TEACHER'S BEHAVIOUR IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The theory behind this study reiterates the predictions that successful teacher–student interaction in the classroom is essential to the educational and social development of students and that teachers' understanding of their own behaviour is therefore of paramount importance. Teachers can be grouped into three categories: empathetic teachers, non-empathetic teachers and uncommitted teachers. This study includes several findings regarding teacher–student interaction in the classroom, most importantly that personal characteristics appear to be a good predictor of teacher competence and that there appear to be relationships between particular personal characteristics on the one hand and teachers' classroom practices on the other. These results seemed to be unrelated to class size and the educational institution type, representing a basis for implementation in the entire educational system.

Interaction has been defined as reciprocal communication in which each person reacts to and communicates with the other (Hargreaves, 1975). From Mead's (1934) sociological viewpoint, the conscious mind, self-awareness and self-regulation are central to this interaction, and he viewed human thought, experience and behaviour as being basically social. When people are interacting, they are constantly interpreting the acts of themselves and others and responding to them. Symbolic interactionists (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) argue that we perceive ourselves through the eyes of others and that through this process we gradually come to perceive the world. Each time we enter a new social situation or relationship, we learn to behave by watching, asking and listening. Thus, behaviour is not only a response to stimuli from another person, but actions are constructed through shared symbols in a reciprocal interaction, in which we use our senses, insight and thoughts. Through this interaction, individuals may acquire the basis for cooperative and social activity. Both teachers and students are concerned with their 'selves' and, as Pollard & Tann (1993) put it, each individual has a unique sense of self and a degree of free will in acting and in developing understanding with others.

Teachers' sense of self is particularly important, because of the way in which it influences their perspectives of, strategies with and actions towards children (Hargreaves, 1975; Nias, 1989). Bruner (1977) argues that the teacher is a model, that he or she is a personal symbol of the educational process, a figure with whom students can identify and compare themselves. Through language, teachers and students express themselves, but although language provides the key set of symbols (Hewitt, 1997), not all symbols take the form of spoken or written words. Hall & Hall (1988) suggest that the impact of non verbal communication is potentially much greater than that of verbal communication; these subtle cues can be transmitted through many different channels and the ability to understand them is critical to interpersonal relationships.

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Several research studies have provided information about teacher–pupil interaction in the classroom. In the UK, Cooper & McIntyre (1996) found that factors connected with students' moods, attitudes and interests are the most prominent kinds of circumstantial factors to which teachers attend. Teachers in their study found it desirable to be open to students' influences and to incorporate these influences in their teaching. Some of the outcomes sought by teachers tended to relate to the affective rather than the cognitive realm, in that they represented the need to create a classroom atmosphere that considered students' feelings or orientations. These factors were found to motivate pupils to engage actively in the learning process and to cooperate with others. These findings are consistent with Bruner's (1987) model of learning as a transactional process. Given an appropriate, shared social context, students seem to be more competent as intelligent social actors than they are as individuals (Bruner, 1987).

However, other research on classroom interaction has yielded different results. Alexander's (1992) findings, for example, indicate that teachers are not aware of the ways in which interaction may influence learning. In his study, conducted in the UK, teachers often spent a large proportion of their time in class interacting with students, but two-thirds of these interactions were routine in nature. One-to-one teacher–student interaction was brief (three per minute) and, for most of the children, it occurred infrequently. Alexander's findings present a picture of intensely busy teachers who emphasise the need to approach many students in each lesson, but one student at a time.

In another British study, ORACLE (Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation) teachers were involved in interaction with students nearly 80% of the time they were observed; 70% of these interactions were with individual students, 20% with the whole class and less than 10% with groups of students. Thus, research has shown a high rate of brief teacher–student interactions in the classroom, predominantly on an individual basis. It may be argued, however, that the more teachers seek to make themselves available to each student as an individual, the less time they have for direct and structured interaction with each person.

Non-Verbal Communication in The Classroom

Aspects of non-verbal communication are of considerable importance for teacher–student interaction. First, non-verbal messages are seen as reflections of actual thoughts or feelings. Second, a student's ability to learn from a teacher depends upon there being a shared system of non-verbal communication. Finally, new approaches to human communication are concerned with the 'whole man', in which communication is seen as a process taking place within a framework of human relationships, but limited not only to an analysis of the source, content and reception of messages.

Non-verbal or bodily communication includes gestures, head movements, eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice, touch and silence, all integral parts of people as persons. Facial expression and eye contact are considered to be the most important non-verbal communications (Nelson-Jones, 1993). The effect of interaction can be emotional, physical, cognitive or any combination of these factors.

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Teachers can, to some extent, be unaware of the complex details of the elements of interaction that constantly unfold in front of them: The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and powerful. Either intentionally or unintentionally, teachers may send messages that create distance. For example, a teacher may physically edge away from a student who wishes to discuss personal concerns or a teacher can be physically near a student without being psychologically available. The quality of one's approach to other people 'attending' influences the quality of one's perceptiveness. Attending is now considered to be a basic and important helping skill. There are several ways in which bodily movements support verbal communication: for example, emphasising, providing further information about what is said, illustrating, providing feedback and signaling attention. A relaxed body posture contributes to the message that one is receptive. If a teacher is tense, the students may consciously or intuitively feel that he/she is not accessible to them, creating tension in the classroom. Relaxation means comfort with using one's own body as a vehicle of contact and expression, suggesting that a relaxed teacher can better focus attention on students.

Acceptance can also be reflected in teachers' non-verbal behaviour. Acceptance is a concept that refers to the whole person in the interaction process. To be accepted is the prerequisite of perceiving oneself as an independent person. A student who experiences difficulties can easily feel different from peers and may have a greater need for acceptance from adults than do other students. Thus it is especially important for a teacher to acquire good listening skills and to understand the meaning behind a student's actions, in order to communicate in a way that helps the student to feel accepted and acknowledged. Different types of listening make various demands upon both teachers and children . Unlike hearing, listening depends on a complex set of acquired skills. The prerequisite for effective listening is effective feedback, which consists of both verbal and non verbal messages and as such is based on the ability to show empathetic behaviour. When empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence are applied in teaching, an ease of interaction is facilitated. Too little consideration has been given to 'empathic' interpersonal relations, a critical element for the understanding of personality dynamics and for effective changes in personality and behaviour. Qualitatively, empathetic understanding is the desire to know the full, present and changing awareness of another person. It requires one to receive the communication of another; to translate the words and signs of the other into experienced meaning that matches at least those aspects of the other's awareness that are most important to the other person at the moment.

The non-verbal communication, the subtle interpersonal interaction and the dynamic complexity of teacher–student interaction may all be revealed in the teacher's empathic behaviour and body messages. Not every teacher is capable of establishing true empathetic understanding with students. However, Thompson & Rudolph (1992) believe that younger students, to a greater degree than adults, are sensitive to the real feelings and attitudes of others. Furthermore, non-verbal messages may be the most important clue to what a young student is really feeling and trying to communicate. Empathetic understanding is sharply different from evaluative understanding. When a teacher has the ability to understand a student's reactions from inside, has a sensitive awareness of a student's needs and is receptive and understands

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how the pupil perceives the learning, the likelihood of significant learning is increased. Therefore, learning is facilitated when students are understood rather then evaluated or judged.

The Possibility of Small Schools Meeting the Needs of All Students

The strength of working in small schools includes the opportunity to provide each student with personal attention because of the small number of students on roll. It is through the family-like interpersonal relationship in small schools that teachers have the opportunity to know students more intimately, and to know their interests and particular abilities as well as their difficulties, especially in (foreign) language classes; inclusion is less socially difficult in small groups; there is less sensitivity to and evaluation of differences among students; the opportunity for the individual student to join in all school activities is maximised; there are greater opportunities for participation and belonging.

However, research has also revealed that teachers find classroom management more difficult in multilevel and mixed ability classes. Teaching in multilevel classes, a situation that often occurs in small schools, calls attention to the importance of a curriculum that offers opportunities for students to practice a range of skills in a cross-curriculum context. Such an approach requires knowledge about suitable methods for teaching multilevel classes, as well as a thorough knowledge about individual needs. The presence of multilevel classes should be a challenge for teachers to apply modern teaching methods befitting students who differ in age and ability; methods that acknowledge the educational, social and emotional development of each student (Veenman, 1995).

The Study

The present study is meant as a suggested framework for the observation of teachers' non-verbal behaviour in small and large educational institutions, teachers' practices in the classroom and their efforts to meet the individual needs of all students. Semi-structured interviews designed for this study are meant to explore the teachers' perspectives and understanding of teacher– student interaction and learning in the classroom. In order to achieve these objectives, the observations are designed to provide information on two aspects of teacher behaviour. Teacher's non-verbal behaviour includes the teacher's attentive behaviour, body posture, physical openness and facial expressions, as well as appropriate use of touch, voice, volume, articulation and vocal expression. The collected data is targeted at identifying the ways in which the teacher makes use of non-verbal communication in the classroom. Teacher's general behaviour refers to the teacher's methods of discipline and teaching methods. In order to obtain an extended understanding of teacher–pupil interactions in the classroom, field notes can be used to record instances of the teacher's general behaviour, including key words, phrases and classroom atmosphere. The semi-structured interviews with teachers in small and large schools are intended to determine:

(i) information about teachers' understanding of student' needs;
(ii) teachers' understanding of their own verbal and non-verbal behaviour;
(iii) teachers' beliefs about their classroom interactions;

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(iv) information about teachers' relationships with parents/stakeholders and colleagues;
(v) information about teachers' beliefs about their own teaching.

Methodology

The number of teachers chosen for this activity may vary according to the institution type and size, but it is important that the lessons taught are different in content, as well as the levels of the classes observed. The teacher selection should be based on willingness to participate in the study, however, attempts can be made to take teaching experience into account.

An observation scheme was developed to observe two aspects of teachers' communications: body messages and voice messages. To strengthen the validity of the observations, a number of coding schemes are to be designed. The measurement for the structured observation scheme is a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5, where:

1 _ always, 2 _ often, 3 _ sometimes, 4 _ seldom and 5 _ never.

The five definitions of body language and the four definitions of voice messages are as follows.

Availability: involves the teacher's physical and psychological orientation towards pupils.

Measurement: closeness/distance.

Body posture: involves the teacher's exhibiting relaxation or tension through body posture.

Measurement: relaxed/tense.

Physical openness: is a measure of the teacher's physical connection with the pupils with whom she/he is interacting.

Measurement: facing pupils/eye contact/leaning.

Facial expression: involves the teacher's demonstration of interest in and concern for the pupil, as well as surprise and anger.

Measurements: interest/concern, surprise/ anger.

Appropriate use of touch: refers to the way in which the teacher exhibits physical contact in his/her interaction with pupils.

Measurement: touching hands/arms/ shoulders.

Use of voice: refers to the teacher's voice tone during teacher–pupil interactions in the classroom.

Measurement: speaking quickly/softly/little.

Volume: refers to the extent to which the teacher speaks loudly or quietly.

Measurement: loud/quiet.

Articulation: refers to the distinctness and clarity of speech.

Measurements: clear voice/unclear voice, interactive/reflective voice.

Vocal expression: refers to the teacher's use of his/her voice to express major feelings and feeling nuances.

Measurement: interested/anger/contempt/sadness/boredom.

The field notes made during the structured observation include features of students' tasks and behaviour, teachers' comments and methods and notes on the atmosphere in the

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classroom, all of which represent an extended understanding of classroom interactions and of teacher behaviour.

The format of the interviews is semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer certain flexibility, which may be helpful under sensitive situations that may arise during an interview. It can be difficult to analyse thoughts and actions, but close observation and sympathetic interviewing can bring the researcher close to the core of social interchange (Woods, 1983).

A pilot study must be conducted in order to ensure the accuracy of the observation and the reliability of the observation scheme.

In order to describe and explain teachers' behaviour and actions in each type of school, interpretational analysis will be used. This step requires the detection of constructs and patterns in the teacher's behaviour (Gall *et al.*, 1996). A set of categories which adequately encompasses and summarises the data will be developed. The categories suggested are as follows.

Teaching Approach

Differentiation/individualistic: tasks according to each student's needs and the teacher teaching each student individually.

Whole class/individualistic: the teacher teaches the whole class for a while and then teaches each student individually .

Teachers' Behaviour and Practices

Whole class/same task: all students are provided with the same task. The scale can range from 1 to 3, with 3 being the most appropriate teaching method and 1 the least appropriate.

Method of Discipline

Harmony: balanced atmosphere in the classroom, resulting in students being relaxed and concentrating on tasks (intrinsic discipline)

Good order: well-organised classroom and arrangements, the students functioning according to rules (extrinsic discipline)

Strict order: strictly organised, rules seem to be rigorous and might be inhibiting (enforced discipline)

Confused: classroom disorganised, resulting in pupils being distributed (lack of discipline) . The scale may range from 1 to 4, with 4 being the most appropriate method of discipline and 1 the least appropriate.

Teachers' Behaviour

Empathetic/encouraging: continuous awareness of students' conditions, their communication and the meanings of words and signs, directly encouraging.

Encouraging: directly encouraging and attending to students .

Distant: a lack of attention and consideration. The scale may range from 1 to 3, with 3 being the most appropriate behaviour and 1 the least appropriate behaviour.

The interviews are dissected into units of analysis and sets of concepts relevant to the aim of the study were developed. The concepts are: pupils' individual needs, teachers' empathetic behaviour, interactions, discipline, teachers' relationships with parents/stakeholders, teachers' relationships with colleagues and teaching approaches.

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Expected Results

There is a need for teachers who display good judgment, who respond from genuine consideration. As Hare (1993) said, behaviour of this kind has been undervalued in educational circles.

Teacher training today does not ensure skilful teacher–student interaction. In spite of the knowledge that an understanding of human relations theories produces a positive change in teachers' attitudes and a corresponding positive change in classroom climate.

The results of such a study may open the possibility for future research. They could also pave the way for a type of teacher training that emphasises the manner in which learning occurs. Equally important, this new type of training will focus on teachers' understanding of themselves and the ways in which their perspectives of a particular situation at a particular time may influence their various decisions and behaviour.

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