

TEACHERS GREETING CHILDREN IN ESN(S) SCHOOLS

V. WILLIAMS, B. DAVIDSON, J. HAMMOND, H. JOHNSON,
AND S. SILVERMAN

Teachers' Research Group, Special Schools, Avon, U.K.

Introduction: Teachers Communicating with Children

Much research at present in ESN(S) education is concerned with structured individual teaching (eg: Leeming, Swann, Coupe & Mittler, 1979; Robson, 1977), yet very little of each child's time during the school day is actually taken up by his planned teaching programme. He is still learning much during other parts of the day from his social dealings with the adults and children around him. This paper describes an attempt by a teachers' research group to observe closely what happens during one particularly significant part of the day, when the child first comes into the classroom and is greeted by the teacher.

For the normal stream of education there is an ever growing body of knowledge about how the teacher interacts with her pupils. We do not as yet have such detailed information about classrooms for the ESN(S). In normal classrooms, research has largely followed Flanders' system for analysing verbal functions (Flanders, 1963), and the main concern has been to discover whether teachers use "direct" or "indirect" modes of communication, and whether or not these are successful. When one turns to ESN(S) classrooms, however, the important parameters seem to be rather different. Many of our children have little or no expressive language, and we felt therefore that it was important to broaden our view of the teacher's communication. Not only does she talk to each child as he comes in, but also she communicates a welcome by smiling, by coming close to him, and perhaps by touching him. In other words, the skills of a teacher in an ESN(S) school must include a mastery of non-verbal communication as well as verbal exchange.

Conn and Richardson (in Berry, 1976) consider methods of analysing various aspects of the teacher's communication in an ESN(S) nursery class, and present findings from a preliminary observational study; the area which interests us was the comparison of children within the class. These authors found that it was not the most linguistically advanced child who was addressed most, but the child who was most attention-seeking and potentially troublesome. This study was a small-scale observation on a particular classroom; since we had four classes and teachers available for observation, we decided to compare the teachers' communication to children in each of the four different ability groups, in order to find out whether the communication strategies of the four teachers bore a consistent relationship to the children's receptive language ability. In developing a coding scheme to deal with these communication strategies, we drew largely on Argyle (1967), who discusses the various forms of non-verbal communication.

Teachers and Children

The teachers we observed were working in two different schools for the mentally handicapped, and three of them were members of this research group; they were all experienced teachers in special schools, and had been teaching the particular children in this study for a minimum of one term. The four classes represent the wide range of ability and chronological age which is typical of most ESN(S) schools: average ages and receptive language scores on the Reynell-Zinkin Scale (1980) for each class are shown in Table 1.

Both Class A and Class D consisted of children whose receptive language ability did not lag far behind their chronological age: in fact, they included some children who had been transferred from ESN(M) schools, and one child who has since been transferred to a normal infants school. Class B consisted of children who lived in a subnormality hospital and attended school during the day. It may be seen from the wide discrepancy between their chronological and receptive language ages that they were functioning at a very low level: this

was at least partly due to various behaviour disorders in the group. Among the children in Class C, five children suffered from visual handicaps, three had various degrees of hearing loss, and all six were physically handicapped, although three of them had achieved independent mobility. In summary, the four groups of children were extremely diverse. One factor which varied significantly between classes was in fact receptive language ability itself; (the Kruskal-Wallis Test for differences between groups yielded $H = 13.9$, $p < .01$). Each group could be expected therefore to demand quite different styles of teaching and general interaction from the teacher.

Table 1
Teachers and Children

Classes	A	B	C	D
Type of class	Infants	Adolescents (hospital)	Special Needs	Juniors
No. of children	6	6	6	9
Mean chron. age	5, 4	16, 10	9, 2	10, 6
Mean receptive lang. age	3, 3	1, 3	1, 8	3, 9
Teacher a member of research group	yes	yes	yes	no
School (referred to by initials)	N	B	B	N

Data Collection and Coding Scheme

Two video-tape recordings were made of each of the four teachers in this study during the period when all the children were entering the classroom. The children came in singly or in groups, according to normal practice, which was dependent on transport arrangements, and no special days were chosen for the recordings; the teacher herself arranged the dates according to the availability of the video recording equipment in each school. The camera was focused as far as possible on the teacher herself, rather than on the children, so that facial expressions and gestures could be noted.

The coding scheme which we developed to analyse the teachers' communication is presented in summary below (Table 2).

Table 2
Summary of Coding Scheme

Space	categories coded the distance of the teacher from the child
Gaze	categories coded the expression on the teacher's face, when this could be distinguished
Gesture	categories coded any manual gesture which had some significance (an intention or meaning describable in words)
Touch	categories coded the ways in which the teacher touched the child while greeting him; (ie: which part of the body was used for touching, and which part of the child was touched)
Utterance	categories coded the length of the teacher's utterances
Plane	categories coded the spatial posture of the teacher relative to the child

When using this scheme to analyse the data, we marked each category as positive (occurring at least once) or negative (non-occurring) within each consecutive five-second time interval. The coding started at the point when the child entered the classroom. The initial interaction with the teacher was coded, including any interaction which concerned

taking off coats, etc. Interaction with people other than the teacher was not coded. Coding ended either when the child settled down to a classroom activity, or when it was clear that the teacher was no longer greeting the child (either because she left him physically, or because of the content of what she said).

This coding scheme proved to be quite adequate for our purposes, although we regarded it all along as a tentative means of dealing with an area of communication about which there are few established facts. We did not make use of the full amount of detail which was included when we came to testing our hypotheses, but it was necessary to code some excess information before determining which were the important points to pursue.

Results

We analysed the data using two methods, one of which compared the two greetings received by each child with those of every other child (children treated as individuals), while the other method sought for differences between class groups as wholes. In the first method, the children were ranked according to their receptive language ages; we used the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient (Siegel, 1956, pp 202 — 213), corrected for ties, to discover whether it was likely that receptive language ability was associated with aspects of the teachers' behaviour, such as amount of touch received by each child, or amount of time spent with each child. In the second method, with the same rank order data, the Kruskal-Wallis One-Way Analysis of Variance by ranks (Siegel, op. cit, pp. 184 — 193) was used to establish whether there were significant differences between the treatment received by children in different classes. Table 3 summarizes the results, which will be briefly discussed below.

Table 3
Summary of Results

Correlations with low receptive language ability (ie: with children ranked from lowest to highest ability).

	rs value	level of significance
Time spent with child		NS
Lack of interruptions	0.41	.05
Proportion of long utterances	0.64	.01 (reverse order)
Proportion of short utterances	0.57	.01
Time spent at child's level	0.41	.05
Time spent in gesturing		N.S.
Smiles/frowns/surprised looks	0.38	.05
Time spent in touching	0.63	.01
Distance of teacher: far away	0.365	.05 (reverse order)
Distance of teacher: close	0.433	.05

Differences between classes treated as whole groups

	H value	level of significance
Time spent with each child	14.1	.01
Lack of interruptions	5.49	.20
Proportion of long utterances	6.29	.10
Proportion of short utterances	16.16	.01
Time spent at child's level	13.94	.01
Time spent in gesturing	7.67	.10
Smiles/frowns/surprised looks	21	.001
Time spent in touching	30.9	.001
Distance of teacher: far away	12.72	.01
Distance of teacher: close	14.14	.01

Our first hypothesis was that the teachers would spend longer time with children of lower language ability: this was not so. It could be, therefore, that time in itself is not an important distinguishing feature of greetings, and is determined more by chance factors, which are relevant only to one occasion (eg: child bringing in present for teacher, child seeming to be sick, etc.). However, the amount of interruption in each child's greeting did seem to vary according to the language ability of the children. There was a tendency to interrupt the more able children more often, and for longer periods, than the less able ones. The teachers clearly helped those with lower levels of comprehension by concentrating their own attention exclusively on each child in turn.

Next we turned to the teachers' actual communication strategies. In the sphere of spoken language, we merely examined length of utterance, and found that the better the child's receptive language ability, the more likely he was to have long utterances (6 words or more) addressed to him. The reverse was also true, in that children of lower language ability received more short utterances (3 words or less). However, it was the non-verbal means of communication which chiefly interested us, as many of the children had minimal comprehension of the content of verbal language in any type of utterance.

We found, for instance, that there was some evidence to show the teachers "getting down to the child's level" more often with the less able children, thus making eye-eye contact possible. However, certain factors confused this issue: tall children were automatically at the teacher's eye level, and physically handicapped children were often being carried or held by the teacher, tending therefore to have the teacher behind them more often than the other children.

The results for gesturing were also inconclusive: this was largely because the total amounts of gesture used were very low. We also investigated whether more distinctive types of facial expression (smiles, frowns and surprised looks) would be given to the children who understood least speech: there was some evidence of this happening. The teachers tended to aid their communication with these children by changing their expressions more often and more obviously.

However, the most striking results were those concerning touch. There was a strong correlation (at .01 level) between low receptive language ability and the amount the children were touched by their teachers. The distribution of the children in four different class groups also appeared to be related to the amount of touching they received (correlation at .001 level), and so the teacher's own style may have had an influence on this factor. However, as the classes were biased according to receptive language ability as well (see above), we can argue that teachers' styles were influenced by the average ability in their classes. There will be further discussion of this point below.

Since the less able children were touched more, it was to be expected that the teachers would spend more time close to these children. Our predictions here proved correct, but with less strong evidence (correlations at .05 level). The reason for this seems to be that the teachers remained close to many of the younger children without actually touching them. Therefore these children, many of whom were quite linguistically able, obtained high ranks for "teacher close", but not for "teacher touching". It seemed unusual to greet a very small child at a distance greater than 1 — 2 feet, and so these children benefited from the closeness of the teacher's face and voice.

In summary, what emerged is as follows: the 27 children who were being greeted by their teachers were separated into four different class groups. The allocation of children to classes was certainly not random, but probably resulted from a range of considerations, some explicit and some implicit. Receptive language ability, for instance, was found to vary significantly from class to class (see above). Age of child was also clearly a criterion for a child being in any given class. Therefore the four teachers we observed were different not only by virtue of their own personalities, but also because they had different types of class. It is clear from Table 3 that we found greater differences on nearly all measures between class

groups as wholes, than between individual children. In view of this fact, we wondered whether the overall trends in non-verbal communication would be repeated within each class, so that the teachers could be shown to adapt their mode of greeting to each child's comprehension level within their own class. However, no consistent results were obtained when we tested for correlation of rank orders for receptive language ability and the rank orders for the various aspects of teacher behaviour, class by class.

The positive findings from our research were that touch seemed to be the main non-verbal means of communicating with the less verbal children, with gaze and "getting down to the child's level" playing lesser roles. These modes were the ones which our teachers consistently altered in accordance with the children's level of understanding. In addition, children who had better comprehension of language received a higher proportion of long utterances, while children who had lower comprehension levels tended to receive a higher proportion of short utterances from the teacher.

General discussion

What implications might these results have for those concerned with mentally handicapped children? The findings concerning touch seemed to be particularly relevant, since it is often said that mentally handicapped people touch others and come close to them in inappropriate ways. Clearly, touching is one of the most direct ways of gaining and holding another person's attention, and also of communicating confidence and trust. The teachers are instinctively adapting their mode of communication to the ability level of the children, and phasing out the amount of touching as linguistic communication becomes increasingly possible. How can we help mentally handicapped people themselves to do this? It may indeed be an area where we need to know more about our own non-verbal communication in order to find out how it is affecting the children's modes of communication.

In our observations, the more able children tended indeed to be greeted quite casually, and to treat the whole occasion in casual terms. They were chiefly interested in entering the class and immediately choosing an activity or interacting with a classmate, and the perfunctory "good morning" was often said from a regard to politeness. The more severely handicapped children, on the other hand, seemed to gain a lot from the initial interaction with their teacher, and were often seen to gradually relax, to become more evidently aware of their surroundings, and to show pleasure in their teacher's company. It is clearly an important matter for such children to receive a slow, leisurely and reassuring introduction to the school day, whereas for older and more able children, it would be an intrusion on their own plans for activity.

The other major result was the finding that differences between classes on most facets of the teachers' behaviour were more striking than differences between children. In other words, the teachers are adapting their style of greeting to suit the average ability of the children in each class, and while they sometimes make changes to suit a child of different ability from the rest of the group, it is clear that such a child would have quite different treatment in a group of his own ability level. Only rarely was a trend apparent to consistently match the mode of communication to the individual child's comprehension level. Indeed, such changes may be almost impossible for any individual to make in the course of natural human interaction. This fact certainly has implications for the placement of children in classes, for it seems that a child whose ability is much below or above that of the rest of the class might receive a slightly inappropriate form of teacher communication. It is of course debatable whether or not this would be a disadvantage to that child. However, we may be demanding a super-human task from the teacher, who has to try to adapt her whole strategy for each child in her class. We have shown that this adaptation involves far more than simply talking in sentences which each child can understand: the style of greeting given to a less able child was typically a leisurely, relaxing affair, with the emphasis on touching, holding and

clear facial expressions, while the most able children were greeted very briefly and casually, merely as a preliminary to their settling down to an activity. Perhaps the ideal grouping of children would involve a certain amount of flexibility, so that those who did not fit the "average pattern" of their own class group could spend some time each day in other complementary settings. For instance, a physically handicapped child may be integrated in a class of active children of similar mental level to himself, but still may have the advantage of a period of time spent with other physically handicapped children, when the adults would be concentrating on physical contact, as part of a therapeutic approach to his physical handicap. Such a flexible system would depend for its success on the close contact and cooperation between all classrooms and teachers in a school.

It is interesting that a small-scale observational project led us to debate such an issue as the placement of children within a ESN(S) school, and we feel therefore that more research of this nature may be very beneficial, particularly in view of the current enthusiasm for integration of handicapped with non-handicapped pupils. We are attempting to define the quality of the daily interactions which comprise the human environment given to the child in a special school. In this context, we would like to observe adults greeting normal young children, in order to see whether the same trends are found. We feel that the variations in our behaviour towards the children reflect the development which any mother must go through with her own child, and that special schools in this sense are not so "special". It would also be important to examine the teacher's non-verbal communication in different situations during the day, since it may be that she is giving the child clearer messages at some times than at others. How, for instance, does she use her non-verbal repertoire in a group teaching session (eg: at music or story-time)? Certainly, the next step in any continuation of this research must be to widen the sample, since it is always possible that our results may be due to idiosyncrasies of our own personalities. We feel, however, that we have taken a first step towards defining the problems and questions in this area, and that we now have a basis of methodology and theory to look further at what happens inside ESN(S) classrooms.

SUMMARY

Four teachers in different types of ESN(S) classroom were observed and recorded while greeting the children as they entered the room on two separate mornings. The aim was to describe the different non-verbal modes used to communicate with children of varying receptive language ability, and a coding scheme was devised and used for this end. It was found that the length of the teachers' utterances correlated with the children's receptive language ability, and that the most important non-verbal means of communicating with the less verbally able children was touch, with gaze and "getting down to the child's level" playing lesser roles. Although the teachers were sensitive to the children's varying abilities, the major differences in teacher behaviour were found between classes, rather than within classes. We concluded that each teacher tended to use an interactive style which was appropriate for the average ability of her class, and that it is difficult to adapt the mode of non-verbal communication exactly in accordance with each child's level of comprehension. These findings lead one to question the rigid placement of heterogeneous children in one particular class.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Dr. Jim Kyle at the Education Dept., Bristol University, for his help in reading through a first draft of this paper and giving us his suggestions. We would also like to thank the head teachers and others at Briarwood School and New Fosseyway School, Avon, for allowing us to observe and record the teachers in their classrooms.

Note:

For further details of data collection, coding scheme and statistical treatment of results, please contact: V. Williams, 47 Long Ashton Road, Long Ashton, Avon.

References

- Argyle, M. (1967) *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*. Penguin, England.
- Berry, P. (1976) *Language and Communication in the Mentally Handicapped*. E. Arnold, London.
- Flanders, N.E. (1963) Intent, Action and Feedback: a preparation for teaching, in: *Interaction Analysis: Theory, Research and Application*. eds. Amidon, E.J. & Hough, J.B. (1967) Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Leeving, K., Swann, W., Coupe, J. & Mittler, P. (1979) *Teaching Language and Communication to the Mentally Handicapped*. Schools Council Publications.
- Reynell, J. & Zinkin, P. (1980) *Developmental Scales for Young Visually Handicapped Children*. NFER, London.
- Robson, C. (1977) *Steps in the Development of Language* (The Project TASS). H.A.R.C., Manchester.
- Siegel, S. (1956) *Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioural Sciences*. McGraw-Hill Kogakusha, Tokyo.