

NUTRITION AND FOOD SCIENCE

Present Knowledge and Utilization

VOLUME 2

Nutrition Education and Food Science and Technology

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PLENUM PRESS · NEW YORK AND LONDON

COMMUNICATIONS COMPETENCIES OF THE NUTRITIONIST-DIETITIAN

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INTRODUCTION

The nutritionist-dietitian plays many roles while fulfilling her professional responsibilities. Some of these roles require scientific expertise and technological skills, in order to carry out specific activities such as program planning, selection and use of equipment, food handling and diet calculations. There are other roles, still more important, for which not only scientific and technical expertise but abilities for human interaction as well, are indispensable. Working with people means communication expertise whether these interactions are oral, written or non verbal.

Communications can be of a direct nature, either through face to face contacts or through written messages; they can also be indirect or meant to reach a group or a community.

Whatever the type of communication, there is a message to be sent to a person or a group of persons, delivered through a specific channel or several channels, which will elicit a response that the nutritionist is greatly interested in receiving.

Messages will vary according to their content, the recipient and the media. In general, their purpose is to convey concepts. Messages will, at the same time, convey attitudes, practices and habits that constitute the frame of reference within which those concepts are presented. Therefore, the message need to be coded according to the language used by the recipient.

ROLE OF THE NUTRITIONIST IN COMMUNICATIONS

In their daily work nutritionists communicate with the people they serve: patients, physicians, nurses, mothers, students, teachers, community leaders, home makers, agricultural extensionists. They all need help in terms of nutrition advice. In this case, the role of the nutritionist is to disseminate the nutrition gospel and the message must be shaped so as to fill the needs of every recipient.

Nutritionists also communicate with the people they work for. In either administrative or scientific roles these persons need to be informed of the purposes of the nutrition program, its development and results. In this situation the nutritionist is the promoter of the program and must convince others of its importance.

On the other hand, nutritionists communicate with the people who work under their supervision. These persons need to know exactly what is expected from them and how well they are doing. For them, the nutritionist is the leader who must orient them, interpret to them the regulations, as well as understand their limitations, and provide them with advice and training.

Communication is purposeful. Nutritionists communicate with people in order to give and to collect information, to coordinate, to obtain cooperation, to motivate, to explain, to demonstrate, and to evaluate. All these communications have a common aim: to improve the nutritional status of the population through the promotion of better feeding practices and the increment of nutrition knowledge.

COMMUNICATIONS IN NUTRITION EDUCATION

After a long period of experience, nutritionists working in nutrition education programs now recognize that the success of the program lies in counting on good communication channels.

Information must flow through the channels and reach every person involved.

At every step of the channel the message must be clearly defined and transmitted in terms that are clear for the receiver.

The triangle of Fig. 1 represents the different degrees of nutrition expertise required to participate in a nutrition program.

At each level, different communication skills are required in order to transmit the nutrition message to the next level.

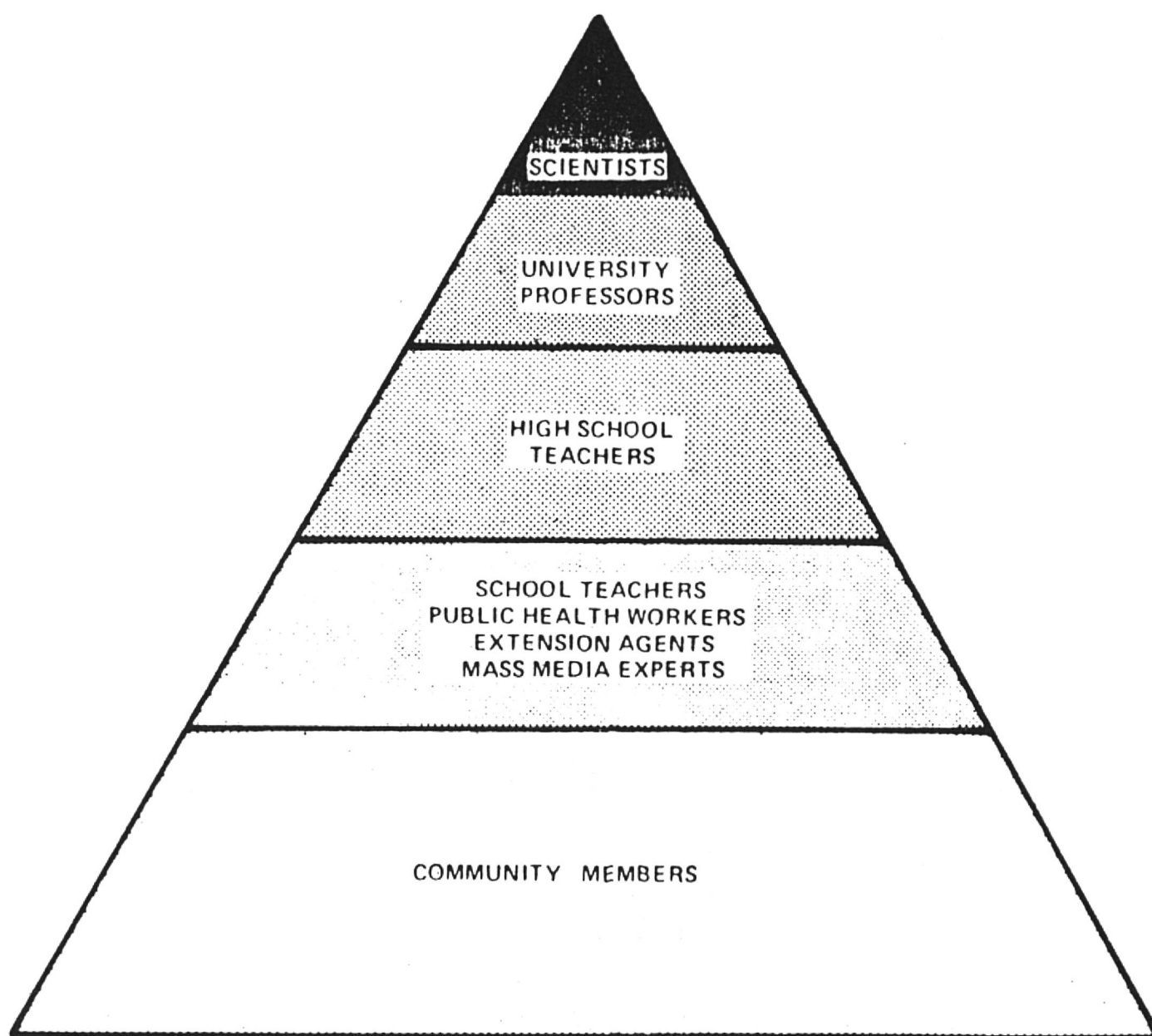


Fig. 1 - Degrees of nutrition expertise needed for a nutrition program. The intensity of the color shows the concentration of knowledge required and the width of the band represents the numbers of transmitters needed in each category.

Thus, a university professor must be able to teach college or high school graduates; a high school teacher must learn to communicate with youngsters; a teacher must know how to talk with children; a physician, a nurse, and a social worker must learn to communicate with patients and parents; an extension agent must know how to communicate with rural families, and people working in the press, radio and T.V. must be able to communicate with the population at large.

Each one at his own level is supposed to possess the necessary communication competencies in order to interact effectively with his receptors. No matter how much knowledge they possess, they must know their audience and share with them the same code; otherwise there will be no communication. It is like trying to use a pay phone without having the right change; no matter how much currency in higher denomination bills people may have, obviously, only the right coin will do the miracle.

If we break this triangle into several smaller triangles, one for each discipline, we find a small triangle for the public health team, another one for the agricultural extension group, and a much bigger one for the educational system. There is also another triangle for the mass media. Although there is some overlapping (in a family some members receive one channel and others listen to another), people in each channel or discipline have very well established habits of communication (see fig. 2).

Faced with this situation, the nutritionist working in a nutrition education program, needs to understand the conditions under which the nutrition message is to be communicated through each one of the channels and serve as an adviser to all of them. In such a program the nutritionist is asked to communicate effectively with people at all levels and through all channels.

In order to ensure good communication some countries have organized information centers or authorized sources located above all channels, which can communicate reliable information on nutrition (see fig. 3).

This measure helps to reduce the number of interfering factors and facilitates communication. This information is released mostly in printed form: bulletins, pamphlets, charts, books, journals, press articles, posters, slides, movies, etc. adapted to the different groups. At each channel, nutritionists help the people in charge of the program to do the necessary adaptations for the receivers at different levels, and act as consultants in the preparation of audiovisual materials. Thus, we see the role of the nutritionist as communicator is a complex and an essential one.

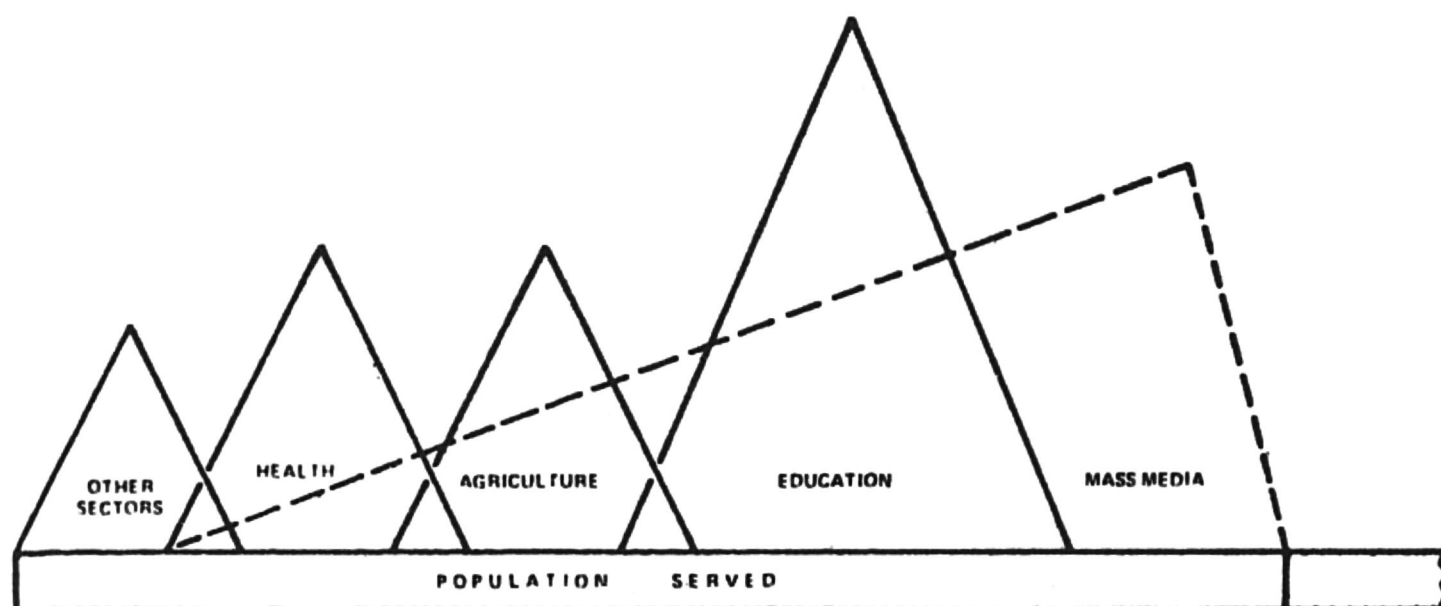


Fig. 2 - Overlap of communication channels.

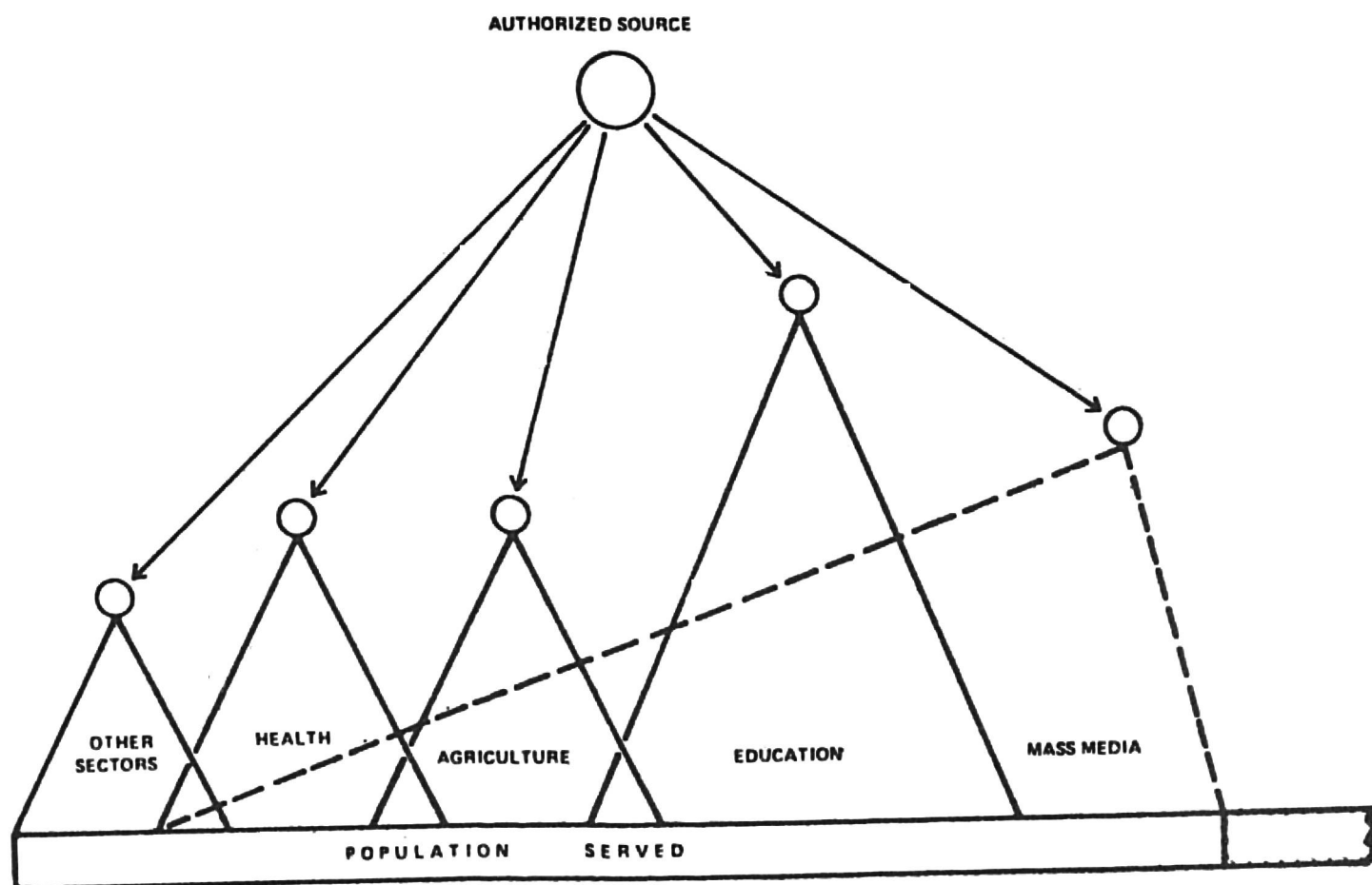


Fig. 3 - Position of an authorized source with respect to different communication channels.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOLS OF NUTRITION

The ability to communicate effectively requires the acquisition of a series of concepts and practical experiences in the communications area that will facilitate the development of skills and proper communication habits and attitudes. Obviously, all of them represent a great challenge to the schools training nutritionist-dietitians.

To enable future nutritionists to communicate effectively, the curriculum of the schools of nutrition must provide a theoretical frame in social and pedagogical sciences, and sufficient practical experience to develop the above mentioned skills, habits and attitudes.

Courses like general psychology, social psychology, educational psychology and social anthropology will help the student understand the human being, his motivations, his way of expressing himself, and its reactions to different types of stimulus. The student will also learn about the individual types of behavior and group dynamics.

Courses in education will teach the student how to organize his subject matter and how to define the different messages. Still more important, these courses will teach the student how to decide on the amount of content in a message, and the frequency of its presentation.

Courses in communications will help the student understand the communication process, the factors affecting it in a positive or negative way, and how to improve communications. Nutritionists should be able to detect communications problems and establish preventive measures in order to communicate effectively.

Courses in audiovisual aids will give the student practical experience in planning and defining the message and interpreting it according to the audience. Teaching experiences and the use of audiovisual materials in mass media programs are excellent opportunities to develop communications skills.

All this knowledge must be integrated within specific experiences in nutrition education, directed to determine nutrition knowledge of target groups in the community, its relation to their eating practices, and the way by means of which nutrition information reaches these groups. Small communications research projects can be carried out by students so as to develop skills in identifying the best channels of communication for nutrition messages in the community, and the factors that affect the communications process.

These experiences must be offered at an early stage of the career and the development of skills observed throughout all of their studies, until graduation.

ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Associations of nutritionists should also plan continuing education programs to improve the communications competencies of their members.

In this way nutritionists will be more effective communicators and, consequently, better educators and happier and more fruitful professionals.

CONCLUSION

Nutritionists work with people. Their role as communicators is essential for their work. They can learn to be good communicators. Schools and associations can provide this training which is a must if they are to play their role with the maximum efficiency.