

A psychodynamic analysis of Nurture and RP: Positive language and communication through relational approaches in school

Introduction:

Proponents of Nurture Groups (NGs) and Restorative Practice (RP) in school agree that language is paramount to both approaches. In particular, they suggest that restorative approaches should “develop a common language” that moves “away from using, blaming, stigmatising, excusing, rescuing, helpless language...towards more relational language” (Blood & Thosborne, 2005; p.10). But what exactly do we mean when we talk about ‘relational language’? Outlining what it is not (i.e. blaming, stigmatising, excusing, rescuing, helpless) does not help us to fully understand and implement exactly what it *is*. Similarly, Doyle (2003) suggests that the use of circle time “offers many opportunities for adults to adopt the NG practices of modelling positive behaviour and body language” (p.264), but she fails to describe what such body language actually looks like. Few studies/authors set out in explicit terms what positive language and communication entails, and if language is mentioned, it is often only in the most generic and vague terms. For example, Binnie and Allen (2008) in their evaluation of whole school support through part-time NGs suggest that effective NGs should “place an emphasis on communication and language development through intensive interaction with an adult and other children” (p.202), which gives us little to go on in terms of specific language-based aims and goals.

An emphasis on language and communication ensuring understanding by the child has been positioned as one of defining features of children’s experience in a NG (Lucas, Buckland & Insley, 2006). This may be relatively straightforward in the setting of ‘child-friendly’ educational targets (Cooper & Tiknaz, 2007), and developing the language skills of the child more generally as advocated by Lucas, Buckland & Insley (2006). However, it is less obvious when considering children’s emotional lives which can be messy, personally threatening, and less than easy to make any kind of simple ‘sense’ of - for practitioner or child (Jackson, 2002). This is particularly the case for children from complex backgrounds where emotions and behaviours can arise that are as difficult to comprehend as they are to control.

In relation to RP, scripted restorative questions that are open-ended and give everyone involved an equal voice, are positioned as ways that social connections and mutual responsibility can be strengthened, and harms repaired (Zehr, 2002, 2005). Opportunities to air feelings about both good and bad events through the ‘expression of affect’ are emphasised through a restorative approach (Wachtel, 2013). However, exactly how inquiring language and self-expression provides teachers, practitioners and pupils with the tools to develop social connections and repair harm is less well-developed in the literature; it is simply – and uncritically - asserted that it can.

In light of the lack of specificity about positive language and communication that is apparent in the research, it becomes necessary to clarify how this important cornerstone to both nurture and RP is understood and supported. This paper makes a tentative step towards trying to unpack and understand some of the elements that make up positive language and communication, asking:

- Which aspects of positive language and communication should be present in effective practice within NGs, RP and indeed any educational context where a desire to sustain a positive social dynamic is present?
- Which aspects of positive language and communication are primary and which ones are more peripheral?

This list will not be exhaustive; due to the constraints of time and space, a focus on four specific antecedents and outcomes to positive language and communication will be emphasised:

- 1) An understanding of behaviour as communication
- 2) Verbal and non-verbal language and communication
- 3) Inquiring language
- 4) Self-expression and active listening.

These core precepts have been selectively drawn from a review of the literature on NGs and RP that empirically examine how language is positioned, examined and evidenced. The most salient aspects of this list will be drawn together towards the end, to provide a clear guide to best practice. Empirical evidence to highlight these antecedents and outcomes will be drawn from the Comparative Nurture Group Study (CNG Study hereafter) where available, and a closer understanding of the methodology for this research can be found there (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a, 2016b). Methodologically therefore, this paper combines both a theoretical and conceptual attempt at unpacking some of the ideas surrounding what constitutes positive language and communication, with an examination of ways that the author encountered positive language and communication in the research field.

In terms of the academic literature, the necessary ingredients to positive language and communication will be examined in light of Psychoanalytic Psychology that emphasises processes of projection, containment, and reverie (Bion, 1959, 1962, 1963, 1965; Klein, 1932), and Object Relations Theory highlighting the facilitating 'holding' environment (Winnicott, 1945, 1956), alongside more practice-based educational research where nurture provision, RP and theories of learning are emphasised. The rationale for choosing Psychoanalytic Psychology to frame this discussion, lies in the usefulness of psychodynamic approaches that see human functioning as being based upon the interaction of internal drives and forces; particularly unconscious drives that are prevalent in early childhood where the psychic apparatus of the 'id' (Freud, 1923) predominates. Other scripted language-based approaches such as *Social Stories* (Gray, 1995) that teach children with autism to 'read' social situations will not be part of this analysis. This is due to a desire to focus on how positive language and communication functions on a more generalised basis, rather than in relation to specific developmental disorders.

The initial interest in this exploration stems from the CNG Study that examined the use of NG's in seven schools in the North West (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a, 2016b). This study provided the author with the initial exposure to RP, where the NG settings that were most successful in nurture also had a leaning towards a restorative approach through avoiding punitive sanction systems and sustaining positive relationships. The CNG Study (Warin &

Hibbin, 2016a, 2016b) served as a springboard for RP research exploring the use of a restorative approach in a range of educational settings. This has provided further insight into closely associated principles that focus upon the importance of relationships, and also the concept of behaviour as communication. The rationale in parcelling NGs and RP together lies in the fact that these two concepts – the importance of relationships and behaviour as communication - underpin both NG and RP provision, where both “...philosophies are based on a will to develop, maintain, repair and sustain attachments” (Warin & Hibbin, 2016b; p. 7). Indeed, in the course of the NG and RP research, it has become clear that practitioners with considerable and ongoing experience, tend towards a difficulty differentiating between the two approaches that they view as stemming from the same ideological base of developing secure and trusting interpersonal relationships. In this respect, the second principle of nurture where the NG offers a safe base (Lucas, Insley and Buckland, 2006), and the fourth principle of RP where “processes and practice aim to ensure the safety of all participants and create a safe space for the expression of feelings and views about harm that has been caused” (RJC, 2015), can be understood as an unambiguous point of alignment between the two approaches.

An understanding of behaviour as communication: Reverie, projection and containment:

Behaviour as communication is one of the six principles of nurture, as originally proposed by Marjorie Boxall (Bennathan & Boxall, 1998, 2000; Boxall, 2002) and upheld by NurtureUK as a leading organisation in the support and training of NG practitioners. On a philosophical level, communication and language is linked to children’s inner emotional worlds, where it becomes easier to enact their emotions in the absence of an ability to verbally express what they may be feeling inside. Certainly, there is strong support in the literature for the co-occurrence of behavioural/psychosocial problems with language difficulties (Gualtieri et al., 1983; Beitchman et al, 1989; Lindsay et al, 2007) with children and young people frequently ‘externalising’ their verbally repressed emotions. Similarly, Evans & Lester suggest that student behaviour should be viewed as a function of “unmet needs that can result in aggression, violence and perceived misbehaviour” (2012; 58), highlighting the link between punitive disciplinary regimes in school and the challenging behaviour that RP tries to ameliorate. Therefore, a central principle upon which positive language and communication lies, relates to a deep understanding by educationalists of behaviour as communication; without such an understanding, any attempts at positive language and communication will ultimately fail.

Challenging behaviour has been theorised by proponents of the psychoanalytic tradition, as the means by which inner conflict can be observed, understood and ameliorated. In particular the work of Wilfred Bion (1994) that built upon and expanded Melanie Klein’s (1946) concept of projective identification whereby unconscious thoughts and feelings are **defensively** projected onto another person, is of particular interest. Bion’s (1994) theory of Container-Contained describes the process of ‘reverie’ as the ontogenesis – the

development from inception to maturity - of the psyche. The capacity for maternal reverie (understanding of and emotional attunement to the inner world of the child) is developed through a process of projection from the infant/child into the caregiver, of unwanted, overwhelming and archaic emotional states. These negative emotions then become transformed by the caregiver to be returned to the infant/child in a more palatable and less emotionally threatening form. Here then, the mother/caregiver acts as a 'container' for the infant/child's feelings and emotions, and through the sense of being 'contained' the infant/child is helped to develop a capacity for self-regulation:

"Melanie Klein described an aspect of projective identification concerned with the modification of infantile fears; the infant projects part of its psyche, namely its bad feelings, into a good breast. Thence in due course they are removed and re-introjected... in such a way that the object that is re-introjected has become tolerable to the infant's psyche.... the latter I shall designate the term contained." (Bion, 1994; p.90)

This process of containment can be seen in the following exchange taken from the CNG Study (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a). Here, Josi, a child that had accessed both nurture and also one-to-one integrated arts therapy as a result of early trauma, described her nurture journey and her sessions with Sarah, her Integrated Arts Therapist (IAT). Here, Sarah was able to act as the container for Josi's negative emotions, helping her to manage anger thereby feeding back and reframing Josi's negative emotions in less destructive and threatening forms:

Interviewer: Can you remember why you needed to go in the nurture room in the first place?

Josi: Because mummy had some not very nice people in her life.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about all of that now?

Josi: It's in the past now.

Interviewer: So what's good about talking to Sarah [IAT] then?

Josi: I get quite angry and she gives me different ways of making me not be angry.

How these processes of reverie, projection and containment work in the context of education has been examined by Gibb (2017) in her doctoral thesis examining how NG teachers makes sense of the relationship with the NG child. In particular, the psychodynamic concept of projection has been positioned as one way to make sense of and understand both the powerful feelings within the child that manifest in challenging behaviour, and the often knee-jerk and punitive reactions that such behaviour can elicit in the teachers and staff members who have been the receiving party for such projections. Reflections by Jackson (2002) and McLoughlin (2010) on the use of the therapeutic working group in school as a means of exploring - and also containing - teachers' feelings towards such behaviour, has been useful in establishing how an understanding of behaviour as communication is essential to psychological containment (Bion, 1994). This is particularly for children from the most complex backgrounds of neglect and abuse where in a 'chaotic mixture' of "rage, fear and distress...tend to be acted out through the body" (McLoughlin, 2010; 234):

“Some children will desperately cling to particular members of staff and become extremely dependent on them. Others project their intolerable feelings into staff and quickly become seen as unmanageable... Thus, they are experienced as entirely unpredictable and wild – ‘feral’, as the tabloid newspapers have termed it.” (McLoughlin, 2010; 234)

In his discussion of therapeutic working groups with teachers in school, Jackson (2002) describes how focusing directly on the projections – the negative feelings and emotions within the teacher/practitioner that are elicited by such ‘feral’ behaviour – can provide insight into what the child is actually communicating. This form of group supervision that focuses very directly on behaviour as communication, enables teacher/practitioners to move beyond the difficult feelings and knee-jerk responses that such challenging behaviour can often evoke, to gain insight into behaviour as communication in very practical and pragmatic terms:

“Teachers initially felt both puzzled and disturbed by the description of Mark pointing at his genitals...When invited then to think about what Mark might be ‘communicating’ through his behaviour, a number of different ideas were raised...This process of airing and sharing these possibilities together enabled teachers to make important links between what Mark was doing, how it made his teacher feel and how Mark himself might actually have been feeling underneath the surface.” (Jackson, 2002; 138)

Similarly, Hanks (1999) suggests that without an understanding of behaviour as communication, the emotional expression of defiance that is often a signature of insecurely attached children, can be misconstrued as “‘mere attention seeking’, rather than seeing in it a possible longing for gaining control” (In Greenwood, 2002; 307). Psychoanalytic Theory provides us with a blueprint for understanding behaviour as communication on a very fundamental basis. Punitive responses to challenging behaviour fail because “creating more shame and harm in people whose behaviours most likely stem from the fact that they’ve already been harmed” (Kelly, 2014; p.52: In Thorsborne, 2014) is as counter intuitive as it is perpetuating. As a result, the ability to recognize and prevent shame is an essential element of effective restorative interventions (Kelly, 2014).

Relatedly, the language and communication of teachers and practitioners needs to take into account these affects and projections so that children’s challenging behaviour can be effectively contained. As succinctly described by a Head teacher that contributed to the CNG Study (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a) “...once you stop reacting to the behaviour and [start] looking at behaviour instead as ‘what is that telling me about the child’ - it’s distress so often that’s causing that” (In Warin & Hibbin, 2016; p.32). Therefore, reconfiguring reactions to challenging behaviour is at the heart of interventions that aim to understand the child rather than merely manage and control their outbursts.

Positive verbal and non-verbal communication:

Once an understanding of behaviour as communication on a very functional and pragmatic basis has been gained by teachers and practitioners, the next question to be addressed relates to what positive language and communication *actually looks like* when it is being practically used. There is a deficit of research examining the taken for granted precept of positive language and communication; in a systemic review of 13 papers examining the effectiveness of NG's (Hughs & Scholsser, 2014), only two looked more closely at the particular strategies or styles of communication that are used.

Colwell & O'Connor (2003) compared the use of language strategies likely to enhance or harm self-esteem in NGs and normal classrooms. They found that teachers used significantly more positive language and communication in the NG classroom, characterised by four types of interpersonal contexts where corresponding language use could be either positive or negative; namely: lesson instruction; feedback; praise; and behaviour management. In addition, a fifth category of non-verbal communication was similarly classed as being either positive or negative:

- **Lesson instruction:** positive language use characterised by explanation, encouragement and hints where teacher questions are thought-provoking and attention-gaining. In contrast, lesson instruction based upon negative language use is in the form of directions, orders and solutions, and comments that are sarcastic and patronising.
- **Feedback:** positive language use characterised by teacher responses that accept and clarify, and pupil comments, ideas and questions are responded to with warmth and interest. In contrast, feedback based upon negative language use disallows, ignores or criticises pupil ideas, comments and questions.
- **Praise:** positive language use characterised by spontaneous praise of pupil's behaviour or work. In contrast, praise based upon negative language use is uninformative and bland (e.g. describing something as 'good') or given with an added negative comment.
- **Behaviour management:** positive language use characterised by behaviour management focusing on the inappropriate behaviour. In contrast, behaviour management based upon negative language use contains depreciating remarks that criticise or reject the child.
- **Non-verbal communication:** positive non-verbal communication characterised by the use of eye contact, smiling, or using a soft voice/touch. In contrast, negative non-verbal communication is characterised by shouting, scowling or adopting an angry posture.

What is of particular interest in Colwell and O'Connor's (2003) findings is the role of affect in mediating language use, where it is not just the content of what is said but the way

language is emotionally imbued; the 'warmth' with which feedback is given is as important as the way the feedback is structured. Similarly, the avoidance of sarcastic and patronising language use in relation to lesson instruction reminds us of research that has been conducted on shame (Nathanson, 1992) where a range of defensive behaviours can be triggered by perceived humiliation. This is particularly the case in the comparative and value-laden context of academic learning where the risk of feeling 'shamed' on an intellectual basis is ever present.

More recently, verbal and non-verbal praise in the NG has been more closely examined by Bani (2011), who found that staff in NGs tended to use a higher frequency of specific praise compared to non-verbal praise, despite the fact that non-verbal praise tended to be just as effective in managing children's learning and behaviour. The affective quality of non-verbal praise was highlighted where Bani (2011) suggests that "non-verbal praise is known to convey feelings of acceptance and warmth" (p.62). Indeed, as Bani (2011) goes on to suggest, self-esteem is a basic human need (Maslow, 1970) and its rejuvenation is likely to occur in environments where children feel safe and valued (Quale & Holsworth, 1997). The kinds of non-verbal communications that Bani (2003) highlights as being beneficial to positive inter-personal exchange, include some of the ones mentioned by Colwell & O'Connor (2003) – eye contact, smiling, using a soft voice and touch – plus some additional non-verbal behaviours that denote the acceptance and warmth that is characteristic of safe and trusting environments:

Non-verbal praise/behaviour

- *Eye contact*
- *Facial expressions – including smiling/laughing/winking*
- *Use of soft voice*
- *Nodding*
- *Clapping*
- *Touching the child – e.g., patting/holding hand/hugging*
- *Proximity to child*
- *Thumbs up/other signs of approval*
- *One-to-one attention*
- *Giving stickers/other rewards*

Results from Bani's (2003) study suggested that the kind of verbal praise that was most likely to offer children this rejuvenation in self-esteem, was praise that was "personal, genuine, contingent and descriptive (mentioning desired behaviour), and provided specific information, where the pupil understood why they are being praised" (p.62). In contrast, verbal praise that was less effective at boosting self-esteem and controlling behaviour, tended to be "directed as an evaluation of the person and/or delivered in an unpopular and artificial manner" (p.62).

This perspective on the importance of specific praise has been supported in educational research by Dweck (2000, 2006) who, through her work on positive growth mindsets, has asserted that praise needs to be specific and related to the learning task being undertaken. Dweck (2000, 2006) found that students with fixed beliefs in the permanence of ability

tended to struggle with academic success. This manifested itself in relation to three different domains: learning, effort and response to failure, where students with fixed mindsets tend to believe in natural ability, that they shouldn't need to 'try' and correspondingly, if they fail they are 'dumb' and would consider cheating in future. Dweck (2008) goes on to suggest that reassuring children that they are 'smart' when they get things wrong rather than focusing on process-based concerns in terms of effort, work strategies, concentration, perseverance and improvement, merely serves to reinforce children's fixed mindsets. A similar caveat on the way we praise children has been provided by Baumeister et al (2003) who suggest that the indiscriminate praise that typifies many of the programmes forwarded by the self-esteem movement of last few decades, is more likely to contribute to 'inflated self-esteem':

"Praising all the children just for being themselves, in contrast, simply devalues praise and confuses the young people as to what the legitimate standards are." (Baumeister et al, 2003; p.39)

Rather than, using praise judiciously by linking it "to learning and improvement... in recognition of good performance" (Baumeister et al, 2003; p.29) is as important as avoiding praise that is uninformative and 'bland' or given with an added negative comment (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003). In terms of the latter caveat, while the authors offer no explanation as to why 'an added negative comment' is detrimental to the perception of praise, it is suggested that this may be because even if praise is specific and informative, if it is packaged alongside a criticism, it is this negative information that will be most strongly attended to. Thus, the positive effect of praise upon self-esteem is cancelled out by co-occurring critique.

There is tentative support for this idea in the literature on attentional bias, where Cardi et al (2013) have shown through their study of people with eating disorders that the attentional bias to rejection is correlated with adverse childhood experiences and that such individuals show vigilance to rejection and avoidance of social reward. In addition, Derryberry and Reed (1996) have hypothesised that motivational systems regulate attention, so that anxious children will be "attentive to environmental threats" and "would be likely to attend to the negative components of the self, including failures in achievement and moral domains, and to worry about a variety of environmental events, such as criticism from others..." (p.222). Derryberry and Reed (1996) go on to suggest that these attentional biases in anxious children are likely to result in such children forming very different representations than might be expected, adding weight to the idea that praise paired with critique will only be selectively perceived.

More research on positive language and communication is needed to uncover the links between the way we talk to children, and the effects of this upon resulting behaviour. In particular, research that closely examines post-conflict mediation practices within the context of different behavioural management approaches, would provide a welcome starting point for understanding how positive language and communication is best fostered, or alternatively constrained, when dealing with challenging behaviour. RP conferences that provide structured opportunities for conflict resolution, would make an ideal locus for the observation of positive language and communication in this respect.

Inquiring language:

The effective use of inquiring language is central to the psychoanalytic process of containment in relation to children's challenging behaviour. As pointed out by Greenwood (2002):

"Teachers frequently manage milder versions of these behaviours with understanding, firmness and skill, but, when they manifest in the extreme forms typical of such very troubled children, they can stretch us all to the limit. We can feel hurt, anxious, helpless, de-skilled, frustrated, angry, abused and even frightened." (p.303)

When teachers and practitioners are on the receiving end of behaviour that results in discomforting projections, understanding the affect and feelings that have motivated the challenging behaviour, and then figuring out how to best contain – to feed back in a more palatable, understandable, and less destructive form (Bion, 1994) - the negative feelings that have arisen, can be a daunting task. As already suggested, negative affect triggered in the child is often the result of children's inner unconscious conflicts, and as such children need help in trying to understand why they may have, seemingly irrationally, acted the way they have. Greenwood (2002) goes on to suggest that "developing our own capacities to be empathetically available, while remaining detached to be able to *stop and think before acting*" (my emphasis; p.307) is a fundamental aspect of working with damaged children. But how can teachers and practitioners remain empathetically available when they are themselves feeling hurt, anxious, helpless, deskilled, frustrated, angry and abused? This kind of 'secondary abuse' (Cairns, 1999) of professionals working with very damaged children, is unlikely to facilitate clear thinking and responses that are helpful to the child (Greenwood, 2002). In such instances, the use of questions and inquiring language enable time and space to be bought, in order to take a breath and step back from the behaviour and resulting projections that can often arise.

RP is the obvious home for inquiring language that builds scripted questions into the post conflict milieu. Restorative language is described as being open-ended, giving everyone an equal voice, including the person who has done harm. It is generally based around a very scripted response with varying levels of formality, from an informal 'corridor conversation', to more formal restorative meetings between various people that have been affected, in an effort to repair the harm, asking:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking about at the time?
- What have your thoughts been since?
- How do you feel about what's happened?
- Who has been affected by what you did?
- In what ways have they been affected?
- What do you think should be done to repair the harm? (IIRP, 2006; online)

Such questions that focus on whom has been harmed, thought processes surrounding the harm, and ways to make reparation, contrast with more adversarial and punitive questioning that is concerned with who is to blame and the kind of punishment required (O'Connell, 2004). In addition, a caveat about non-verbal communication needs to be made

here. While questions and inquiring language are essential to a restorative approach, and indeed any approach that puts positive relationships and attachments at its heart, the tone and emotional affect connected to such questions is essential to their effective delivery: questioning can easily adopt a stance that is confrontational and inquisitorial, resulting in defensive behaviour from those being questioned. As suggested by an Integrated Arts Therapist working in a school that was particularly effective in their NG provision, responses to children that emphasised reassurance and “staying calm” (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a) were essential to effective practice when dealing with challenging behaviour. Clearly then, asking restorative questions in the absence of a calm and reassuring manner is insufficient in adopting a non-adversarial stance, in much the same way as criticism paired with critique is less likely to boost children’s self-esteem (Colwell & O’Connor, 2003).

In contrast, a more reactive style based on trying to shut down the behaviour and punitively discipline the child, often leads to incorrect assumptions as to the actual cause of the disruptive behaviour; as the old adage goes, act in haste repent at leisure. Furthermore, such ‘business as usual’ models of discipline provide children – particularly disruptive children with complex needs - with the kind of authoritarian discipline that they are often very used to, and therefore something familiar, concrete and tangible to react back against; as suggested by Greenwood (2002) “from a practical point of view, direct confrontation may just lead to escalation” (p.303). Greenwood (2002) goes on to describe the necessary preconditions for enabling a child to feel safe, grow and develop autonomy in the context of their challenging behaviour:

“If boundaries and expectations can be stated and restated ‘whilst maintaining empathy for the child’s dilemma’ (Greenhalgh 1994: 112), and if children can be confronted in an emotionally non-threatening way – and without retaliation – it can be a way of demonstrating to the child that her difficult feelings can be ‘emotionally held’...” (p.303)

Clearly then, the use of questioning language that seeks to find out who was hurt rather than who is to blame and allows *everyone* an equal voice rather than silencing the apparent offender, enables teachers to confront the problematic behaviour whilst avoiding the damaging impact of emotional threat.

Finally, the value of silence as a space for reflection is another useful aspect of inquiring language that is worthy of consideration. Silence in an educational context has been explored by Ollin (2008), who calls for a reconceptualization of silence away from an ‘absence of talk’, towards a silent pedagogy of reflection that is “free from intrusion or the demand for an immediate response or interaction with others” (p.276). This links to theoretical conceptions that were first proposed by Vygotsky in his description of the way inner speech contributes to the development of children’s higher mental functions. Fernyhough (2008) has extended Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987, 1997) ideas on inner speech and the internalization of dialogue to develop a model of Dialogic Thinking that depicts the development of social understanding and children’s ‘theory of mind’ whereby “the individual imputes mental states to himself and others” (Premack & Woodruff, 1978; p.515). This model emphasises a “progression from social dialogue, through the intermediate stage of private speech, towards fully internalized inner dialogue” (Fernyhough, 2008; p.255). Opportunities to be silent, reflect, and speak inwardly, can therefore be understood as

other important aspects of inquiring language that should be viewed as active opportunities for growth, learning and development rather than passive voids to be filled with verbal exchange (Ollin, 2008).

Self-expression and active listening: The 'holding' environment

As noted by Ogden (2004) "Winnicott's concept of 'holding' and Bion's idea of the Container-Contained'..." are "...often used interchangeably in the psychoanalytic literature" (p.1349). However, the notion of Container-Contained (Bion, 1994) where destructive thoughts and feelings are actively transformed and passed back to the child in a more palatable form, can be contrasted with the more passive notion of 'holding' (Winnicott, 1945, 1956) that Ogden (2004) describes as "the provision of a 'place' (a psychological state) in which the infant (or patient) may gather himself together" (p.1352). Such a 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1956) that simply allows the child to flip out, act out or just "be known in all his bits and pieces" (Winnicott, 1945; p.150) until they have recovered a degree of composure, is what enables a child to feel safe and 'emotionally held': as noted by Greenwood (2002) "thinking rationally at such times is just impossible" (p.305). In this way anxiety is managed in a manner that does not try to halt the experience or question what is taking place, but rather allows the child to move through the anxiety in whatever way is required, while simultaneously ensuring that the experience does not result in overwhelm or harm. Holding in this respect is as much a physical (and physiological) experience as it is a psychological one (Ogden, 2004). In terms of positive language and communication however, holding has more in common with the process of active listening. This concept was first forwarded by the eminent counsellor and humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, who advocated a model of listening that probed for the concealed emotions behind the words:

"The question or challenge frequently is a masked expression of feelings or needs which the speaker is far more anxious to communicate than he is to have the surface questions answered. Because he cannot speak these feelings openly, the speaker must disguise them to himself and others in an acceptable form." (Rogers & Farson, 1957; p.4-7)

Listening as a means by which children are simply given the space to talk and the agency to seek help should they need it (Maliphant & Horner, 2016), links to the concept of resilience that describes the protective factors (Garemzy, 1985; Rutter, 1987) that enable children to overcome adversity and stress. One key protective factor that has been established through research on stress resistant children includes "the availability of external support systems that encourage and reinforce a child's coping efforts" (Gramezy, 1985; In Rutter, 1987; p. 316). The idea that just being listened to is sometimes enough to incur resilience, even if no solid answers or strategies are found to deal with problems and inner conflicts, has been discussed by Maliphant & Horner (2016) in their description of an intervention to create 'opportunities to be heard' through the use of Listening Posts:

"Bright red post boxes were strategically placed on each floor of the school ensuring access for all children. Attached to these post boxes were self-referral forms that the children could fill in requesting to talk to one of the listening mentors. Our aim was to empower children to

be solution focused in their thinking, amplify their voice in the school community and to help them access further support where appropriate.” (p.28)

These listening posts formed part of a whole school drive to improve emotional literacy. They were manned by a combination of therapists, wellbeing team members and teaching assistants, who had been trained by the school therapists to become listening mentors. The impact over time was striking, where children were able to cope with, and overcome, emotional conflicts they were struggling with. Maliphant & Horner (2016) were able to form a picture of the emotional lives of children at school that was used to inform the Senior Leadership Team of issues that were arising, leading to the establishment of pupils being trained as listening mentors in the playground which had become evidenced as “a place where children felt under-stimulated and uncontained” (p.30).

Within the CNG Study (Warin & Hibbin, 2016a), active listening was a central part of the way that teachers and practitioners helped children to overcome their concerns and deal with complex emotions and events within their lives. Active listening is also an essential hallmark of the therapeutic relationship, where listening for emotional meaning is key. As such, in the second example below, the role of a trusted adult who was also a trained therapist that Josi could talk to in an exclusive manner was as important to Josi as the opportunity to generally ‘off-load’:

“My teachers have helped me understand my mum’s depression, and they listen to my worries and its helped me not to worry about her....” Nicole: Setting 6

“...over Christmas she [Josi] was on a bus with her Grandmother, and she looked out of the window and suddenly said 'I need to talk to Sarah' and her grandmother said 'you can talk to me' and she said 'no, I need to talk to Sarah', so she bracketed me off...and as soon as she came back after Christmas she was bursting to see me...and it was like a torrent, so much had happened in her life...and she just really needed to off-load...” IAT: Setting 3

Here then, listening – particularly active listening that attends to the emotional pattern behind the words - can be understood as the receptive side of positive language and communication; a half without which the more actively language-focused nature of communication could not effectively operate. In order to respond effectively to children’s difficult emotions, we must first actively listen for those emotions that need to be contained (Bion, 1994). This gives children the emotional security of feeling heard, and the mental security of being quite literally ‘held in mind’ (Maliphant & Horner, 2016).

[Antecedents to and outcomes of positive language and communication:](#)

A primary aim of this analysis includes identifying which elements are most central to positive language and communication. It is suggested that an understanding of behaviour as communication is a foundational keystone that is an essential antecedent to nurturing and restorative language practice. Active listening is then positioned as the next most central element as we are clearly unable to understand children’s inner worlds if we are unable to hear what they have communicated to us through their attempts at self-expression. The interpersonal strategy of containment is an antecedent that is bracketed by, and provisional

upon, an understanding of behaviour as communication and active listening: we are unable to feedback children's damaging emotions to them in less threatening forms if we do not firstly understand that all behaviour is communication, and secondly ensure that we actively and attentively listen for concealed emotional patterns behind behaviours and words. In addition, institutional strategies such as reflection in supervised working groups, the provision of a facilitating environment that allows children to feel emotionally safe and 'held', and opportunities for children to talk to trusted others can be understood as antecedents that are supportive of behaviour as communication, containment and active listening, as well as positive language and communication as a whole:

Antecedents:

- An understanding of behaviour as communication, attunement to the inner world of the child (Reverie) and of the difficult feelings that children's behaviour can elicit in the adult (Projection).
- The importance of reflection as a means of understanding behaviour as communication.
- The value of a facilitating environment that allows children to feel emotionally safe (Holding).
- An ability to transform children's difficult and threatening emotions into more comprehensible forms (Container-Contained).
- Providing children with opportunities to talk with trusted adults in the promotion of resilience.
- Active forms of listening that attend to the emotional pattern behind the words.

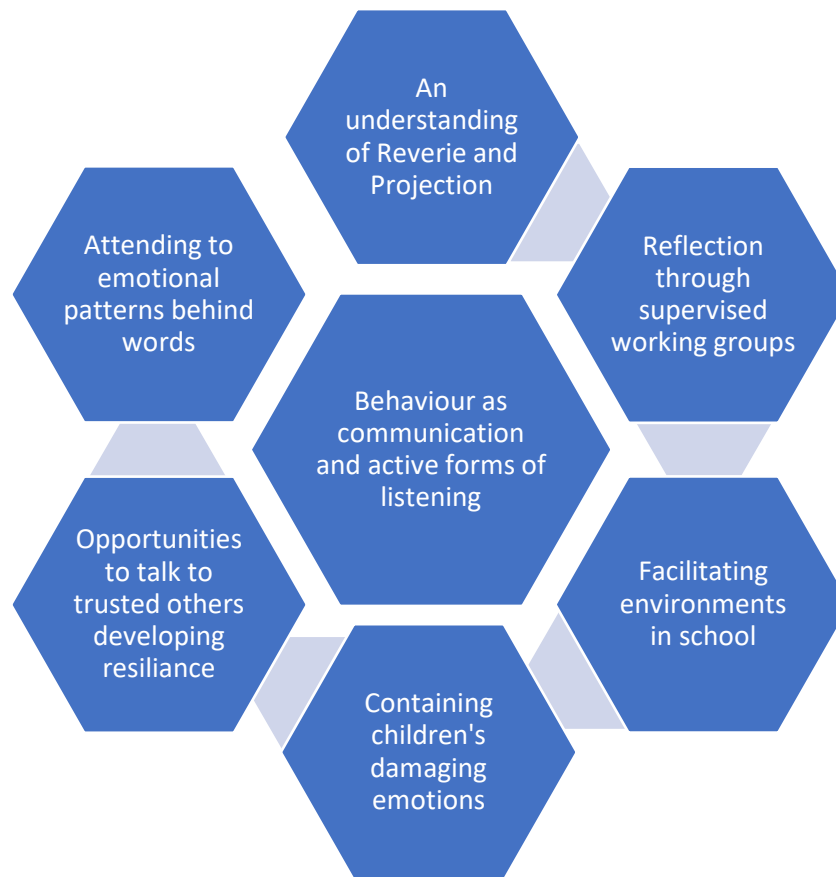


Figure 1: Antecedents to positive language and communication

Inquiring language and other interpersonal strategies such as specific praise, explanation and feedback, behaviour management strategies, non-verbal language use and silence, can be understood as the positive language-based outcomes that spring from the primary antecedents of an understanding of behaviour as communication and active forms of listening:

Outcomes:

- Lesson instruction based on explanation, encouragement and hints rather than directions, orders and solutions.
- The avoidance of sarcastic and patronising language use during lesson instruction that can create feelings of shame.
- Silence as a form of reflective language use that promotes the development of children’s thinking, cognition and inner speech.
- Feedback that is accepting and clarifies rather than disallowing, ignoring or criticising pupils’ ideas.
- Praise that is informative and specific to the effort put in rather than the end result and given without added negative comments.
- Questioning language that buys time to think and reflect before acting.
- A questioning style that is calm rather than confrontational and seeks to understand rather than blame.

- Behaviour management that is focused on the specific behaviour rather than criticising the child.
- Non-verbal language use that focuses on indicators of personal warmth such as eye-contact, smiling and touch.

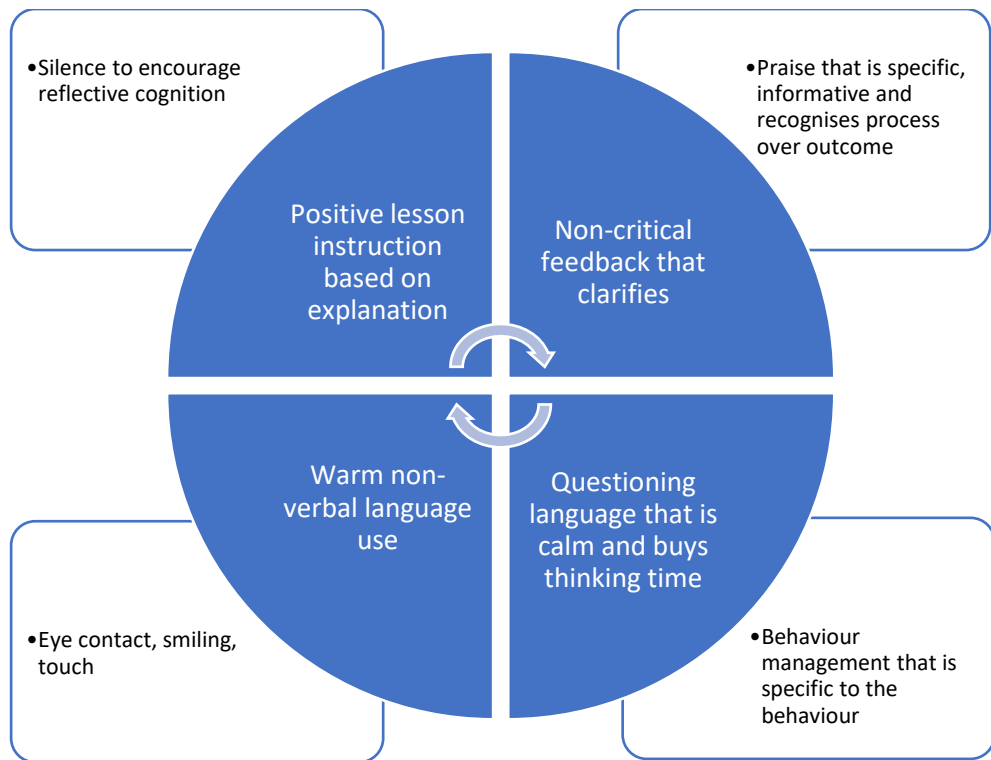


Figure 2: Positive language and communication outcomes

At different times both antecedents and outcomes will lie on a continuum from preventative skills and language at one end, to a more reactive desire to respond to conflict, repair harm and instil a sense of belonging at the other (McCluskey et al, 2008). However, it is clear that further research is needed (particularly in relation to post conflict mediation practices) to explicate even more clearly how positive language and communication looks - and feels - in practice. A take home message from this analysis, and the thread that draws both antecedents and outcomes together, is that taking the time to understand the child and then respond in appropriate ways, is central to positive language and communication. A large degree of mindfulness (Langer, 1989) where teachers and practitioners are present in the moment rather than reacting to the many different stressors and distractions that are part and parcel of the classroom context, is necessary to avoid language and communication that is negative, combative and counter-productive. Once time, reflection and mental space have been positioned as indispensable educational tools, the rest comes with practice where the skills of positive language and communication become second nature with continued use and engagement.

Conclusion:

This analysis has provided a thumbnail sketch of positive language and communication in relation to theoretical ideas within the psychoanalytic literature concerning projective identification (Klein, 1946) and the notion of Container-Contained (Bion, 1994), to forward an understanding of the way behaviour as communication forms the basis of effective language-based interactions. The rationale for the inclusion of a psychoanalytic framework centres upon the idea that these theories are principally concerned with the explication of challenging behaviour and ways to ameliorate the complexity of affect and associated feelings, that can arise from psychological discord.

It has also attempted to practically describe the content of positive language and (non-verbal) communication through research on classroom strategies likely to enhance self-esteem (Colwell & O'Connor, 2003), and the use of specific and process-based praise to impact on children's growth mindsets (Dweck, 2008; Bani, 2011). The use of inquiring language to create non-reactive and non-threatening psychological space (Greenwood, 2002) when dealing with emotionally complex behaviour has been discussed in relation to RP in school, with consideration being given to the reflective value of silence (Ollin, 2008) and the cognitive value of inner speech (FERNYHOUGH, 2008). Finally, the psychoanalytic notion of the 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1956) as a way to passively respond to children's externalising behaviour, whilst actively listening (Rogers & Farson, 1956) to their expressed concerns, has been positioned as an essential element of positive language and communication that allows children to develop resilience (Rutter, 1985) through being emotionally held in school.

Other more preventative (McCluskey et al., 2008) aspects of positive language and communication that, for example, aim to develop children's emotional literacy in school giving them an emotional language upon which to draw, have been beyond the scope of this analysis. Despite such limitations, it is clear that positive language and communication is an essential and multifaceted aspect of helping children and young people to grow and navigate their inner and outer lives. In order to support children who struggle - and who don't have the language to explain - we need to understand, listen and respond in ways that help them to develop a positive language of their own. In addition, it is important to take on board the lessons from both the NG and RP in relation to the core principles of safety, behaviour as communication and meeting needs (Lucas, Buckland & Insley, 2006; Evans & Lester, 2013; RJC, 2015): children with high levels of need and emotional disturbance are not capable of coping with punitive sanctions that merely reinforce and perpetuate the unmet needs and emotional disturbance that already exists. In this respect further research that focuses on the psychological impact of zero tolerance policies and/or restorative approaches on children with high levels of need, would be welcome. Finding an alternative way of being with such children that is strongly based in the antecedents to, and outcomes of, positive language and communication, is as essential to addressing the challenging behaviour of emotionally damaged children, as it is to asking why we would want to cause them more harm in the first place.

