

Nonverbal Parameters in Preschool Education

Monica Mădălina Teodorescu 

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania

monica_madalina2006@yahoo.com

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Abstract

In kindergartens, where cognitive, behavioral and attitudinal development of the young child is desired, it is recommended to use efficiently nonverbal communication (expressed especially through posture, mimicry, gestures), in order not to inhibit the child, but to arouse his curiosity. The teacher has an important role in terms of her duty to teach preschoolers to communicate verbal and nonverbal even outside the physical space of the kindergarten, in the family, on the street, in the circle of friends. Most of the times, the nonverbal competence of the teachers is the fruit of a hard work, it involves effort in finding a suitable variant for the word, gesture, silence, space or time. In this article we present the nonverbal elements frequently used by the educators, which we identified after conducting a research in which we applied the questionnaire-based survey method. The results of the research have shown that educators use a variety of nonverbal elements that produce on children both positive and negative effects.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, didactic communication, educational methods, educational message, kindergarten education, preschoolers' education.

JEL Classification: I20, I21, I29.

1. Introduction

While the vocabulary has a limited number of words, expressing the multitude and diversity of communication messages, the human face has very mobile features that can betray an unlimited number of emotional experiences that cannot be described in words, so that, we can say that,

from an emotional point of view, the face is stronger than the word. Flushing, as a result of exercise, shyness, anger or shame, is an obvious and natural sign that cannot be controlled, mimicked or avoided.

Ribbens and Thompson (2012) believe that the facts are more telling than the words, in the sense that, a nod of the head, an eloquent sigh, a studied look, a smile with meaninglessness, the arms crossed and even the way of touching the nose are some of the hundreds of clues that the body offers permanently. “Body language connects different languages and cultures, in the sense that it often has the same meanings all over the world. Bodily expressions of happiness or sadness, anger or satisfaction, agreement, or disagreement transcend cultures and languages.” (Graur, 2001). Collett (2005) believes that the way we sit during a conversation, the way we move our legs, hands, eyes, and eyebrows reveals the degree of involvement in the conversation and the attitude towards the other. Also, the way we arrange our arms and legs when we sit down provides information about our mood and intentions, showing if we feel dominant or submissive, preoccupied or bored, involved or detached.

This study investigates the effects of nonverbal parameters on teaching communication in preschool education and the extent to which non-verbal communication of teachers can make didactic communication more efficient. In preschool education, nonverbal communication is of particular importance, since the subjects involved in the educational act are children between the ages of three and six, who have not yet developed the verbal language. Since body language develops before verbal language (a small child can point the finger at an object, before they can say the name of that object) it is necessary for the teacher to know and decipher that language, but in turn must use these nonverbal elements to facilitate the understanding of the message transmitted to the children.

In this paper we chose to carry out an analysis on human communication, with a focus on the nonverbal side of communication, and didactic communication, and in the second part, through research, we set out to discover what types of gestures teachers use most often in teaching communication and to what extent they are aware of the effect of nonverbal communication at the preschool age. Observing how preschoolers communicate with each other and with the teacher, we all find out that verbal communication is not enough. At times, in order to completely decode a message received from preschoolers it is absolutely necessary to follow the

information sent through nonverbal behavior. Equally, the communication of educators must also be complete: it is not enough to reproduce verbal information, but it must animate them, to give them depth, helping themselves with gestures, mimicry, tone of voice and all other ways of nonverbal communication, so that preschoolers understand correctly the message transmitted. Looking for research in this area, it seems that the importance of nonverbal communication in pre-school education is not given, because we can not find up to this point research on this topic.

2. Literature review

Taking into account that we can communicate through a variety of modes, Stovall and Hull (2018) state that sometimes we communicate even without intention. In recent years, have been noted several researchers who have analyzed the impact of body elements or communication styles in human relationships (Pinxteren, Pluymaekers, Lemmink, 2020). Nonverbal communication is also an important aspect in the teaching process (Arima, Ali, 2021). Salome (2022) believes that regardless of whether we are adults or children, we all have in us the need to communicate. Kendon (apud. Chelcea, 2005) defines nonverbal communication by listing its components: “body movements, gestures, facial expressions and body orientation, posture and space, touches and pronunciation and those aspects of speech such as intonation, voice quality, rhythm of speech and also everything that can be considered different from the content of the act of speech, from what is said”.

All nonverbal elements become acts of indirect communication (Hațegan, 2020). The human body is an instrument laden with cultural and symbolic value (Boldea, Sigmirean, Buda, 2020). To reinforce this statement, we add the idea that the exchange of messages of any kind is all communication (Chiru, 2018). Another way of nonverbal communication is that achieved through signs. “Signs can be: words, images, smells or objects, but all these things become signs only if we give them meanings.” (Graur, 2001)

Albu (2016) emphasizes that: in communicating with preschoolers the tone of voice, the gestures and the expression of the adults' face are decisive, because, depending on their significance, they will feel accepted, respected, noticed or on the contrary rejected, demeaned aggrieved. Therefore, the teacher is the one who represents a model of acquiring a partnership communication, constantly inducing the child the feeling of security she needs, because she is in

the situation of being outside the family environment for the first time. The teacher helps the preschooler to build a positive image about herself, to be able to accept some disillusion, to understand others. With the help of communication people influences the others (Charvet, 2022). In addition to these aspects, we mention that the ability to communicate verbally and nonverbally is a desideratum of the current education (Brebner, Attrill, Marsh, Coles, 2017). Of course, communication between educators and preschoolers can sometimes also encounter blockages or threats.

Taking up the ideas of Th. Gordon, H. Friedrich (apud. Albu, 2007) lists some of them:

1. Commands and dispositions – these do not take into account the needs of the child. Therefore, they represent for preschoolers’ manifestations of force and therefore awaken in the child feelings of anger and stubbornness, which in turn will generate quarrels and inconveniences.
2. Warnings and threats – they cause fear, hostility, opposition, enmity. The preschooler may be incited by the thought of putting the teacher to the test, in order to check whether or not she keeps her word, fulfilling the threat.
3. Sermons and Persuasion – the preschooler's agreement is obtained only momentarily and is accompanied by a sense of guilt.
4. Advice and indications – although adults consider them beneficial, children do not appreciate them because they show him that he is ignorant, imperfect and subordinate.
5. Negative judgments – such judgments affect the preschooler regarding the attitude towards oneself. He will feel useless, rejected, angry, therefore, later he will criticize, he will hate. Through these negative judgments the preschooler learns to be suspicious, will try to hide in order to escape criticism.
6. Advice and solutions – if preschoolers always receive advice for solving their problems, they will consider that they are not able to find a solution for themselves, ending up giving up ever thinking about solutions and becoming dependent on the proposals of others, losing their autonomy and initiative.

7. Praise – although they are considered to have positive effects, sometimes they sound false and disturb, uncomfortable preschoolers. That is why it is recommended that praises should not be given at random, but only for concrete facts.

8. Rebuke and irony – these messages destroy the child's self-awareness and value because they lead to the formation of self-image.

9. Not taking it seriously – this actually means rejection, encouraging the preschooler to stop addressing us, which leads to internalization and frustration. Giving importance is a real consolation for the child.

10. Threatening questions – when a question seems threatening to him, the preschooler responds with silence or lying.

11. Sarcasm – when the tone and the word contradict each other, sarcasm appears. The child notices him and feels aggrieved, remaining in his soul with a helpless rage.

12. Prohibitions – as in any educational act, in the kindergarten, certain limits are imposed, which are required to be explained by the teacher, understandable to the children, because the prohibitions that the child does not understand incite him/her to violate them.

In order to avoid these aforementioned barriers, a teacher consumes a lot of energy, which causes her self-dissatisfaction and awareness of incompetence in terms of education, however, a secret in terms of education is to give the preschooler a lot of affection, so that she feels safe even though she is no longer in the family. Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in determining the success of the communication process in any context, both face-to-face and otherwise. Communication is a complex process that involves, in addition to receiving the message and understanding the “emotion” behind it (Ponomari, 2019). Neuliep (2006) recorded that as much as 90% of all communication occurs through nonverbal behavior. For this reason, numerous studies have focus on understanding the role of nonverbal communication.

Studies on nonverbal communication have focused on several themes. For example, Trovo and Silva (2012) examined nonverbal communication among nurses from University of Sao Paulo School of Nursing and found that the subjects use of nonverbal communication is important in medical field for therapeutic actions towards patients. This is because nonverbal communication involves one of the needs in humans for connection especially during situation of ill health.

Sundaram and Webster (2000) studied the role of nonverbal communication during service encounters through customers' perception. Research in the area of English language education have also been interested in examining the role of NVC given the fact that it complements the communication process as a whole. Studies on role of nonverbal communication in the English language classroom has span several decades. Similarly, Sime (2006) found that teachers' effective use of nonverbal communication would increase student achievement.

3. Research methodology

Starting from the premises that one or more nonverbal elements can convey more message than a million words, we establish the purpose, hypothesis, and objectives of the research.

3.1. Purpose, assumptions, and objectives

The purpose of this research is to identify the most used nonverbal elements in the didactic communication of educators. To achieve the purpose of the research, we establish the following hypothesis: *If the teacher is aware of the importance of valuing certain nonverbal parameters during didactic communication, then she will effectively use these parameters.*

In order to verify the assumptions, we formulate the following objectives:

1. Identification of nonverbal forms of communication that predominate in the didactic communication of educators.
2. Increasing the level of awareness of educators regarding the value of nonverbal parameters in didactic communication.

The research variables are: a. nonverbal communication (look, mimicry, gestures etc.); b. the level of awareness of the teachers regarding the value of nonverbal parameters in didactic communication. The dependent variable is *the level of awareness of the teachers regarding the value of nonverbal parameters in the didactic communication.*

The performance indicators are:

1. Recognizes the value of nonverbal parameters.
2. Uses these parameters consciously and systematically.
3. Tracks the impact of using nonverbal parameters in didactic communication.

The independent variable is *nonverbal parameters introduced by educators in didactic communication.*

3.2. Research squad

For this study, the inclusion criterion concerns the teaching staff status. The participants were selected from state preschool educational institutions, and the nature of the sample was of convenience. Sample volume was of 64 subjects.

3.3. Methods and tools

As a research method we used the questionnaire-based survey method. The tool used was an administered questionnaire that we built and for which we obtained the opinion of the Ethics Commission of the University. It contains two types of indicators: indicators of administrative factual data (educational level, number of children, age of children) and indicators of factual data of a non-administrative nature – referring to the personal experience of subjects regarding the non-verbal parameters they use in the educational act, as well as to the level of awareness of their use and the effects they produce on children. In this study we identified the main types of nonverbal elements used in the classroom by educators, as well as their opinions on the importance of nonverbal communication in the educational act.

3.4. Sampling strategy

The sampling strategy is the subjective one because the sampling units are chosen according to the criterion of fulfilling the status of teacher in preschool education (educators). As mentioned before, participants were selected from state preschool educational institutions, and the nature of the sample is of convenience.

3.5. Ethical issues

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed that they could refuse participation or withdraw at any time, without any justification and without negative effects. Each respondent was informed about the purpose of the study, the approximate time required to respond to the items in the questionnaire, as well as about the fact that the items do not involve personal data such as name, age, or residence, and all the information collected will be used strictly for the purpose of the research. Also, the questionnaire includes a section in which the respondents gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

3.6. Procedure for collecting data

The data collection procedure was carried out by means of a questionnaire that was offered to respondents for completion using the Google Forms platform that allows the distribution of the

final questionnaire in a short time and efficiently. Respondents received the form by e-mail or WhatsApp.

4. Analysis and interpretation of data

In the item *Does the age level of the children you work with influence the way you communicate with them?*, we recorded a percentage of 56.3% affirmative answers, the respondents giving a high score of 4 and 5 respectively (to a very large extent). 9.4% said that only sometimes the number of children influences the didactic communication, while 12.5% of the respondents consider that the age level of the children influences to a very small extent the communication with the preschoolers of the group in which they work. Analyzing these answers we could conclude that most educators adapt the elements of didactic communication to the particularities of the group of children, taking into account the specific characteristics of the age of the preschoolers with whom they work.

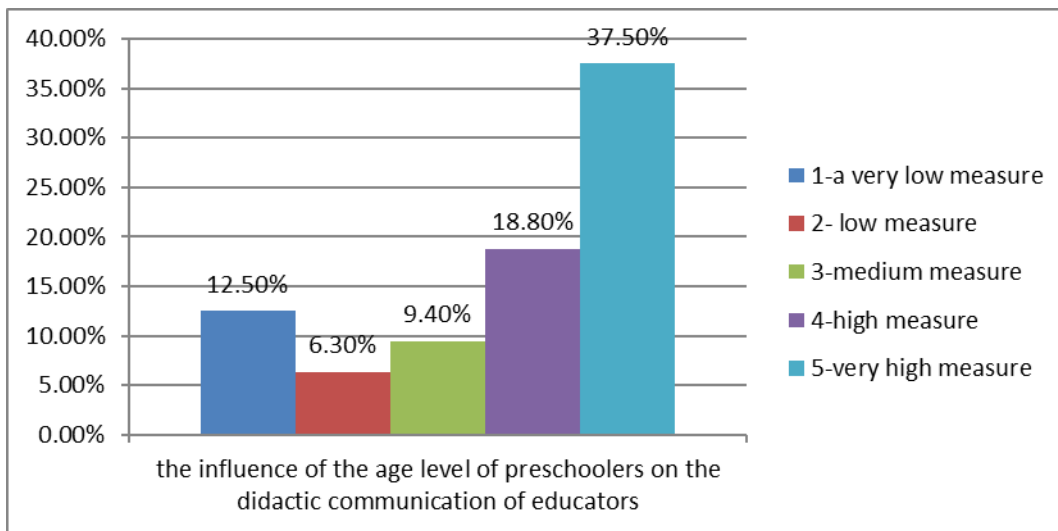


Fig.1. Age of preschoolers and didactic communication.

In the free answer item *If you answered “YES” to the previous question, briefly describe how teaching communication changes depending on the age of the children you work with*, respondents said that when working with the small group, where the age level is about 3 years, they use a warmer tone, a slower rhythm of speech, more nonverbal elements so that children feel safe. Also, the respondents said that they adapt the vocabulary to the specifics of the oral

communication of the little ones, using familiar words, easy to understand, offering additional explanations, repeating the message as many times as needed.

To the item *Which categories of nonverbal elements do you use in class more often?*, 78.1% of respondents said that they use eye contact (*oculesics*) and paralinguistic elements (*voice modulation*) in particular. Also, in a percentage of 53.1% the respondents chose mimicry and gestures as the nonverbal elements they use most often. 40.6% of teachers use haptics and proxemics in particular, while 21.9% mentioned that article is a nonverbal element that they use in didactic communication. Analyzing the answers, we find that all the nonverbal elements are present in the didactic communication in preschool education, some, such as gestures and glances being used to a greater extent than the others.

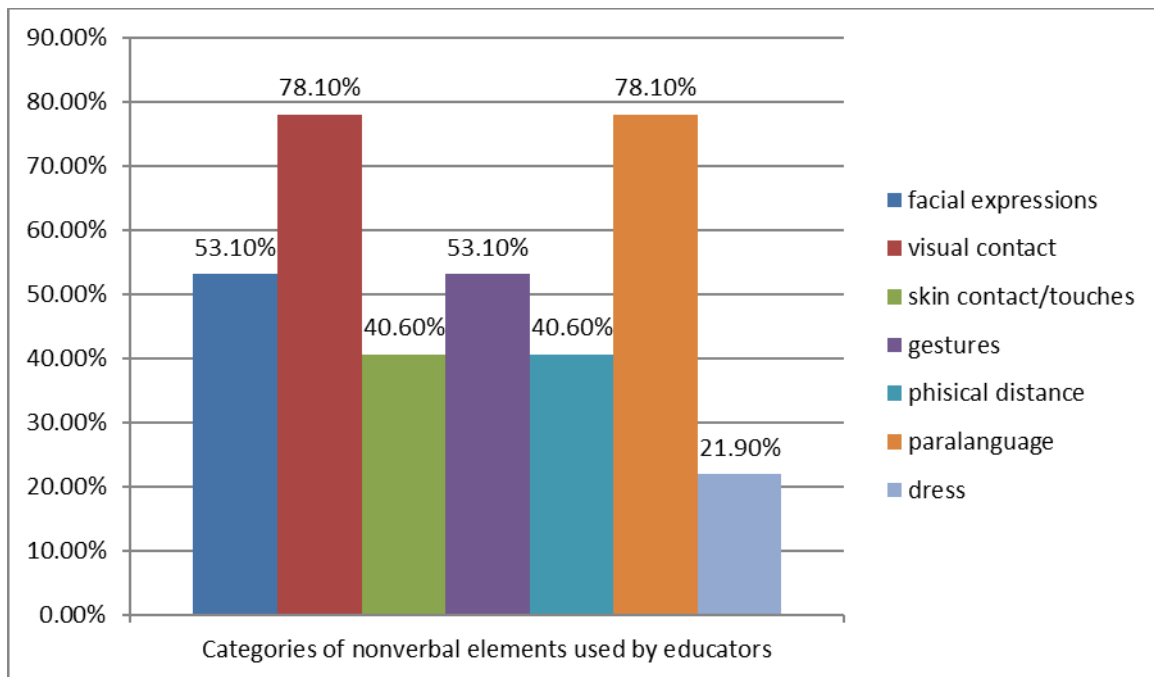


Fig.2. Nonverbal elements used by educators.

In the item *Do you think that nonverbal elements produce effects on children?*, respondents chose 46.9% of the response variant *a) Yes, positive effects*, from which we understand that they positively appreciate the use of nonverbal elements in didactic communication. 56.3% of respondents consider that nonverbal elements can produce both positive and negative effects on children, depending on the context.

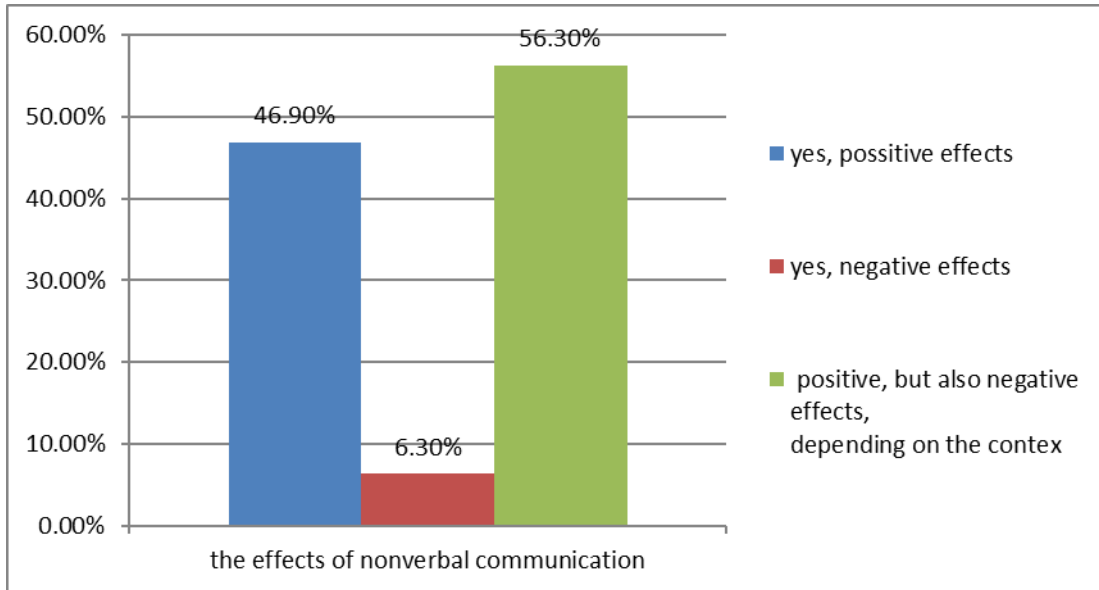


Fig.3. Effect of nonverbal communication.

In the item *What do you prefer to do when in class, one or more children become inattentive or disturb the peace of others?*, answers were recorded such as: 75% of respondents choose to make a sign to the careless child, using nonverbal elements, while 28.1% of teachers preferring to make a direct observation using verbal communication. We understand from these results that educators prefer to use nonverbal parameters during activities in order not to interrupt the natural course of oral speech.

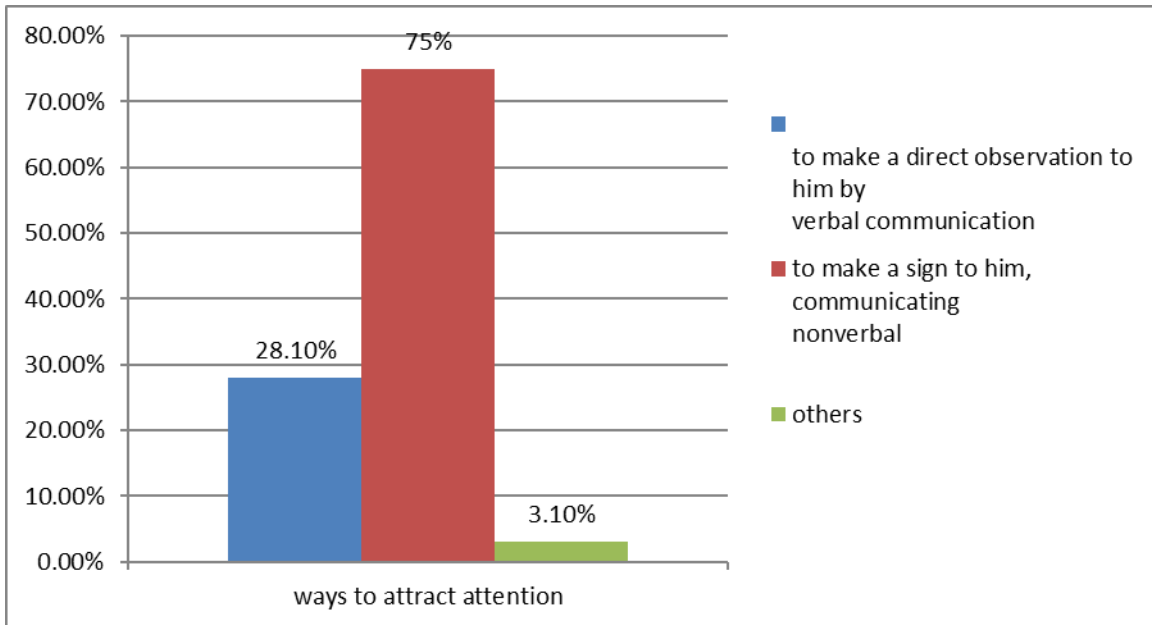


Fig. 4. Ways to make an observation.

To the question *What distance do you prefer to keep during activities with children?*, we recorded a percentage of 56.3% for close personal distance (0.45-0.75 m), 25% for close intimate distance (0-0.15 m). 18.8% of teachers prefer to keep a distance of 0.10-0.45 m, and 12.5% of respondents mentioned that they keep a distant personal distance of 0.75-1.25 m, respectively a close social distance (1.25- 2.10 m). Analyzing the data, we can conclude that the average distance from which teachers communicate during activities with preschoolers is about 0.5 m.

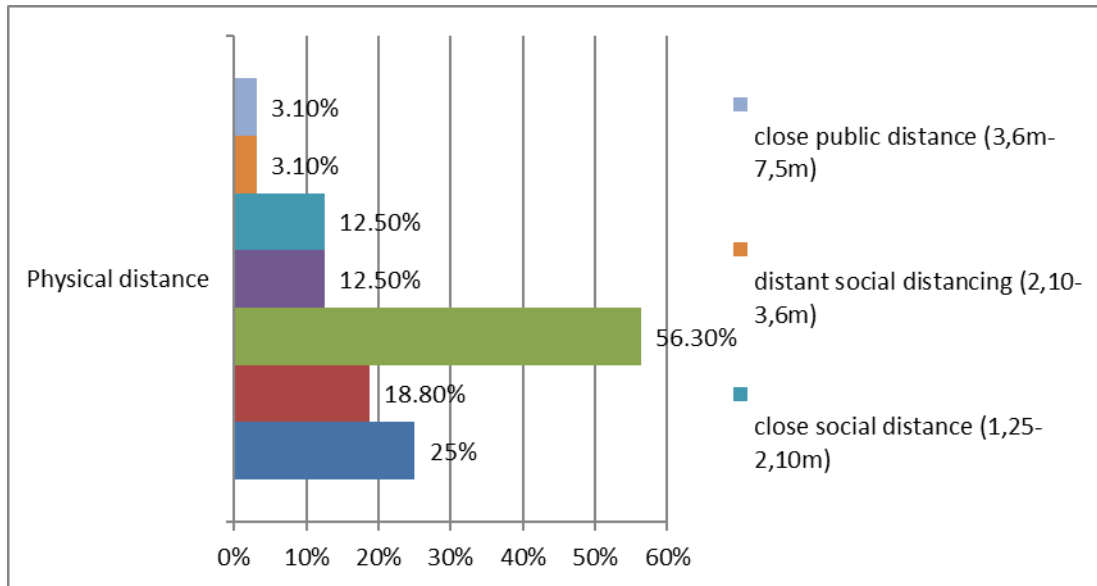


Fig. 5. Distance between teacher and preschoolers.

In the item *From the point of view of haptics (touches) while communicating with your favorite preschoolers*, 65.6% of the teachers said that they preface to caress the children, 46.9% prefer to hold them by the hand, 40.6% chose the encouraging touch on the shoulder, all these nonverbal elements having an effect of strengthening the teacher-student relationship and transmitting some feelings of security, acceptance, and encouragement.

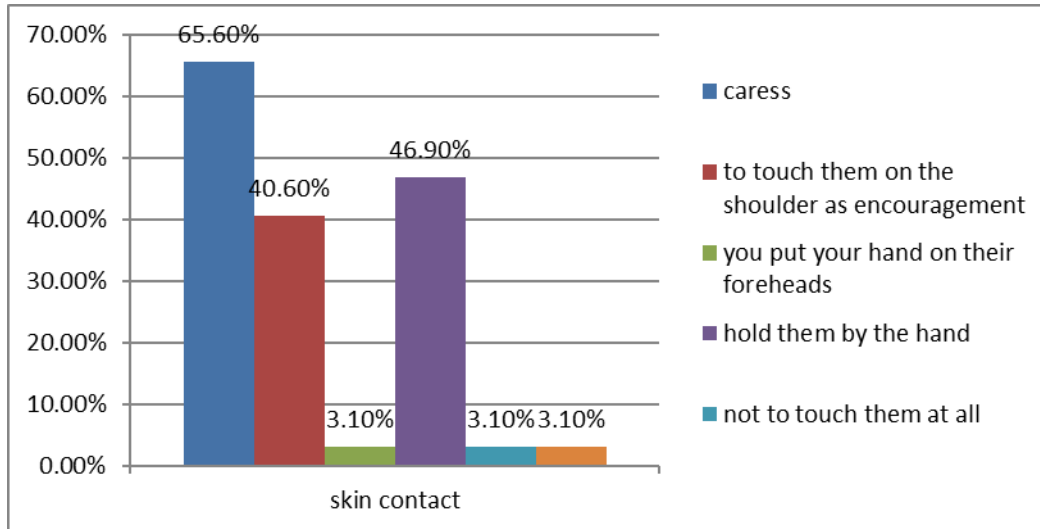


Fig.6. Skin contact in the classroom.

To the question *In your opinion, how much do preschoolers understand what you want to convey to them through nonverbal communication (signs, glances etc.)?*, 71.9% of respondents gave high scores of 4 and 5 respectively (largely and very much), from which we understand that preschoolers are able to correctly receive the message transmitted nonverbally by educators.

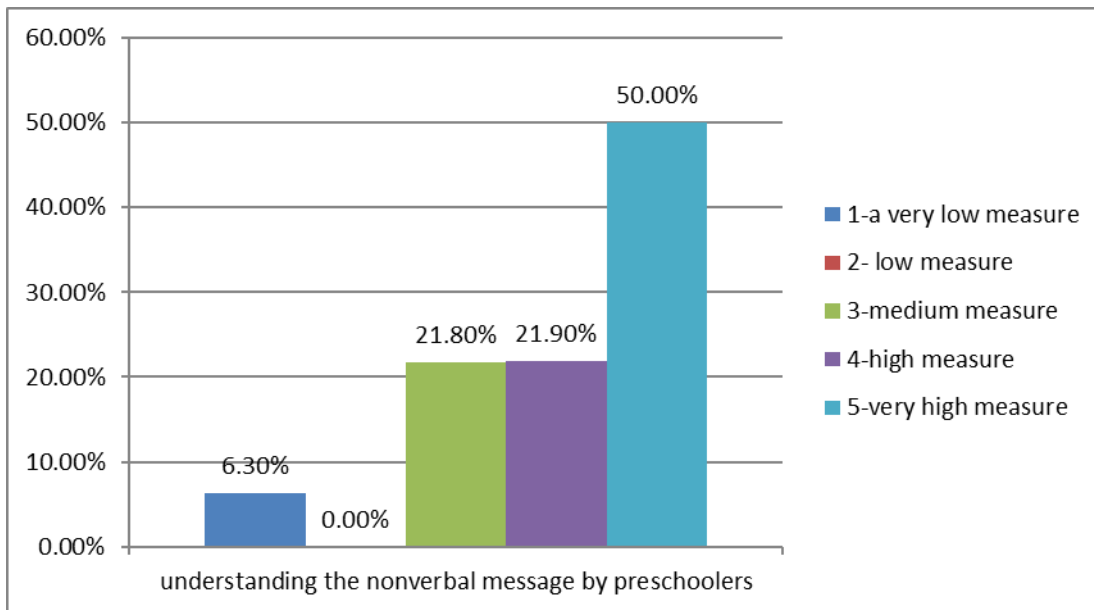


Fig. 7. Level of understanding the nonverbal message by preschoolers.

To the question *Do you think that the clothing and accessories you choose have any relevance for the didactic communication with the children?*, the teachers answered in a percentage of

37.5%, according to 25% that the clothing chosen for the teaching activity influences to a great extent the didactic communication with the children.

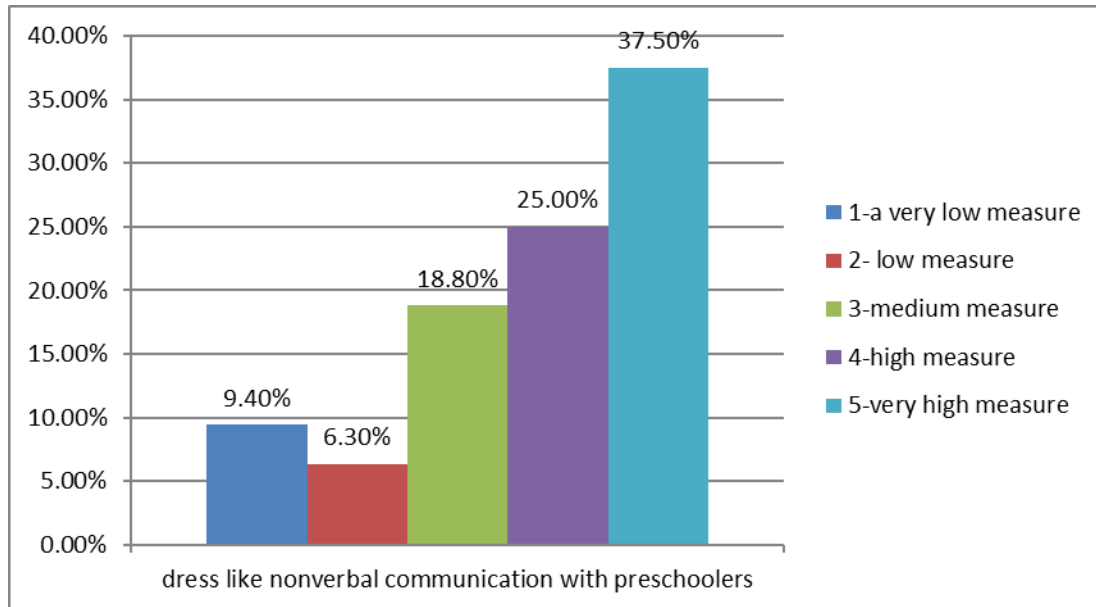


Fig.8. The importance of teacher's clothing.

Analyzing the recorded data, we noticed that the interviewed teachers attach greater importance to nonverbal elements such as mimicry and gestures, to the intonation and tone of speech, and less to the elements related to proxemics and artefacts, considering that the latter are less useful in the didactic communication in kindergarten.

5. Conclusions of the research

The results of the research have shown that in kindergartens teachers adapt the didactic communication to the particularities of the children, their age influencing the way in which the teachers transmit the educational message. Thus, being young, children need illustrative gestures to understand the meaning of words, permanent eye contact, but also intuitive material, resumption of explanations and a slower rhythm of speech. Also, making an inventory of the elements preferred by the educators, the results of the research showed that among the nonverbal elements most often used by the educators, on the first place is eye contact (*oculesics*) and paralinguistic elements (*voice modulation*), 78.1% of respondents said that they use it frequently. Moreover, from the recorded results it appears that when a child becomes careless or turbulent, agitated, the teacher prefers to make an observation on nonverbal channels, then to verbally

communicate a warning. In order to strengthen these conclusions, we recall the percentages recorded in the item corresponding to this aspect: 75% of respondents choose to make a sign to the careless child, using nonverbal elements, 28.1% of teachers preferring to make a direct observation using verbal communication.

Other recorded results indicated an educator's preference for skin touches such as caresses, encouraging touch on the shoulder or shaking the hand. They are designed to form the relationship between the teacher and the students, to add affection and to motivate children to participate confidently in the activity. These elements are not used by chance, but are introduced consciously and systematically by the educators in the teaching activity, they are aware of their educational value. Please note that 71.9% of respondents gave high scores of 4 and 5 respectively (largely and very much), from which we understand that preschoolers are able to correctly receive the message transmitted nonverbally by educators.

Analyzing the recorded results, we came to the conclusion that the hypothesis of assertion has been validated: *If the teacher is aware of the importance of valuing certain nonverbal parameters during didactic communication, then she will effectively use these parameters.*

5.1. Discussions

The results of the research have shown that when we communicate with the students, through nonverbal they convey boredom, disinterest, then of course our students will not look at us with attention or interest either. But when we communicate a message to them using a mimicry that indicates wonder, a serious tone, a faster pace, then the students will also look at us with interest and attention. We can also add to these results the mention that the teachers, through the attire, posture, mimicry, gestures used transmit to the students their mental state, from which we conclude that the nonverbal communication betrays the inner thoughts of the professor.

5.2. Limits of research

First of all, the sample is quite limited, only 64 teachers were surveyed, and the questionnaire was applied using an online platform, so the answers cannot be generalized. Secondly, although the answers were anonymous, the teachers may have given an expected answer, an answer deemed appropriate, and not a sincere one.

5.3. Future directions of research

The research aims to be useful to teachers in preschool education in order to increase their degree of awareness of the value of nonverbal elements in didactic communication in order to introduce them effectively in their daily activity. The relevance of this topic, carried out in the field of education at pre-school level, is reminiscent at the level of practice, by identifying good practices. Dinu (2014) highlights the importance of human communication in general, and Chelcea (2005) emphasizes the role of nonverbal elements in human communication by describing the characteristics of nonverbal parameters. The contributions of the papers on the field of human communication in general and nonverbal communication in particular, have the potential to change the vision on the impact of nonverbal communication in the pedagogical act and its role in didactic communication.

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