AN exploration of how adults’ use of non-verbal communication skills affects children’s responses to them in the classroom

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Whilst much research has focused on adults’ use of non-verbal communication in the classroom, little thought has been given to the voice of the child in this context. Adopting a case study approach, observations, focus groups and interviews were used to explore children’s responses to the various types of non-verbal behaviour demonstrated by a class teacher and a teaching assistant (TA) in a year two classroom in the South West of England. As a result of the findings, three key themes emerged. Firstly, that non-verbal signals are often used as a form of control to either reinforce or punish children’s behaviour as appropriate. It is argued that body language appears to have the most effect on the children in the study when used in congruence with spoken language. Moreover, the significant similarities shown between both adults’ use of non-verbal messages suggests a strong sense of collaboration and teamwork. Finally, it is emphasised that there are many ways in which non-verbal communication can influence children, and that an awareness of this will continue to enhance our interactions with them as both educators and as learners.

Keywords: non-verbal, communication, collaboration, children’s voice

Introduction

The concept of non-verbal communication was first brought to my attention whilst exploring literature for an assignment on interpersonal and team-working skills in the first year of my Foundation Degree. I was able to consider the ways in which we communicate with both colleagues and young children aside from verbal interaction, and the influence that body language can have on the teaching and learning process.

As a prospective teacher, I have always been motivated to gain experience in a range of different settings, allowing me to relate the theory I have studied to my practice. This was particularly true when I embarked on a regular placement in an inner city primary school in the South West of England with children in year two. I note this experience, as it was the first opportunity I had to work with children with English as an additional language (EAL). What I soon came to realise was that communicating non-verbally with these children was sometimes the most effective, if not the only form of interaction that they could rely on during their first encounter at an English speaking school. I began to reflect on my observations of both the class teacher and the teaching assistant (TA), who supports the children on a regular basis. Contemplating how a smile, a clap, or a ‘thumbs up’ could change many of the children’s hesitant expressions intrigued me significantly.
Searching for supporting literature, and therefore building on my previous reading, confirmed that research in this area was certainly not sparse. Although some was quite dated, much had been written on the number of non-verbal behaviours that existed, a great deal of which related to the educational milieu. In particular, theorists had noted many features of both effective and weak non-verbal communication skills used by adults in the classroom (Corrie, 2009; Wootton, 1993). One of the key issues I noted, however, was that these seemed to be based on unexamined assumptions, with little thought being given to the voice of the child (Neill, 1989). I concluded that taking into account how we use body language as educators is imperative – but exactly how constructive is it if we do not consider the extent to which it can affect children?

My decision to address this issue therefore formed the key focus of my research study. Firstly, I aimed to explore the various types of non-verbal behaviour used by the teacher (Mrs Graham) and the TA (Mr Bunt) in the year two classroom (names used are pseudonyms). Most importantly, I wanted to see how the children responded to their use of body language, and whether or not they recognised any differences between the two adults communication. I then decided to discuss the children’s reactions with Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt, asking whether or not they felt that these children were accurate in identifying the types of non-verbal communication that they use.

In order to meet these aims, I thus posed the following three research questions –

- What are the various forms of non-verbal communication skills used by Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt and how do the children respond to these?
- Do the children perceive any differences between the non-verbal communication used by Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt?
- How do Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt feel about their use of non-verbal communication and the children’s responses to this?

Reviewing the literature related to non-verbal communication allows me to summarise the key authors, issues and debates which are relevant to my research dissertation. Discussion of the methods used to obtain and analyse the research data also address particular strengths, weaknesses and limitations, as well as the ethical considerations made throughout the process, and beyond. By identifying the main findings, I then discuss the themes that have emerged, whilst subsequently noting the conclusions and implications drawn as a result of my research journey.

**Literature Review**

‘…The teaching/learning process is a goldmine for discovering the richness and importance of non-verbal behaviour’” (Knapp and Hall, 2002, pp.72).

The purpose of exploring previous literature on non-verbal communication is to identify the origins and development of understanding in the field, thus putting my research journey into a clearer context. Since the 1960’s, theorists have contributed an extensive amount of research into non-verbal aspects of interpersonal communication (Payler, 2009). I am keen to explore these ideas, with a particular interest in how and why adults’ use of non-verbal communication affects children’s responses to them. Critically analysing this literature will help me to draw on particular trends and to identify potential gaps in existing knowledge.
Many cite Charles Darwin as being the first to raise awareness of non-verbal interaction from a scientific stance (Guerrero and Floyd, 2006; Riggio and Feldman, 2005; Argyle, 1988; Mehrabian, 1972). As illustrated in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872, in Riggio and Feldman, 2005), Darwin concluded that humans and animals displayed different expressions for different emotions. His ideas thus provided the foundations for later work by the likes of Mehrabian (1972), Ekman and Friesen (1969, in Mehrabian, 1972), Argyle (1988) and Knapp and Hall (2002).

This said the difficulty in defining non-verbal communication as a single process appears to be a common agreement amongst many of these theorists. As a result, specific categories of non-verbal behaviour have been proposed. Some of the most common forms, as described by Petrie (1997), are smiling, frowning and body orientation. Argyle (1988) defines nine categories as facial expression, gaze, gestures, posture, bodily contact, spatial behaviour, clothes, non-verbal vocalisations and smell, which he claims can be broken down even further. Whilst the five areas identified by Ekman and Friesen (1969, in Mehrabian, 1972) are widely recognised, they are slightly more complex to understand. Mehrabian (1972) comments clearly on these, providing definitions for *emblem*, *illustrator*, *affect display*, *regulator* and *adaptor*. For example, *emblem* refers to the types of gesture that can accurately be translated into words, such as a teacher’s wave at the end of the school day.

Mehrabian (1972) himself has significantly contributed to our understanding of non-verbal communication and its importance in social contexts. When referring to his work, I found it surprising that he considers only seven percent of our communication to be verbal. Subsequently, ninety-three percent of communication either relates to body language or is paralinguistic. Like Mehrabian (1972), Petrie (1997) stresses the importance of paralinguistics, particularly when working with young children. She claims that practitioners should be sensitive to the ways in which they use their voices to convey meaning. For example, the speed at which someone speaks, the pitch and volume of their voice or the emphasis they place on certain words can all have an effect on children’s reactions.

I feel that it is important to stress, however, that researchers including Burgoon (1994) and Knapp *et al.* (2004) highlight the need to view non-verbal behaviour as an integrated part of the complete interpersonal communication process, as opposed to form of expression used solely by itself (cited in Payler, 2009).

Petrie (1997) goes on to say that whilst it is essential for children to both see and use a range of verbal and non-verbal gestures on a regular basis, to communicate effectively with them is a very complex process. The quality of children’s learning can rely heavily upon the quality of classroom interaction between themselves and adults (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2001). Good teaching, according to Hall *et al.* (2001), involves the ability to use body language to portray attitudes and reinforcements frequently. Competent teachers give regular non-verbal messages indicating an ability to keep a class under control. Consequently, it is clear that the sending and receiving of non-verbal cues play a key role in pedagogy (Hall *et al.*., 2001).

Gable and Shean (2000, in Hargie and Dickson, 2004) note that we can gain significant reward from non-verbal communication. This is shown to contribute towards positive changes in emotional state. On the contrary, Hargie and Dickson (2004) and Petrie (1997) argue that whilst successful non-verbal communication can be enjoyable and interesting, we can often experience challenging and problematic encounters with others. For example, individuals can sometimes unconsciously convey messages, or make inaccurate judgments about someone’s body language without taking into account other factors which may affect it (Petrie, 1997). Wootton (1993, pp.4) believes that many newly qualified teachers often display a
characteristic of ineffective teaching styles by using inappropriate body language. I agree when he claims that ‘...many teachers need to be altogether more aware of how they are perceived by their pupils’. Thus, Hargie et al. (1994, p. ix) stress that the importance of effective interpersonal communication in professional contexts should be widely recognised.

Despite this widespread research, it is intriguing to know that we are rather limited in our ability to put such theory into ‘real world’ practice (Riggio and Feldman, 2005, pp. ix). Riggio and Feldman (2005) propose that this is due to much research remaining in professional journals, read predominantly by other researchers of non-verbal communication. It is likely that this is why Sage (2000) and Wootton (1993) declare that, as practitioners, we still rarely consider the connotations of non-verbal communication in teaching and learning.

Exploring the content of both the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and The National Curriculum does little except further support this claim (DCSF, 2008; DfEE, 1999). Whilst both documents clearly identify communication as a key skill across the curriculum, most emphasis is placed on children’s attainment in the areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Brief reference to non-verbal behaviour does appear in the EYFS, but this encourages practitioners to ‘...show sensitivity to the many different ways that children express themselves non-verbally’ (DCSF, 2008, pp.42). Although an awareness of children’s non-verbal communication is not insignificant, the curriculum appears to lack any indication of educators considering their own non-verbal skills.

In spite of this, I found that a growing amount of literature focusing on teacher non-verbal communication appears in resources more readily accessible to educators. These include books (Bruce, 2004; Neill and Caswell, 1993), practical advice guides (Wootton, 1993) and the internet (Nonverbal Solutions, 2008). It appears that a common analogy when making reference to non-verbal communication within books is to discuss potential processes through examples of everyday educational contexts (Bruce, 2004; Schaerf, 1996). For instance Payler (2009) consults one of her recent projects when analysing how guidance is transmitted and co-created with the child through the use of non-verbal gestures. By doing this, I believe that practitioners may relate more easily to ideas and feel more able to apply theories regarding non-verbal behaviour into their practice.

Another example can be taken from Corrie (2009). Entitled Jimmy’s story, Corrie (2009) tells a personal story in which she discusses a young boy’s competence in receiving non-verbal signals from his teacher. After regularly misbehaving, Jimmy believed that his class teacher hated him. Although Jimmy’s teacher explained she did not hate him, Corrie (2009) observed that her non-verbal messages entirely contradicted her spoken communication. It was concluded that young children are not as influenced by what we say than by our non-verbal gestures. Therefore, Jimmy maintained the same opinion about his teacher as before.

I find it interesting that prior to Corrie’s (2009) findings, Neill (1989) and Rosa (2004) claimed that younger children are mainly influenced by the verbal components of contradictory communication, whereas older children and adults are more influenced by body language. Using a quantitative method, Neill (1989) explored how facial expression and posture affected children’s responses to teacher’s non-verbal communication. It was discovered that smiling and frowning have stronger effects on children’s reactions than posture and gesture. A similar observational study was again conducted by Neill (1986, in Neill, 1989), in which he identified differences in non-verbal messages between teachers who had effective relationships with their pupils, and those with relationships which were less effective. I notice that the findings of this study complement the previously mentioned ideas by Wootton (1993) regarding the body language of newly qualified teachers.
Goldin-Meadow et al. (1999) wished to examine the role that hand gesture plays in instruction to children. In terms of pedagogy, they identify two major values of non-verbal cues. As also expressed by Hall et al. (2001), it is thought that hand gesture can significantly illustrate the attitudes of both the teacher and the pupil. For example, if an answer given by a child is subsequently followed by a ‘thumbs up’ and a nod by the teacher, the likelihood is that the child believes their answer to be correct. Secondly, non-verbal signals can highlight a great deal about the content and structure of a lesson itself, as also discovered by Watkins (2007).

Comparable to the work of Neill (1986, in Neill, 1989) and Wootton (1993), Watkins (2007) investigated the different pedagogic methods used by two early years teachers, focusing on the ways in which their body language affected students engagement with learning. Surprisingly, the progressive viewpoint adopted by one new teacher, which was reflected in her frequent informal interactions with the children, resulted in them having difficulty applying themselves to their work. The traditional teacher-directed classroom meant that the children demonstrated a much greater level of concentration. Watkins (2007) claims that the heightened discipline exercised by the second teacher in a non-verbal manner meant that the children were thus equipped with discipline to learn. She concluded that -

‘...it is the affective force generated by teachers’ bodies and the ways in which it circulates in a disciplinary capacity within a pedagogic space that needs to be clearly understood’ (Watkins, 2007, pp. 779).

Considerations made towards other adults in the classroom, namely TAs, is less evident. Even so, work by Eyres et al. (2004) and Fraser and Meadows (2008) has explored children’s perceptions of TAs, and whilst not clearly related to non-verbal communication, some rather relevant connections can be made. Fraser and Meadows (2008) discovered that children were able to distinguish a variety of differences between their teacher and the TA, despite claims that role of the TA is becoming increasingly hard to define (Drake et al., 2004). One child considered the TA as a helpful and caring individual, addressing their use of non-verbal behaviour - ‘...well, they have to get down to the child’s level almost and not make them feel nervous...’ (Fraser and Meadows, 2008, pp. 355). The key feature of this study that I am drawn to is the extent to which the differences in role allocation may be influenced by the body language that the adults use.

Key theorists from Darwin (1872, in Riggio and Feldman, 2005) to Argyle (1988) have developed research to inform our understanding of non-verbal communication, and to suggest its more clearly defined categories. Ensuring successful communication with young children is a complex process, and as such, it is important to consider the connotations of body language in order to enhance our understanding as competent educators (Hall et al., 2001; Petrie, 1997). The fact that we may experience problematic non-verbal encounters with others may be a result of little exposure to information on effective body language, although I believe that more resources are slowly becoming available (Riggio and Feldman, 2005; Wootton, 1993).

The most imperative argument that underpins this literature review is that whilst research into the non-verbal communication skills of teachers is evident (Corrie, 2009; Watkins, 2007; Wootton, 1993), theorists largely fail to consider the children’s perspective or their responses to these adults. There is also a growing concern for the validity of positivist or ‘laboratory’ experiments used to research non-verbal interactions, because doubts exist as to whether the behaviour as a result of these experiments would actually occur in everyday classroom environments (Neill, 1989; Argyle, 1988). I find the growing amount of research into
children’s perceptions of TAs particularly intriguing (Fraser and Meadows, 2008). Disappointingly, I have found no evidence which focuses on the extent to which knowledge of the teacher or TA role may be affected by the types of non-verbal signals they use.

The following section critically analyses the research methods I chose in order to gather my own findings and to achieve the aims of the research investigation.

Methodologies

‘Case studies are good for drawing out the detail and complexity of intricate social relationships within an institution’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2005, pp.47).

The above statement by Roberts-Holmes (2005) highlights one of the key benefits of case studies in educational research. The fact that case studies often have a narrowly defined focus complimented my desire to conduct research within the year two classroom that inspired my interest in non-verbal communication (Hughes, 2001, cited in Roberts-Holmes, 2005). One of the key strengths of this approach was that it involved ‘real’ situations, which give the findings a deeper level of meaning than it would to just present abstract theories and principles (Cohen et al. 2007). On the other hand, Bassey (1981, in Bell, 2005) notes the risk of generalisations, hence the reason I am aware that my findings may not necessarily apply in other similar contexts.

In order to validate my findings as much as possible, and to meet the requirements of a case study approach, I adopted a total of three research methods. This is frequently known as triangulation (Cohen et al., 2007; Willan, 2007). By comparing and combining different methods, I was able to gain a better understanding of children’s responses to non-verbal communication from a variety of viewpoints.

Observations

I first conducted six non-participant observations of the adults interacting with the children in the classroom. Three of these observations focused on Mrs Graham, and three on Mr Bunt. Sharp (2009) and Bell (2005) highlight the benefits of providing a first-hand account of non-verbal behaviour as it unfolds, which can be particularly useful to determine whether people act in the way that they say they do.

This said, I feel it necessary to mention that due predominantly to the nature of their roles, it was only possible to observe Mrs Graham ‘teaching’, and Mr Bunt whilst he assisted small groups of children during activities. These different situations may have had an influence over the types of non-verbal communication displayed, which obviously limits the extent to which comparison can be made between both adults.

One of the main purposes of conducting observations is to ‘make the familiar strange’ (Walliman and Buckler, 2008, pp. 195). This meant that I was able to investigate a method of communication that may otherwise go unnoticed amongst everyday routines in the classroom environment. In my quest for qualitative data to contribute towards the richness and depth of a case study, I decided that a narrative approach would be most beneficial. Nonetheless, after conducting a pilot observation, I discovered that the recording of data was often challenging, largely due to the pace of the lesson and the overwhelming amount that I was trying to note down. I feared that this may result in over-simplification of my results, particularly as I was addressing a complex behaviour (Sharp, 2009).
After consultation with my tutor, I decided to also use a quantitative data collection method in the form of tally charts. By doing so, I was able to note the types of non-verbal communication used quickly and accurately, as well as recording more detailed key moments in a narrative format as before. Consequently, I learnt that semi-structured observations are often most successful, as they set the agenda for what is to be observed, whilst still allowing for a degree of flexibility (Sharp, 2009).

Focus Groups

By considering children’s perspectives, we can empower them (Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). I used focus groups to work predominantly with pairs of children, and a total of seven altogether. By working alongside a friend, it was felt that the children would be more comfortable, as Roberts-Holmes (2005) also advocates. The procedure involved asking the children to complete two drawings of both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt in the following scenarios –

a) When the class are sitting nicely and showing good listening skills
b) When they class are being noisy and not showing good listening skills.

Drawing is an excellent inclusive and participatory research technique and a powerful means of representation, as the children are able to illustrate their understanding of experiences on linguistic, affective and cognitive levels (Coates, 2004; Kress, 1997 and Hawkins, 2002, in Roberts-Holmes, 2005). An issue that I did note was that some children seemed to seek reassurance that their work was ‘correct’ by observing what their friend had drawn. This then limits the extent to which some drawings were truly the child’s own representation (Skelton, 2001).

I knew that it was essential that the children were then given the time to discuss their drawings to clarify the types of non-verbal communication they had identified (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). Focus groups are often invaluable when aiming to discover ‘...how people think about an issue – their reasoning about why things are as they are’ (Laws, 2003, in Bell, 2005, pp. 162). Roberts-Holmes (2005) does go on to say, however, that engaging in this discussion is most effective as the children are drawing, as after this, the meaning of the picture is sometimes lost. This corresponds with a struggle that I encountered, as I found myself frequently asking leading questions and repeating phrases in order to prompt the children’s conversation.

Yet, I often found that as the children were concentrating on their drawings, they found it difficult to talk at the same time. When they did have something to say, they often spoke over each other. This is an issue widely discussed by many theorists exploring the effectiveness of focus groups (Grieg and Taylor, 1999). Consequently, I chose to adopt more of a ‘paired interview’ scenario instead, which meant that I could discuss the drawings with each child one at a time, in order to minimise the risk of interruptions and inconclusive data. Unfortunately, I was aware that this procedure did not then ultimately meet the requirements of a focus group, where the participants were ‘...free to exchange opinions, reactions and experiences within a group discussion’ (Willan, 2007, pp. 192).

Interviews

Observations do not always provide the opportunity to fully understand the experiences and feelings of the participants themselves (Willan, 2007), hence the reason why I conducted
semi-structured interviews with both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt. I devised a total of eight questions as part of an interview schedule, prior to the interviews taking place.

By using a semi-structured interview framework, I was able to keep the interview focused upon the subject of non-verbal communication, whilst being flexible enough to probe additional questions when necessary (Walliman and Buckler, 2008; Roberts-Holmes, 2005). I felt confident that the interview contained an accurate balance of both open and closed questions. Whilst closed questions are not deemed to be as effective (Cohen et al., 2007), they ensured that the interviewees did not feel like they had been put ‘on the spot’, by allowing them extra time to consider their responses to more open-ended questions.

I wanted to give careful consideration to the preparation of questions to ensure that I was able to capture exactly what I aimed to, given the short space of time and opportunity to do so (Walliman and Buckler, 2008). However, on reflection, I realised that a small minority of these questions actually related to one of my original research aims, which was to discover what Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt thought about the children’s responses to the non-verbal communication they use. This then limited the amount of interview data which was clearly focused on answering one of my three research questions.

Due to the unpredictable reality of research in an educational setting, it was only possible for the interviews to take place either in the busy atmosphere of the staff room, or the classroom. I was aware that this counteracts the ideal interview atmosphere recommended by the likes of Sharp (2009). Specifically, I sometimes noted Mr Bunt’s hesitance whilst answering questions, often due to colleagues who would enter the room and be unable to resist the temptation to answer on his behalf! This may then have influenced the extent to which Mr Bunt’s answers were always a true reflection of his thoughts.

**Ethical Considerations**

It was important to me that ethical considerations were not simply an ‘afterthought’ of the research process (Alderson, 2005). An ethics protocol was devised which addressed the possible ethical issues as a result of the research being conducted. This protocol was included for reference in letters to the gatekeeper (the deputy/acting Headteacher) as well as the adult participants. Consent slips were given to these participants, in which they acknowledged their agreement to my research being carried out. Both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt were provided with a research brief prior to the observations and interviews being conducted. Letters were given to a total of fifteen parents following consultation with Mrs Graham. These included reference to the ethics protocol, should they wish to obtain a copy. Whilst I had originally hoped to work with a total of ten children, preferably with EAL, participants were only selected on the basis that they returned the parental consent forms enclosed. Whist subject to debate (Grieg and Taylor, 1999), I see informed consent as a -

‘...voluntary agreement to participate in a research project based upon complete disclosure of all relevant information and the recipient’s understanding of this’ (NCB, 2002, in Roberts-Holmes, 2005, pp. 60)

As Morrow and Richards (1996, in Roberts-Holmes, 2005) stress, children are commonly seen as too immature to be able to give informed consent to research taking place. In support of others (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Grieg and Taylor, 1999), I dispute this. The research brief, in the form of a ‘Body Language’ cards written in age-appropriate language, were read to the children prior to the research being conducted. The children then consented to the research taking place using their own coloured cube and placing it on the stop/go board as
necessary. These boards were changed from happy/sad faces, at the risk of children who may wish to withdraw consent seeing it as a ‘negative’ thing.

**Data analysis**

Data from the focus groups and interviews were fully transcribed manually. Coding analysis and case summaries were used to identify the most relevant and interesting findings. Coding analysis involves the coloured highlighting of findings which support or link to one another, and therefore helps to identify any emerging themes. Brief sentences or bullet points are then written under each theme, which act as case summaries. From the findings, I noted the dominance of three key themes - **control**, **congruence** and **collaboration**. I discuss these in the following section.

**Findings, Discussion and Analysis**

The first key theme that I saw underpinning the research findings has been labelled **control**. I recognised that non-verbal communication was often discussed and utilised as a form of behaviour management within the year two classroom. Drawing on the quote by Watkins (2007, pp. 779) previously highlighted in the literature review relates to this theme, when she stresses that -

‘...it is the affective force generated by teachers’ bodies and the ways in which it circulates in a disciplinary capacity that needs to be clearly understood’.

Whilst analysing my findings, I chose to divide the theme of control into two additional sub themes. I found that particular forms of non-verbal communication were used as a way of trying to discipline children during periods of ‘bad’ behaviour, and also as a method of praise when the children displayed ‘good’ behaviour. As Hall *et al.* (2001) and Wootton (1993) claim, one of the many characteristics of a competent teacher is their ability to use body language to portray attitudes and reinforcements regularly.

On questioning Mrs Graham about her use of non-verbal communication, she immediately implied that she consciously used changing facial expressions and hand gestures as a way of tackling behavioural issues. My observations correspond with this statement, often through her attempts to get the class to be silent by folding her arms, placing her finger over her lips and staring at the children. Like Corrie (2009), Mrs Graham emphasised the children’s competence in recognising a range of non-verbal signals and responding accordingly.

I feel that my findings support the idea that non-verbal communication is difficult to define as a single process. Many of the non-verbal cues I identified are the same or similar to those put forward by the likes of Argyle (1988) and Petrie (1997). However, through discussion with Mrs Graham and the children, I learnt that drawings on the whiteboard (such as happy and sad faces) were a method of control deemed to work just as effectively as body language. I have therefore recognised this use of illustrations as a category of non-verbal communication which was absent from the original literature that I explored. To substantiate this finding, I came across further reading from Anning and Ring (2004, pp. 121), who emphasise the need for children to be exposed to drawings to contributes towards the ‘multi-modality of communication’.

Mr Bunt acknowledges the idea that by displaying a ‘closed’ body language, the children automatically become aware that they have done something wrong. When seeking
clarification largely through my observations, I concluded that the ‘closed’ body language he was referring to was represented in terms of releasing himself from the children, often by backing away and staring or folding his arms. The children I spoke to showed significant awareness of this. For example, Adam noted that Mr Bunt sometimes ‘…looks very silent and angry because he doesn’t like us when…we climb on chairs, or climb on tables…’.

This said, I became aware of a contradiction when discussing Mrs Grahams’ use of clapping. Whilst I interpreted that it was used as a way of generating a loud noise to stop the children talking, many of the children themselves, including Amy, actually saw clapping as a form of praise. I sought further explanation for this by referring back to the work of Hargie and Dickson (2004). They cite Huczynski (1996, pp. 362), who devised the term ‘clap trap’. This describes the use of clapping by an individual as a way of motivating others and encouraging them to continue. A simple scenario such as this highlights the importance of obtaining multiple perspectives, as to ensure that researcher bias does not result in misunderstandings (Cohen et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Some of the children described how Mrs Graham would clap and have a smiley face should everyone be sitting at their tables and refrain from talking. Edward agreed, whilst claiming that Mr Bunt often looked happy when the children were not rude, and were showing their good behaviour. To this, I would add that similar gestures were also evident after the children had demonstrated good effort, particularly when answering questions correctly.

Whilst observing Mr Bunt working with a group of children during a numeracy lesson, Jason, whom I was aware was of lower ability, gave the correct answer to a question posed. You could sense that this was unexpected, resulting in Mr Bunt exclaiming ‘…did you just say the right answer?!’ Whilst leaning back in his chair, Mr Bunt then displayed a shocked look on his face, by opening his mouth and covering it with one hand. Jason responded by nodding and smiling at the same time. This situation illustrates one of the many benefits of non-verbal communication. With little speech, both Mr Bunt and Jason were able to make their feelings clear. Jason’s response accurately mirrors Mr Bunt’s, in that he realises what he has done has been recognised as an achievement. As Gable and Shean (2000, in Hargie and Dickson, 2004) discuss, this shows how body language has been used to contribute towards positive changes in emotional state.

Claire highlights a similar situation through her drawing of Mr Bunt, when the class are sitting nicely and showing good listening skills (see Figure 1.).

![Figure 1. Drawing of Mr Bunt by Claire](image)

She discussed it with me subsequently –

‘Claire: Mr Bunt puts his hands on his face like, um on his cheeks um, and...’
Interviewer (I): Oh right, so he puts his hands on his cheeks does he?

Claire: Yeah, and goes, ‘Wow!’

I: ...So what does that mean then...?

Claire: We’re sitting nicely.’

Discussion with Mr Bunt did little but support this notion. He explicitly suggested the use of non-verbal cues to reinforce positive behaviour, and addressed his use of ‘thumbs up’, claiming ‘...that’s just my way of acknowledging their achievements and effort...’ The common use of ‘thumbs up’ was also recognised in research by Goldin-Meadow et al. (1999). In addition, this gesture can be categorised under Ekman and Friesen’s (1969, in Mehrabian, 1972) emblem, in that ‘thumbs up’ can be precisely translated as ‘well done!’ or ‘good work!’ According to Mr Bunt, an important consequence of this use of body language was that it showed admiration for the children’s attempts, even if they hadn’t achieved pre-set targets. By revisiting Watkins’ (2007) research in the literature, I considered how she found that children had difficulty engaging with their work if their teacher frequently used informal non-verbal cues. Rather interestingly, it seems that Mr Bunt contradicts this claim, suggesting that signals such as ‘thumbs up’ or ‘high fives’ were more effective as an informal approach, as they put ‘...a personal side into it’.

It is important to consider that the children’s drawings of the adults were limited to the boundaries I stated, which did relate to differences in behaviour. Moreover, the fact that a number of behavioural issues had been identified within the setting in which the research was conducted may have had an influence over the identification of such a large number of these scenarios. Aside from this, I was keen to question whether the use of non-verbal communication as a way of controlling behaviour is as effective as it first appears. This brings me to the second theme identified, that of congruence. Whilst there were instances when body language was considered to be successful when used alone, I soon realised that it seemed to have the greatest impact on the children when congruent, or when it complemented, spoken word.

Mrs Graham expressed to me how crucial she felt non-verbal language was as a sole process, noting that it worked most of the time. She also commented on the importance of the tone of voice used. Such an awareness of paralinguistics is essential, as stated by Petrie (1997) and Mehrabian (1972). Mrs Graham’s sensitivity to the ways in which she uses her voice to convey meaning can and did have a significant effect on the children’s reactions (Hall et al., 2001; Petrie, 1997; Wootton, 1993). It was thought that shouting repetitively was not a successful means of communication. For Mrs Graham, it was all about modelling effective interactions to the children.

It is possible that she could have obtained information on the importance of non-verbal communication from the growing amount of resources becoming available (Nonverbal Solutions, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Petrie, 1997; Neill and Caswell, 1993, Wootton, 1993). However, it is also relevant to consider the implications of the Hawthorne effect (in Cohen et al., 2007). Whilst meeting appropriate ethical considerations, explaining that I was researching the effectiveness of non-verbal communication may have lead Mrs Graham to feel the need to emphasise its importance. In addition, I noticed that she often described non-verbal cues as ‘...something different’, or as an alternative to using her voice. I find this interesting, largely as it seems to contradict the idea of Burgoon (1994) and Knapp et al.
(2004), who maintain that body language is an incorporated part of the entire interpersonal communication process (cited in Payler, 2009).

Mr Bunt’s opinion first appeared to compliment Mrs Graham’s, as he discussed the effectiveness of sitting down and not speaking, as well as the idea that shouting would only result in the children’s spoken volume raising to match his. He claimed that he could usually tell if the children were responding to his use of non-verbal communication, as their body language would often mimic his. Amy seemed conscious of this when she described a method Mr Bunt uses to stop the children talking. However, she suggests an alternative consequence – ‘he’s twinkling his fingers up to see if anyone copies him…we need to copy him back…we carry on, but we need to be quiet’. Amy’s comments draw attention to circumstances when non-verbal communication can be challenging or problematic, as discussed by Petrie (1997) and Hargie and Dickson (2004).

Nevertheless, I do feel it necessary to mention an alternative explanation I considered, aside from what seems to be an unsuccessful use of a non-verbal gesture. As Drake et al. (2004) state, a particularly low status is often assigned to TAs or support staff in relation to teachers. In parallel, research suggests that children are often more attentive to those who have a higher status within the classroom (Gill and Adams, 1988). Hence, it is worth bearing in mind that Amy’s explanation may reflect an unwillingness to pay attention to Mr Bunt, given that his role is ‘just’ that of a TA, or that he is not as important to listen to or observe as Mrs Graham is. When I asked Mr Bunt whether he believed verbal or non-verbal communication was most effective when working with the children, he claimed that he thought it was a mixture of both.

The drawings in Figures 2 and 3 illustrate instances in which the adults use both verbal and non-verbal communication in congruence. I chose these because I found it interesting that both children discussed their drawings as occasions that they could remember clearly. Claire described how Mr Bunt had his arms crossed as was putting his thumbs down, whilst saying ‘year two!’, and how this caused her and friend to stop chatting about a TV programme. Edward analyses his situation at a particularly emotional level, claiming that not only did Mrs Graham look like she was going to cry whilst exclaiming ‘I hate this...I don’t want to know any more of this class’, but also the fact that the children were equally as aware and upset that they weren’t doing as they should.

On a number of occasions, I also observed the effectiveness of this congruency. Many of the children working with Mr Bunt often responded when he pointed to relevant sections of
worksheets whilst giving a verbal explanation. Moreover, as Mrs Graham pointed to her ear and exclaimed ‘...we need to show our listening skills here’, the children fell silent. During an active learning experience I noted that Mrs Graham asked the children to move to one end of the class or the other, giving both verbal explanation and pointing to two designated areas of the room. The children reacted to this immediately. Mr Bunt adopted a similar strategy during a numeracy session, in which he modelled the movement of a see-saw to aid the children’s understanding of heavy and light. Again, the children responded to this by nodding accordingly.

The fact that the children appear to have related eagerly and more deeply to the above situations has significant implications for the importance of verbal and non-verbal congruence. Arguments put forward by Neill (1989), Rosa (2004) and Corrie (2009) regard either body language or spoken language as having the biggest influence over young children’s understanding of communication. Whilst I do not wish to totally dismiss the impact that non-verbal communication can have, I feel that in this instance, using both verbal and non-verbal communication alongside each other, and to complement each other, was the most effective way of enhancing meaningful interactions with the children.

Analysing the above observations of Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt also brings to light the final theme – collaboration. Although I had originally aimed to identify the differences between the non-verbal communication used by Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt, I became aware that their use of strategies was actually very often similar. This theme can be associated with a wide range of additional literature which focuses on the significance of teamwork in the early years. Recent examples can be taken from Leeson and Huggins (2007) and Insley and Lucas (2009), who claim that we must appreciate healthy and supportive adult relationships as an integral aspect of pedagogy.

Drawing on data from the quantitative section of my observations, I can see that pointing was the most common non-verbal behaviour used by both adults. The fact that neither adult was observed nodding or shaking their head is also relevant in supporting this idea. Much evidence was found of both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt demonstrating the use of smiling, frowning, staring, folding their arms, clapping, and a shocked look by widening the eyes and opening the mouth. In fact, there were no non-verbal behaviours that could be clearly associated with one adult but not the other.

Fraser and Meadows (2008) found that the children in their study were able to make clear distinctions between the role of the class teacher and the TA. Likewise, the children’s drawings in this study sometimes illustrated differences in terms of the roles carried out by both adults. This also supports the previous suggestions I made regarding the status of the TA (Drake et al., 2004). Freya highlighted this when she described that the reason Mr Bunt has a happy face is because he is pleased to be giving out the up-to-date reading records. She went on to say that she could tell Mrs Graham was sad that the children were being loud, because she needs quiet when working on the laptop.

Even so, there was little variation between the types of non-verbal communication that the children illustrated each adult displaying. The drawings by Adam clearly support this (see Figure 4.), as both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt show a smiley face when the children are sitting nicely and showing good listening skills, but an angry or ‘wobbly’ face when they are noisy and not showing good listening skills.
Whilst this discovery does not argue the point of both Fraser and Meadows (2008) and Eyres et al. (2004), for me, it contributes an additional dimension to their research. Discussion with Amy confirmed these non-verbal similarities, as she talked about her drawing of Mr Bunt –

Amy: Um, he’s clapping his hands.

I: He’s clapping his hands is he?

Amy: Yeah, like Mrs Graham.

In correspondence with Neill’s (1989) findings, I also noticed that smiling and frowning were recognised more often by the children, and thus seemed to have stronger effects than posture and gesture. Although uncertain, I considered that this may be due to the difficulty in illustrating body movements in drawings, as opposed to facial expressions. I have come to this conclusion particularly as I noticed some children, including Amy, commenting on hand gestures during the focus group discussion whilst they were not evident in their pictures. Again, this highlights the importance of discussing children’s drawings with them, as previously highlighted by Roberts-Holmes (2005).

I wanted to ask both adults whether or not they engaged in reflective practice in order to consider how it could help their future non-verbal interactions with the children. This was due to my increasing awareness of reflection as a defining characteristic of professional practice, advocated by the likes of Schön (1983), Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) and Leeson (2007) and a requirement for qualified teaching status. As I previously explored in the literature, Sage (2000) and Wootton (1993) claimed that practitioners rarely consider the connotations of body language in pedagogy. In spite of this, Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt claimed that they did reflect, often as a way of questioning ‘…why did it not work today?’ and ‘is there something I can change that would make it better?’. Mr Bunt commented that he enjoyed sitting and contemplating which forms of body language he used that were most effective. He stated that he regularly observed both Mrs Graham and other colleagues in order to pick up on the successful forms of non-verbal communication they use. He went on to say –

‘...I always like to when other people have got the time, to actually ask other people’s opinions...cos it gives you just an all round view of your own sort of experiences and your own...practices.’

By seeking alternative perspectives from his colleagues, Mr Bunt is therefore aiming to overcome a barrier suggested by Petrie (1997), in that we often risk making inaccurate judgments about body language before considering other influences which may affect it.
Observing people objectively means that we can become aware of ourselves as communicators. I discovered additional literature by Hartley (1997), who claims that we can use reflection on previous experiences in order to modify communication between individuals and thus improve team effectiveness as a whole. Of course, the most imperative argument here is that both Mr Bunt and Mrs Graham fail to recognise the importance or value of consultation with the children themselves.

**Conclusion**

The key focus of this research dissertation was to investigate how adults’ use of non-verbal communication skills affects children’s responses to them in the classroom. It was important that the three underlying themes identified elicited the most interesting findings, whilst relating as far as possible to the three research questions I posed.

I first recognised that non-verbal communication was often exercised as a form of control, both to discipline bad behaviour, but also to reward and reinforce good behaviour and achievement. Being able to do this contributes towards Hall *et al.* (2001) and Wootton’s (1993) vision of a competent teacher. Not only did I recognise many of the non-verbal behaviours previously acknowledged by the likes of Argyle (1988), but I also discovered additional channels, such as Mrs Graham’s use of illustrations. Contradictions sometimes arose, between the children’s perceptions and my own, but also between my findings and the literature.

Both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt advocated the use of non-verbal communication as a lone process, despite assertions from Burgoon (1994) and Knapp *et al.* (2004), who stress it as an integral part of the interpersonal communication process (cited in Payler, 2009). Consultation with the children lead me to become aware of problematic situations that can arise through the use of non-verbal behaviour (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). The fact that the children seemed to relate more readily and sensitively when non-verbal and verbal communication were used at the same time and complimented each other thus raises implications for the importance of congruence in this context.

Although I had originally aimed to see whether the children perceived there to be any differences between the use of body language by both adults, I came to realise that it was actually very similar. I labelled this theme collaboration, and associated it with the wide amount of literature relating to the importance of teamwork in the early years. Whilst similarities were found between my study and that of Fraser and Meadows (2008), the fact that both adults did not differ greatly in their use of non-verbal communication, for me, adds an additional dimension to their research. Both Mrs Graham and Mr Bunt stressed the importance of reflection to influence their future interactions with the children, an aspect of professional practice also advocated by the likes of Leeson (2007). However, rather commonly, something which they fail to appreciate is the voice of the child.

As Norris (1998, in Eyres *et al.* 2004) emphasises, children are deemed to have little understanding of many topics, hence the reason they are rarely invited to comment on educational innovations that so frequently affect them. I reiterate Neill’s (1989) argument, in that barely any research focuses on how non-verbal communication affects children. Imperatively, I feel that this is one of the most crucial motivations and strengths of my research dissertation, suggesting further implications both for policy (DCSF, 2008; DfEE, 1999) and to an already growing body of research regarding the voice of the child.
Using *triangulation* through a total of three research methods meant that I was able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic, whilst giving my findings a greater level of validity (Cohen *et al*., 2007; Willan, 2007) It is also worth drawing briefly on epistemological thinking here (Cohen *et al*., 2007). By enquiring rather tentatively into the philosophical dimension of research, I concluded that I most likely practice a term labelled by Walliman and Buckler (2008, pp.164) as *reconciliationism*. By this, I mean that my research is underpinned by the idea that whilst some things can be measured with a degree of certainty about the outcome (positivism), many can still be open to debate and different perspectives (relativism). As Clough and Nutbrown (2002, cited in Roberts-Holmes, 2005, pp. 95) state –

‘...only when the researcher begins systematically to take into account these alternative ways of seeing the topic does mere inquisitiveness change into research’.

Nonetheless, this does not dismiss the idea that case studies can often be prone to researcher bias (Cohen *et al*., 2007; Merriam, 1998). I have highlighted some examples during the findings, discussion and analysis, such as the risk of misinterpretation as a solo researcher (Bell, 2005). Moreover, my standing in the research process both as a familiar face and also as an adult who is ‘learning how to be a teacher’ (as Adam put it), may have influenced the outcome of results. This is why I raised the possible implications of the *Hawthorne effect* (in Cohen *et al*., 2007). Whilst I aimed to minimise these factors as much as possible, they remain an unfortunate reality which may have influenced the validity and reliability of the case study findings overall.

I realise that it is not possible for me to make any sweeping generalisations about my findings, and that they do not necessarily apply in other similar contexts (Basset, 1981, cited in Bell, 2005). If I were to carry out this research study again, I would be interested in investigating a similar subject area, but to compare and contrast children’s responses to non-verbal communication in a range of different settings. Due to the ethical considerations previously addressed, it was not possible for me to work exclusively with pupils who had EAL. However, I would be keen to explore whether EAL pupils responses to body language are different to English children’s responses, particularly as my experience with bilingual children motivated my interest to conduct research in the area of non-verbal communication originally. Moreover, whilst it was not what I wished to focus on, I do not want to bypass the fact that the adults in my study were of different gender. Thus, ‘do children perceive there to be differences between the non-verbal communication used by male and female staff?’ could well be a topic for further research.

I recall reading a statement by Roberts-Holmes (2005), who said that it was important to be selfish when choosing a research topic – to find something that may be beneficial to you in the future. I have had the opportunity to see how -

‘...the teaching/learning process is a goldmine for discovering the richness and importance of non-verbal behaviour’ (Knapp and Hall, 2002, pp. 27).

Imperatively, I have become aware of the many ways in which non-verbal communication can influence the central and most significant individuals in this process – the children. I hope that considering how I use non-verbal communication will continue to enhance my interactions with them, both as an educator and as a learner. I did not set out to find all the answers. Rather, I feel that this research journey has undoubtedly contributed towards many aspects of my personal and professional understanding and development as a prospective teacher – something which I am sure I will greatly value in the years to come.
References


