

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND TEACHERS' SOCIAL SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS IN THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: Article 27 of the National Collective Labour Agreement for Schools defines the competencies that make up the teacher's professional profile, without, however, explicitly mentioning communicative skills, which nevertheless form the foundation of all teaching activity. The European Recommendations and the DigCompEdu Framework reaffirm the importance of communicative competences, urging schools to integrate them into educational processes. This study explores the role of nonverbal communication as a strategic factor in shaping classroom climate and educational relationships. Drawing on international contributions, an exploratory investigation was conducted on seven primary school teachers, observed through structured grids. The results show that only one out of seven teachers effectively uses nonverbal communication, while most display weaknesses, particularly in voice modulation and facial expressiveness, which have a direct impact on student engagement. The study therefore suggests introducing specific training modules aimed at developing teachers' communicative awareness and improving the quality of learning environments.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication; Teacher professionalism; Socio-relational competences; Classroom climate; Teacher training

1. Introduction

The competencies required for the professional profile of teachers were defined by Article 27 of the National Collective Labour Agreement (CCNL, 2018) for the school sector in 2018. According to the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, «The professional profile of teachers consists of disciplinary, digital, linguistic, psycho-pedagogical, methodological-didactic, organizational-relational, guidance, research, documentation, and assessment competences, all of which are interrelated and develop through teaching experience, study, and the systematization of teaching practice». Although comprehensive, this list does not explicitly mention communicative competencies, which nevertheless represent the transversal foundation of all other professional dimensions. As Fiorin states, «Didactic communication remains, in any case, the heart of professionalism (Fiorin, 2002) ». Every skill, disciplinary, psycho-pedagogical, methodological-didactic, or relational, finds its expression in the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students and with the wider educational community. Discussing communicative competences therefore means considering both verbal and nonverbal dimensions, since the construction of a positive classroom climate and the

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quality of educational relationships largely depend on the harmony between what a teacher says and what they convey through body language, gaze, gestures, and voice. As far as students are concerned, the European Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (EU, 2018) assigns schools the task of promoting the development of social and civic competences. It follows that teachers, as the first mediators of such processes, must possess and cultivate them within their professional practice. An interesting contribution comes from the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators – DigCompEdu (European Commission, 2017), which identifies a specific area dedicated to communication within digital competences, highlighting its strategic role in fostering effective and inclusive interactions in online learning environments. This choice demonstrates the importance attributed to communication when discussing digital competence; by analogy, it becomes even more evident that communication skills should have a dedicated place within the professional profile outlined by Article 27 of the CCNL—where they are not explicitly mentioned, despite being the transversal foundation of all the other listed competences.

This gap represents the starting point of the present study, which offers an exploratory analysis of teachers' nonverbal communication in the classroom, assessed through observation grids. The observational practice can be applied by any teacher, in training or in service, who is interested in meta-reflection and the continuous improvement of their professional practice. The objective is to highlight how nonverbal communication represents a modifiable competence, whose development directly contributes to improving teaching effectiveness. In the analysed documents, communicative competences are often treated as an innate and immutable prerequisite of professionalism; on the contrary, they should be the subject of systematic study and conscious cultivation throughout a teacher's career. As Lusso (2005) affirms, «Communicative competences are not innate, but develop throughout life provided, of course, that one works to develop them! (Lusso, 2005)» The analysis thus paves the way for targeted training pathways that help teachers reflect on their nonverbal communication and develop it professionally. A conscious and coherent use of body language not only supports teaching effectiveness but also strengthens trust-based relationships with students and contributes to the creation of positive, inclusive, and participatory learning environments.

2. Research design and observed sample

The study was conducted as part of a 75-hour internship at a primary school. The sample consisted of seven teachers teaching different subjects, observed during regular classroom activities. Although the number of participants was limited, the diversity of disciplines made it possible to detect heterogeneous communicative behaviours, useful for outlining qualitative trends in nonverbal competences within the school context.

The research design was based on systematic observation, using structured grids developed from the studies of Richmond & McCroskey (Richmond & McCroskey, 2004) and adapted by Caccioppola (Caccioppola, 2019). These instruments focused attention on specific dimensions of teachers' communication, ensuring consistency in data collection and comparability among observations.

The grid included three main categories:

- Spatial behaviour (proxemics, posture, kinesics, haptics)

- Vocal signals (verbal indices, nonverbal vocalizations, pauses, and silences)
- Facial expressions (eye contact, emotional expressions, smile)

Indicators were rated on a scale from 0 (absence) to 3 (strong and significant presence), allowing the classification of teachers' nonverbal competence levels from absent to excellent.

Direct observation represents a privileged method for capturing nonverbal behaviour in context, though not without limitations. The small sample size restricts the generalizability of the results, and the observer's presence may, intentionally or not, influence teachers' behaviour. More than providing "objective" data, the investigation aims to offer an exploratory perspective, highlighting the importance of nonverbal communication in teaching practice and encouraging further research. It should also be emphasized that observation grids are not only research tools but can also serve teachers as self-assessment and meta-reflection instruments. From this perspective, they acquire formative value, as they promote critical awareness and continuous professional improvement.

3. Selection and description of observation grids

The following model is based on the observation framework developed by Caccioppola in her book "*E se le parole non bastano? Il comportamento non verbale dell'insegnante in classe*" (Caccioppola, 2019). The aim is to provide a detailed description of the various nonverbal messages considered when analysing teachers' behaviour through direct observation. The grids take into account different categories of behaviour, organized according to bodily systems of reference, and articulate each indicator on a scale from 0 to 3, allowing for a graded evaluation of the effectiveness of nonverbal communication.

Table 1. *Proxemic system of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher*

Categories of nonverbal communicative behaviour	Bodily reference system	Teachers' specific actions	Score (assign the score corresponding to the observed behaviour)
SPATIAL BEHAVIOUR	Proxemic system (interpersonal distance, movement in space)	Remains stationary near the desk or the board (maximum distance from students)	0
		Approaches students when speaking to them or during the explanation.	1
		Moves continuously close to students and among the desks, maintaining minimal distance from students.	2
		Organizes the physical classroom layout according to students' activities, maintaining physical proximity to them.	3

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

The first area of the grid concerns teachers' spatial behaviour, examined through the proxemic system, that is, the use of interpersonal distance and movement within the classroom space. These nonverbal behaviours constitute a meaningful indicator of how teachers construct the educational relationship and manage their physical presence in support of instructional interaction. Observation is conceived along a continuum ranging from more static and distant configurations, such as maintaining a fixed position near the desk or the board, to progressively

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more dynamic and inclusive practices, characterised by approaching students, moving among the desks, and circulating within the classroom during instruction. The highest level of spatial behaviour is represented by the teacher's ability to intentionally reorganise the physical classroom layout in accordance with the proposed activities, while maintaining physical proximity that supports student engagement, attention, and participation.

Table 2. Orientation and posture of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher

Categories of nonverbal communicative behaviour	Bodily reference system	Teachers' specific actions	Score (assign the score corresponding to the observed behaviour)
SPATIAL BEHAVIOUR	Orientation and posture.	Maintains the same position and posture (standing near the desk or the board; seated at the desk), regardless of the classroom activities.	0
		Maintains the same position but changes posture (e.g., leans forward) when speaking to an individual student or to the whole class, then returns to a dominant position.	1
		Changes posture according to the activity (explanation, consolidation, conversation): leans toward the student and maintains face-to-face eye contact.	2
		Adopts a natural and flexible posture depending on the activity, during which he/she seeks to maintain face-to-face interaction with students.	3

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

The second dimension of spatial behaviour addressed by the grid concerns teachers' orientation and posture, understood as core components of nonverbal communication and as privileged conveyors of interpersonal attitudes. Posture does not merely accompany verbal discourse; rather, it plays a significant role in shaping the relational climate, conveying signals of openness, availability, control, or dominance. In line with the literature on nonverbal communication, the grid distinguishes between rigid and dominant postural configurations, which tend to limit interaction and maintain a symbolic distance from students, and more natural and flexible postures, coherent with the different phases of instructional activity. The former are characterised by the maintenance of an invariant position and by an orientation that is largely insensitive to the communicative context, regardless of classroom dynamics. The latter, by contrast, involve an intentional adaptation of posture according to the situation (e.g., explanation, consolidation, dialogue), including leaning toward students, maintaining eye contact, and adopting a face-to-face orientation. The progression of evaluative levels therefore reflects a continuum ranging from predominantly static and self-referential communicative modes to more aware and relational forms of bodily presence, in which teachers use posture and orientation as tools to foster interaction, gather immediate feedback, and support student participation. From this perspective, posture is not considered an ancillary element, but rather an embodied pedagogical resource, capable of making educational intentionality visible and of supporting more effective communicative processes.

Table 3. Haptic system of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher

Categories of nonverbal communicative behaviour	Bodily reference system	Teachers' specific actions	Score (assign the score corresponding to the observed behaviour)
SPATIAL BEHAVIOUR	Kinesic system (body movement, gestures, and facial mimicry)	Does not perform body movements or use gestures during speech.	0
		Uses only head movements to provide feedback to the student with whom he/she is communicating (e.g., nodding or shaking the head).	1
		Occasionally uses gestures to emphasize parts of the discourse. May touch a student to reinforce the verbal message being addressed to him/her.	2
	Haptic system (physical-bodily contact).	Displays a “theatrical” behaviour (moves, gestures, appears to perform) and establishes physical and emotional contact with students.	3

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

A further dimension addressed by the grid concerns teachers' kinesic and haptic behaviour, including body movement, the use of gestures, facial mimicry, and, when present, physical contact. These components of nonverbal communication play a central role in supporting, integrating, and, in some cases, substituting verbal messages, thereby contributing significantly to communicative expressiveness, clarity, and student engagement. With regard to the kinesic system, the grid considers a continuum of behaviours ranging from an almost complete absence of body movement and gestures during speech to progressively more articulated communicative modes, in which teachers use gestures, body movements, and facial expressions in an intentional and content-consistent manner. Intermediate levels include the use of minimal feedback signals, such as head movements while listening, as well as more explicit gestural behaviours that accompany and emphasise communication addressed to individual students or to the whole class.

The haptic system, referring to physical contact, is examined in an integrated and cautious manner, exclusively in terms of contextual appropriateness and communicative function. In this respect, the grid distinguishes between behaviours characterised by the absence of bodily contact and those in which teachers employ light and socially acceptable forms of contact (e.g., a pat on the shoulder or a brief touch on the forearm) to reinforce verbal messages, support attention, or express relational closeness. The progression of scores therefore reflects a shift from limited or reduced forms of bodily communication, potentially monotonous and weakly engaging, to richer, more integrated, and coherent expressive modes, in which body language contributes to conveying emotions, instructional intentionality, and involvement. At the highest levels, kinesic and haptic behaviour is conceptualised as an embodied pedagogical resource, capable of supporting interaction, strengthening the educational bond, and fostering a positive relational climate in the classroom.

Table 4. Vocal signal of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher

Categories of nonverbal communicative behaviour	Bodily reference system	Teachers' specific actions	Score (assign the score corresponding to the observed behaviour)
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VOCAL SIGNALS	Verbal vocal signals Nonverbal vocal signals Pauses and silences	Maintains a constant speech pattern, with volume and tone unchanged and independent of the classroom context. In the presence of background noise, continues speaking or raises his/her voice to obtain silence.	0
		Speaks predominantly, obtains silence from the class when students ask questions, and varies voice volume and tone.	1
		Changes tone and voice volume according to classroom activities. Background noise may occur during some activities (e.g., small-group work or less structured moments).	2
		Has a voice that, due to its richness of expression, captures the class's attention; does not speak continuously but leaves space for students' voices, which emerge during the pauses or silences allowed.	3

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

Voice constitutes another key dimension. Vocal signals, both verbal and nonverbal, reveal the teacher's ability to modulate tone, volume, and rhythm according to context. A monotonous and unvaried speech pattern receives a low score for its limited ability to sustain attention, whereas the conscious use of pauses, silences, and tonal variations is recognized as highly effective in supporting comprehension and managing classroom dynamics.

Table 5. Face of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher

Categories of nonverbal communicative behaviour	Bodily reference system	Teachers' specific actions	Score (assign the score corresponding to the observed behavior)
FACE	Gaze and eye contact	Does not maintain eye contact with students and displays a face that shows little emotional expression.	0
		Maintains eye contact with the group as a whole when addressing the class, or with an individual student when speaking to him/her.	1
	Facial expressions	Displays an animated facial expression when speaking to an individual student or to the class (both positive and negative emotions), showing a present and engaged expression.	2
	Smiling	Displays an expressive and smiling face toward all students, maintaining an interested and attentive expression while speaking, responding, and listening to students.	3

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

Finally, the grids evaluate facial expressiveness, focusing on eye contact, emotional expressions, and smiling. Again, the scale reflects a continuum, from absence of expressiveness and lack of eye contact (signalling detachment and rigidity) to an animated, expressive, and smiling face that conveys attention, interest, and emotional participation.

Based on the nonverbal behaviours previously described, a set of specific indicators was subsequently developed to derive an overall score for teachers' nonverbal behaviour, with a maximum value of 15 points. This index does not merely quantify the quality of nonverbal communication but also provides an interpretative framework for identifying strengths and areas for improvement in teaching practice. From this perspective, the grid is conceived as a tool for observation and self-reflection, supporting teachers, both in training and in service, in developing greater awareness of their communicative styles and in undertaking targeted improvement pathways. The following section presents the table outlining the evaluation scales and the criteria for interpreting the overall score.

Table 6. *Levels of non-verbal behaviour of the teacher*

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
Level 0 Absent (total score ranging from 0 to 4)	The teacher's nonverbal behaviour is extremely limited or inconsistent with verbal communication. The teacher maintains maximum distance from students and adopts the same position and posture, typically remaining near the board or seated at the desk, regardless of the activities carried out by students. The teacher appears rigid, with an absence of gestural behaviour. Speech is monotonous and unvaried. The teacher does not maintain eye contact with students and displays facial expressions that convey little or no emotional information.
Level 1 Minimal (total score ranging from 5 to 8)	The teacher's nonverbal behaviour is monotonous and largely unchanging, or it lacks clear expressiveness. The teacher approaches students only for instructional purposes (e.g., when calling on a student or checking the outcome of their work). The teacher maintains the same position, although posture may change (e.g., leaning forward) when speaking to an individual student or to the class. Gestural behaviour is limited (e.g., nodding or shaking the head). The teacher speaks without leaving space for students' contributions; however, when students ask questions, he/she varies voice volume and maintains eye contact with them.
Level 2 Good (total score ranging from 9 to 12)	The teacher's nonverbal behaviour is adequately expressive in relation to the classroom context. The teacher moves continuously close to students and among the desks, changing position and posture according to the activities carried out. He/she leans toward students and maintains face-to-face eye contact. Head movements and gestures are used to emphasize parts of the discourse. The teacher may engage in physical contact with a student to reinforce a verbal message being addressed to him/her. Facial expression is animated when speaking to an individual student or to the class, conveying both positive and negative emotions, and remains attentive and present. Tone and volume of voice are modulated according to classroom activities. Background noise may occur during some activities (e.g., small-group work or less structured moments).
Level 3 Excellent (total score ranging from 13 to 15)	The teacher organizes the physical classroom layout according to students' activities, maintaining physical proximity and face-to-face interaction with them. He/she adopts a natural posture that communicates openness. The teacher displays a theatrical behaviour (moves, gestures, appears to perform) and establishes both physical and emotional contact with students. Facial expression is expressive and smiling toward all students; an interested and attentive expression is maintained while speaking, responding to, and listening to students. The teacher uses a voice that, due to its richness of expression, captures the class's attention. He/she does not speak continuously, but leaves space for students' verbal contributions, which emerge during the pauses and silences allowed.

Source: Caccioppola F., 2019

4. Results of observation

The exploratory study revealed significant differences in teachers' use of nonverbal communicative skills. Only one out of seven teachers achieved an excellent score (12/15), standing out for expressive gestures, constant eye contact, and dynamic use of classroom space. Three teachers reached a good level (9/15), generally adequate but not always consistent. Two teachers obtained low scores (2–8/15), displaying rigid posture, monotonous prosody, and limited expressiveness. The most critical case (2/15) concerned a teacher who maintained constant distance from students, with little facial expressiveness and minimal relational engagement.

Although based on a small sample, these findings highlight a notable gap: the CCNL (CCNL, 2018) does not explicitly include communication as a specific competence in the teacher's profile, assuming it as a given. The collected evidence, however, shows that only one in seven teachers consciously uses nonverbal resources as didactic and relational tools.

A perceived correlation also emerged between mastery of nonverbal communication and the quality of student participation. Classes led by expressive teachers appeared more motivated, disciplined, and collaborative, while those of less competent teachers tended to show distraction and disorder. This perception aligns with John Hattie's (Hattie, 2009) research, as cited by Silvia Micheletta (Micheletta, 2013), which emphasizes that the decisive factor in learning effectiveness lies in teachers and their approaches: student success or failure largely depends on what teachers do, or fail to do. From this perspective, the most influential elements are not merely technical-didactic but involve the relational dimensions of educational practice: passion for teaching, teachers' expectations, feedback exchange, and the visibility of learning, sometimes perceivable even in the exchange of glances between teacher and student. Hattie's analysis of over 800 factors confirms that the quality of teaching performance, including both verbal and nonverbal communication, forms the core of the educational process.

5. Conclusions

The results of this exploratory study reaffirm that nonverbal communication can no longer be considered an accessory or implicit element of teacher professionalism but must become an explicit focus of training. Although Article 27 of the CCNL does not mention it among professional competencies, educational practice demonstrates its crucial impact on classroom climate, student participation, and ultimately, learning quality. Teacher training programs should therefore include dedicated modules on nonverbal communication, not limited to theoretical acquisition but oriented toward practical experimentation, guided observation, and meta-reflection on one's communicative presence. International literature highlights how self-analysis tools, such as reflective journals, can effectively support teachers' professional development (Ukrop et al., 2018). For in-service teachers, continuous professional development should foster awareness of communicative style through practices such as peer observation, video feedback, and structured debriefing sessions. Recent research projects have also demonstrated the usefulness of digital tools that provide teachers with feedback on their classroom interactions, as in the case of *ClassInSight* (Ngoon et al., 2024).

Alongside these approaches, pedagogical research emphasizes the importance of action research that directly involves teachers as protagonists, allowing them to experiment with innovative practices and assess their impact. Specific studies have shown that teachers' nonverbal behaviour significantly affects teaching effectiveness (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017) and that body and facial language directly influence how didactic messages are received (York, 2014). The aim, therefore, is not to teach teachers to "gesture better," but to help them develop deep relational awareness, harmonizing verbal and nonverbal language. In this direction, the observation grids used in this study are not merely research tools but formative devices that stimulate self-evaluation, foster meta-reflection, and support the continuous improvement of teaching professionalism.

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