Conversations between Rural Basic School Students, Parents and Teachers about Students' Learning

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Abstract: Students grow up and learn in various changing environments that channel their developmental trajectories, moreover, they are not passive targets of environmental influences, but active participants who receive diverse feedback about their successes and failures. Timely formative feedback about their learning helps students to adjust their goals, plans, and behaviour, as well as develop agency/co-agency, which is one of the most important tasks in lifelong learning during this century. Therefore, it is important to find out how frequent and qualitative is the feedback on students' learning provided by teachers and parents (we refer to *parents* to denote all caretakers/guardians who make decisions about students education) and received by students. The aim of the study was to find out how conversations between students, parents and teachers about student learning contribute to the learning process in rural basic school. To reach the aim of the study two research questions were raised, and to answer them several research objectives were set; the theoretical basis of conversations about learning and examples of good practice in basic education were found out through analysis of scientific literature and normative documents, as well as a survey of 58 students, 32 parents and 16 teachers was conducted in a Latvian rural basic school. To analyse the differences between subgroups of respondents contingency analysis was used, as well as Mann-Whitney and Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were calculated. The results of the theoretical research and survey confirm the importance of individual student-parent-teacher conversations about student learning in the learning process in basic school, as well as highlight differences (including statistically significant differences) in the understanding of such conversations in different groups of respondents.

Keywords: school education, conversations, learning, feedback, rural basic school

Introduction

The 21st century as the age of accelerated technological innovations is characterised by focus on sustainable development, accelerated migration, urbanisation, longer life expectancy, growing inequality, depletion of natural resources, climate change and other challenges. To prepare graduates for life in a dynamically changing world, schools can no longer exist as closed entities in themselves, they must become a part of the larger eco-system in which they operate. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, students and adults need to develop three so-called "transformative competencies": *creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas*, and *taking responsibility*. This, together with the development of student agency and co-agency, is the most important task in lifelong learning during this century (Schoon, 2018; OECD, 2019).

According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), basic education (grades 1-9 in Latvian education system) comprises the two stages: primary education and lower secondary education. The aim of basic education is *to lay the foundation for lifelong learning and human development upon which education systems may then expand further educational opportunities* (International Standard..., 2012, 33).

Learning takes place in the context of culture, which defines *an "opportunity space" that affects people's motivation, thinking and behavior* (Salmela-Aro, 2009, 64) and formative feedback to students on their learning processes is an essential condition for learning (Cunningham et al., 2022). At least two subcultural contexts can be distinguished as learning environments: home where interaction between parents and student takes place, and school where takes place interaction between student and teacher (Hirsto, 2010). When these two parts are combined, triangular teacher - student - parent relationships are formed, a learning mesosystem – *the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates* – arises (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 25). In basic education *the adults most close to students, i.e. teachers and parents, are the key agents in establishing the*

environment and resources for students' *learning.* Although parents *have a crucial role in pupils' learning*, because *they know the pupils in ways that teachers do not,* the researchers have concluded that learners' and teachers' perceptions, conceptions and beliefs about learning and student achievements in basic education have been studied vastly, but the parents' viewpoint has not been investigated enough (Nieminen et al., 2021; Zimmerman et al., 2006).

Although parents' understanding of students' learning is not sufficiently known, a review of previous studies shows that it is different from teachers' understanding, because parents are non-professionals in teaching, they do not have a formal pedagogical education as teachers have, and "*their beliefs (..) are arguably confined to what they themselves have experienced when they were students*" (Wong et al., 2020, 451; Nieminen et al., 2021).

This means that in establishing the non-controversial environment and sufficient resources for students' learning, regular targeted communication between students, parents and teachers is required; to improve self-management (including self-directed learning) skills and to adjust their goals, plans, and thinking to successfully cope with the future challenges, students should regularly receive coordinated and consistent formative feedback about their successes and failures. One of the ways to ensure this is regular conversations about student learning between students, teachers, and parents.

Conversation, *the use of speech to communicate ideas and information between or among people* (Conversation, 2023), can be broadly defined as turn-by-turn natural language communication, that allows for learning and the exchange of pertinent beliefs and ideas, as well as develops a mutual sense of psychological safety based on shared beliefs. Unlike passive forms of information exchange (reading, listening, viewing, etc.), *conversations ask people to actively engage and generate thoughtful, on-topic responses, in many cases on an ongoing basis for some amount of time. Despite its ubiquity, research on conversation as a vehicle for social influence has been limited to date* (Hurst et al., 2023).

Therefore*, the aim of the study was* to find out how conversations between students, parents and teachers about student learning can contribute to the learning process in rural basic school.

Methodology

Two research questions were raised to achieve the aim formulated above:
1. What is the role of conversations between rural basic school students, parents, and teachers about student learning in the learning process?
2. What is the frequency of mutual conversations about student learning and the self-assessment of their quality among rural basic school students, parents and teachers?

To reach the aim of the study, following objectives were set:
- to analyse scientific literature and normative documents to find out the theoretical basis of conversations about learning and examples of good practice in contemporary school education, especially at the basic level;
- to develop a survey and empirically find out the frequency of conversations between rural basic school students, their parents and teachers about the students' learning and the self-assessment of the quality of these conversations, as well as find out the recommendations given by students, parents and teachers for the improvement of such conversations;
- to collect, process and evaluate the data obtained in the empirical study in order to develop conclusions and recommendations for the improvement of conversations about student learning.

A small (160 students and 26 teachers) Latvian rural basic school located 172 km from the capital of the country was chosen as the base of the empirical study. Two educational programs from the first to the ninth grade: the basic education program and the special basic education program for students with learning disabilities are offered at the school (Regulations Regarding…, 2018). Seventy-six 5th-9th grade students from both programs were chosen as the research participants; fifty-eight students (25 male and 33 female) aged 11 to 17 years participated in the study – 13 from fifth grade, 11 from sixth, 13 from seventh, 20 from eighth, and 19 from grade 9th. The mean age (M) in the male subgroup is 13.44 years, standard deviation (SD) 1.50, in the female subgroup M = 13.39, SD = 1.68, in the students' sample M = 13.44, SD = 13.41, the age distribution in both subgroups is similar (t = 0.11; df = 56; p = 0.91). 16 teachers and 32 parents of students from selected group also participated in the study.

The education of parents was not ascertained in the design of the research. In the future in next research this information would be especially important.

Empirical data have been obtained using a questionnaire developed by the authors. Two closed-ended questions and one open-ended question about conversations with each of the two groups (i.e. the student survey consists of questions about conversations with parents and teachers, the teacher survey - about conversations with students and parents, the parent survey - about conversations with students and teachers) were included in the survey. Ordinal-polytomous response scales were chosen for closed-ended questions - participants were asked to estimate the frequency of conversations about student learning using 6-point scale from never to daily (options: *never, less than once a month, once to twice a month, once a week, more often than once a week* and *daily*), as well as to give an assessment of the quality of conversations in which they participate, on a five-point scale from 1 to 5, where *one* denotes very low, but *five* very high quality. Students were asked to specify their gender and age. In the open question, respondents were encouraged to provide recommendations for improving conversations with each group included in their survey (see above).

The survey was conducted online on the *e-klase* platform. Every student, teacher and parent has unique access to this platform, so the data collected is authentic and personal data protection is ensured. The survey was available to respondents for one week at the beginning of January 2023. Seventy-six students, 138 parents, and 26 teachers were invited to participate in the survey, 58 students (77% of those invited), 16 teachers (62% of those invited) and 32 parents (23% of those invited) participated in the survey.

Data was collected in charts, Microsoft Excel and R (version 4.2.1) software was used for data processing. To analyse the differences between subgroups of respondents contingency analysis was used, as well as Mann-Whitney and Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were calculated.

Results and Discussion

Improvement of the "transformative competencies" mentioned in the Introduction: creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility, student agency/co-agency, as well as development of other knowledge and skills, attitudes and values necessary for a successful life in the 21st century, i.e. education for citizenship in a broad sense, cannot be fully realized in an isolated and static formal education environment. The role of students should be changed from participants in the classroom learning by listening to teachers' instructions to active participants with both student agency and co-agency. Educational researchers and policy makers should consider that …s*tudents develop co-agency in an interactive, mutually supportive and enriching relationship with their peers, teachers, parents and communities in an organic way in a larger learning eco-system* (OECD, 2019, 16). The role of the teacher in the pedagogical process has also changed: *teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities* (Dewey, 1938, 59) in which students are able to develop their personal agency and co-agency (Ambrose et al, 2010; Leadbeater, 2017). So that the development of student personal agency and co-agency could also take place successfully in the home environment, parents are also consistently encouraged to contact teachers to discuss student's progress in learning, however, the real involvement of parents in constructive conversations with teachers and students depends on several factors - parents' beliefs concerning education and the status of individual teachers, personal learning experiences, socioeconomic situations in the family (Cappella et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2020; Nieminen et al., 2021). Therefore, an empirical study was conducted to find out how students at Latvian rural basic school, their parents and teachers evaluate mutual conversations about student learning.

Conversations between students and teachers

After processing the empirical data, it can be observed that more than half of the students noted that individual conversations about their learning with teachers take place *less often than once a month* (a sixth of the respondents noted that they never happen). Contrary, more than a third of teachers stated that the conversations between teachers and students take place at least *once to twice a month* (Figure 1). Differences in the evaluations are not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.63$; df = 4; p-value = 0.106), but teachers believe that conversations about students' learning happen relatively more often. The respondents' answers to the open questions allow us to conclude that the differences in the evaluation of

the frequency of conversations occur because the students do not understand that the conversation is about the learning process, because the conversation is too generalized.

Conversations proceed only through the mutual belief that the addressee has understood the speaker well enough for immediate purposes (Conversation, 2023). The results obtained in our study confirm that the initiator of the conversation needs to clearly formulate the goal of the conversation and the results to be achieved (Margalit et al., 2022) as well as coordinate them with the interlocutor throughout the conversation. It should also be noted that the understanding of the quality of the conversation and the ability to recall it are interrelated. A.J. Guydish and J.E. Fox Tree were found that ...participants recognized well-balanced conversations more accurately and were also faster to recognize well-balanced conversations. When conducting conversations with students about their learning, teachers and parents should pay close attention to the basic elements of the conversation: reaching common ground, striving to contribute equally, and successful conversational closings (Guydish et al., 2022; Woolf, 2009).
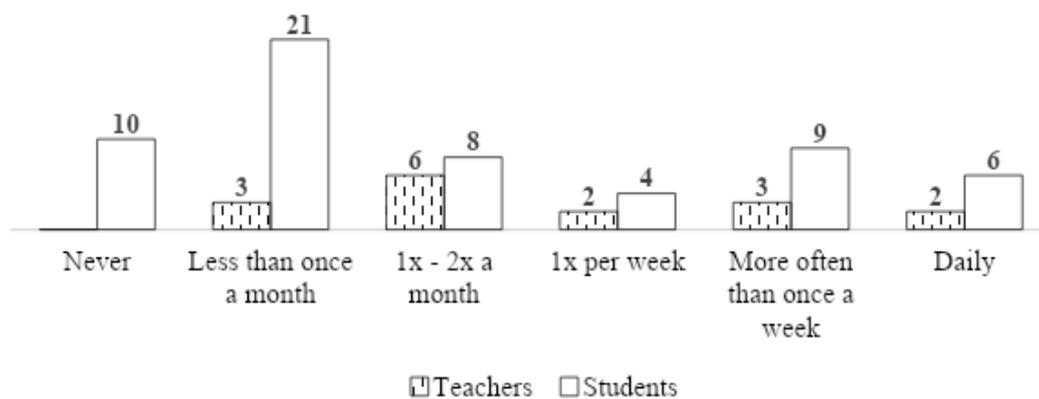

Figure 1. **Frequency of conversations between students (n-58) and teachers (n=16)**, *number of respondents in the assessment group*

More than half (31 participants from 58) of students believe that the *quality* of the conversations about their learning is *high* or *very high*; mode (the value of a variable which occurs most frequently, Mo) = 3, median (the middle value in an ordered set of data, Me) = 4, the lowest score (min) used in the sample of students is 1, the highest (max) is 5; teachers did not use the lowest scores (1 and 2 points), in the teachers sample Mo = 4, Me = 4, min = 3, max = 4 (Figure 2). To find out the statistical significance of the differences in the evaluations given by students and teachers, the Mann-Whitney criterion was calculated, and a good agreement between the evaluations was found (Mann-Whitney U =422.0; p-value = 0.559), students and teachers similarly evaluate the quality of conversations about student learning.
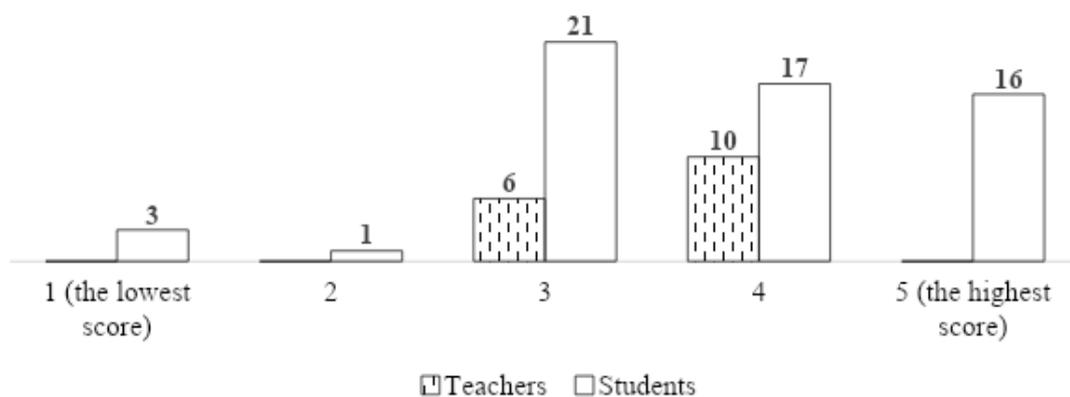

Figure 2. **Assessment of the quality of conversations between students (n-58) and teachers (n=16)**, *number of respondents in the assessment group*

In the answers to the open-ended questions, several recommendations for improving the conversations about student learning were given in each group of respondents. In the *teachers* (n = 16) group, 6 teachers indicated that students' interest and co-responsibility in such conversations should be higher, "...*taking responsibility on the part of students*" is needed, 6 teachers stated that more time should be

allocated, 2 teachers indicated the lack of understanding of the students, why such conversations are necessary. 2 teachers indicate that the conversations should be regular, as well as solutions to specific problems should be offered during conversations.

Almost half of the respondents (28 persons) in the students (n=58) sample noted that the quality of conversations about their learning with teachers is at least satisfactory (3 points) and no improvement is needed, 10 students want the teachers to delve into the problem more seriously, "*let the teachers answer my question normally and help me with my problem instead of telling me one thing and that's it!*" (female student, 14 years old), 12 students believe that teachers should think about their attitude during individual conversations with students. 5 students mention that before starting the conversation they would like to know a specific topic of the conversation, 2 students noted that they want to receive positive feedback during the conversation"*...the teacher would also say the good things about student's learning, and not just emphasize what needs to be improved or done*" (female student, 14 years old). One student indicated that he wants to receive support during individual conversations about his learning.

Conversations between parents and teachers

Two thirds of the respondents (23 persons) in the sample of parents (n=32) noted that individual conversations about students learning with teachers are ongoing *less often than once a month*. Contrary in the group of teachers (n=16), a little more than half of respondents (9 teachers) noted that individual conversations are taking place *not less often* how *once to twice a month* (Figure 3). Differences in the evaluations are statistically significant (χ^2 = 4.55; df=1; p-value = 0,033), teachers believe that conversations about students' learning happen significantly more often. Schools in Latvia inform parents about students' progress, studying and behaviour through both summative and formative assessment practices. It should be noted that parents, based on their personal experience, more often attribute the summative evaluation (in points) to academic achievements, while the descriptive (formative) evaluation is more often attributed to the student's behaviour. Teachers are able to professionally separate the information provided, knowing that ...*some feedback is about learning, some is about behavior* (Frank, 2022, 64), but many parents may perceive conversations with teachers as conversations about the student's behaviour or about the student "in general", and do not perceive them as conversations about "student learning".
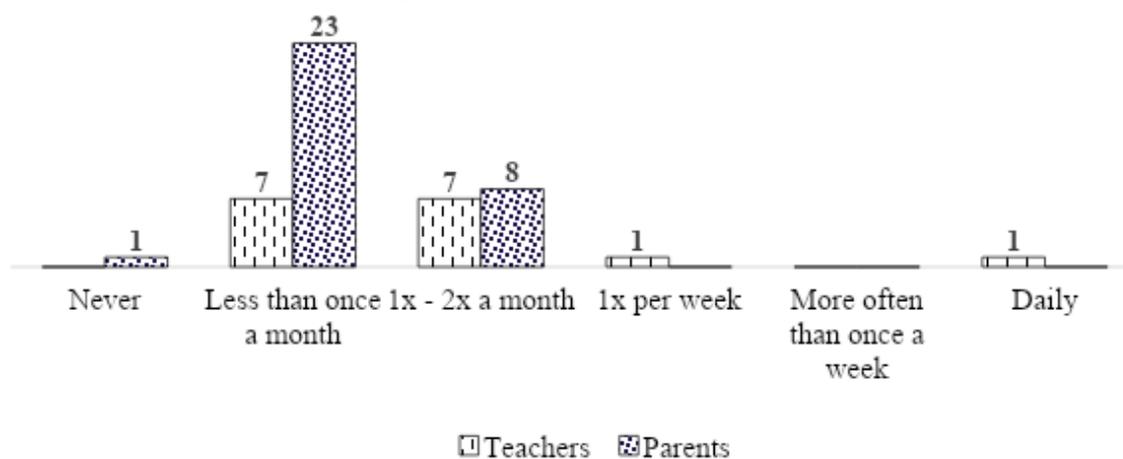

Figure 3. **Frequency of conversations between parents (n-32) and teachers (n=16)**, *number of respondents in the assessment group*

The evaluations of the *quality* of mutual conversations in the sample of parents (Mo = 4, Me = 4, min=2, max=5) are higher than in the sample of teachers (Mo = 3, Me =3, min =3, max =5). (Figure 4) To find out the statistical significance of the differences in the evaluations given by parents and teachers, the Mann-Whitney criterion was calculated, and difference trends were found (Mann-Whitney U =181.0; p-value = 0.083), parents evaluate the quality of conversations about student learning relatively higher than teachers. Several studies indicate that parents tend to overestimate and overvalue information related to the well-being of students and summative assessment (numerical data and exams) and undervalue formative assessment practices (Yogan et al., 2017; Nieminen et al., 2021), therefore the results of our study should be viewed critically; in the future it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study of parents' opinions.

To increase the quality of conversations, 4 *teachers* noted that more time should be given, 4 teachers say they want more interest from parents, while another 4 teachers indicate that parents should be more involved in the learning process, another 4 teachers believe that the quality of conversations with parents would improve offering specific solutions from both parents and teachers.
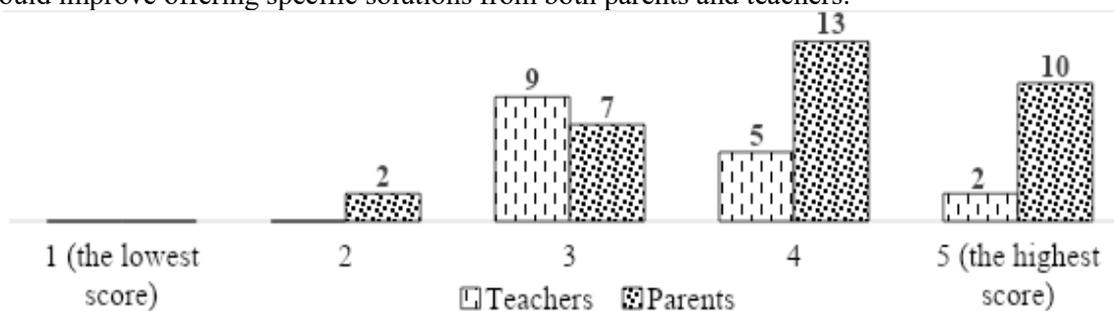

Figure 4. Assessment of the quality of conversations between parents (n-32) and teachers (n=16), *number of respondents in the assessment group*

Almost half of the surveyed *parents* (15 parents) express the opinion that improvements in teacher-parent conversations about student learning are not necessary. 7 parents believe that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to successfully find an individual approach in conversations with students of different ages, and this makes conversation difficult *"...teachers' understanding of the fact that each student is different and everyone cannot be evaluated equally, I think that the teacher must also be educated in psychology in order to better understand the student himself"*. 5 parents noted that teachers should evaluate their attitude before conversations. 3 parents would like conversations to happen more often, while 2 parents would like to have more time to spend on conversations.

Conversations between students and parents

More than half (31 persons) of students (n=58) and the majority of parents (28 parents from 32) noted that student-parent conversations about students learning take place more often than once a week (Figure 5). Differences in the evaluations are statistically significant ($\chi = 12.81$; df=2; p-value = 0,002), parents believe that conversations about students' learning happen significantly more often. This could be explained by the fact that the student and parents have different understandings of what a conversation about learning really is. Scientists indicate that during the conversation, constant feedback, and mutual clarification of the topic of the conversation is required; only in this way will both participants of the conversation understand the meaning of the conversation more and more similarly (Moss et al., 2019).
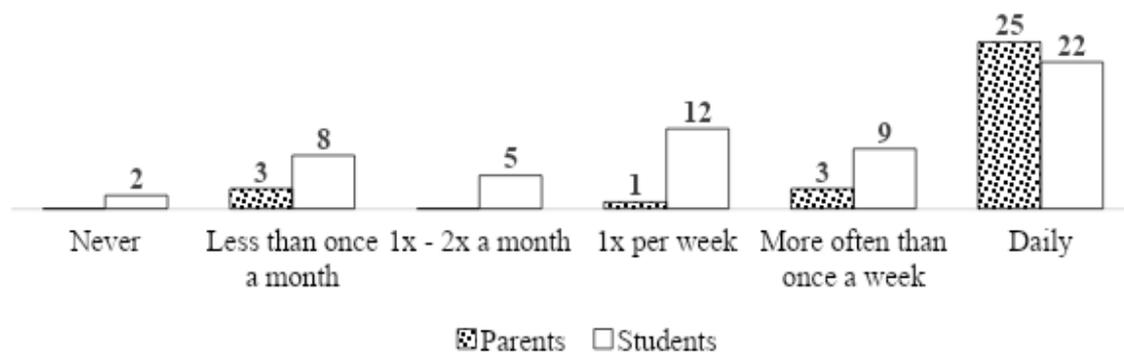

Figure 5. Frequency of conversations between students (n-58) and parents (n=32), *number of respondents in the assessment group*

Almost half of the surveyed students assessed *quality* of the individual conversations with their parents *as very high* (5 points) Mo = 5, Me = 4 (ratings range from 1 to 5), while half of the surveyed parents rated individual conversations with students with 3 points Mo = 3, Me = 3.5 (ratings range 3 to 5) (Figure 6). To find out the statistical significance of the differences in the evaluations given by students and parents, the Mann-Whitney criterion was calculated, and statistically significant differences were found (Mann-Whitney U =657.0; p-value = 0.016), students, although the dispersion of their answers is greater, evaluate the quality of conversations about student learning significantly higher than parents.
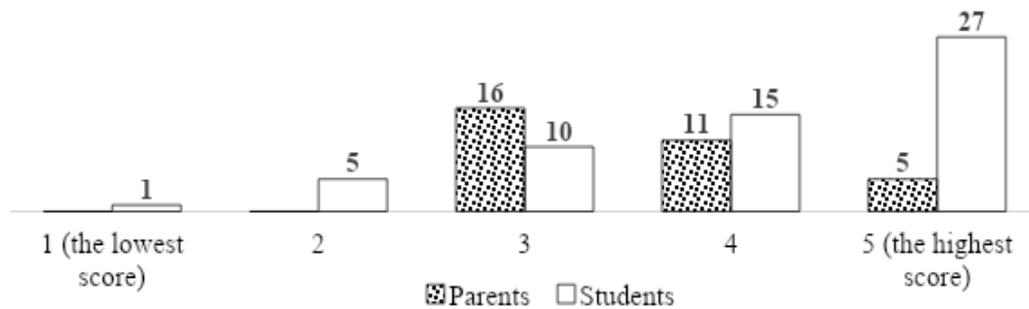
Figure 6. **Assessment of the quality of conversations between students (n=58) and parents (n=32)**, *number of respondents in the assessment group*

More than half (33 respondents) of *students* expresses an opinion that improvements in student-parent conversations are not necessary. 9 students (16 % of respondents) would like their parents not to be angry about the grades they received *"...let them not be so angry"* (male student, 15 years old). 5 students noted that they would like their parents to listen more attentively to what the students say, while 4 students feel pressure from their parents during conversations *"...let them understand that you can't do everything 100% all the time"* (female student, 12 years old), but another 4 students believe that parents do not have a serious enough attitude towards conversations about learning, the other 3 students would like their parents to speak more clearly and understandably about the specific topics.

Only 3 parents have noted that improvements are not necessary, and the quality of conversations is high. 4 parents express opinion that there is a lack of time for high-quality conversations with students about their learning, while 9 parents stated that the problem is the students' attitude towards the conversation, e.g. one parent states that the quality of conversation would be better, *"...if the child took the conversation more seriously and had a greater understanding of how important the knowledge acquired at school is"*. 9 parents believe that there is a lack of involvement in the conversation on the part of the student. 3 parents noted that the circumstances in which the conversations take place are important, 4 parents would like conversations to happen more often. It should also be noted that in a similar study on mutual communication between students and parents, it was found that parents consider conversations with students once a week to be more effective tool for achieving students' goals than students themselves (Yogan et al., 2017).

Table 1

Spearman's rank correlation coefficients of students' age and ratings of conversation frequency and quality

	Conversations with teachers		Conversations with parents	
	Frequency	**Quality**	**Frequency**	**Quality**
Age of students	-0.194	-0.385**	-0.241	-0.093
Frequency of conversations with teachers	1	0.259*	0.507***	0.325*
Quality of conversations with teachers	0.259*	1	0.493***	0.400**
Frequency of conversations with parents	0.507***	0.493***	1	0.352**

*- p<0.05; **-p<0,01; ***-p<0,001

When calculating the correlation coefficient (*Spearman's rho*), it was found that that the evaluations of the frequency and quality of conversations in the group of students negatively correlates with the age of the respondents, i.e., as the age of the students increases, the ratings of the frequency and quality of conversations decrease (Table 1).

Within the scope of the study, only one type of communication - individual conversation - was investigated. It would be a mistake to look at it in isolation from other asynchronous (texting, e-mail,

voice recording) and real-time distant (phone or *WhatsApp* calls, video chats) communication techniques and methods (Storlie, 2015). Therefore, the researchers are convinced that the further research on the exchange of information about student learning in the student-parent-teacher triad should be continued.

Conclusions

Scientific literature and regulatory documents, as well as empirical study on the conversation between students, teachers and parents about student learning allow us to formulate several conclusions:

- triangular teacher - student - parent relationships, maintained through conversations about the student's learning, form a learning mesosystem in which the development of student's personal agency and co-agency takes place;
- although the participants of the empirical study - students, teachers and parents - have a different understanding of conversations about student learning, they have noted that the *quality* of these conversations is at least satisfactory (in all groups of respondents, the median ratings are 3 or higher), statistically significant differences were found only between students' and parents' groups ($p = 0.016$), students assess the quality of conversations higher than parents;
- the perception of parents about the frequency of such conversations is statistically significantly different from the perception of students and teachers - teachers noted that conversations with parents happen more often than the parents indicated ($p = 0.033$), while in the parent-student relationship, parents believe that such conversations happen more often than the students noted ($p = 0.002$);
- to improve the quality of conversations about student's learning, it is necessary to clearly formulate and agree on the achievable goal and limits of the conversation, as well as to strengthen the participants' confidence in the ability to achieve the goal;
- student-teacher conversations should be regular, constructive, objective and aimed at the student's growth, the purpose of the conversation, the achievable result, should be clearly formulated in their content;
- parent-teacher conversations must be scheduled in time, aimed at achieving a specific goal that is understandable and acceptable to both parties, avoiding a subjective generalized assessment of the student's personality;
- parent-student conversations should be aimed at achieving a specific, mutually understandable and acceptable goal, based on mutual listening and understanding;
- it is recommended that conversation initiators (teachers and parents (caregivers)) clearly and in accordance with the level of understanding of the interlocutor, (i.e. taking into account the peculiarities of the student's age), formulate the underlying problem of the conversation, the purpose of the conversation, as well as continuously provide feedback during the conversation.

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