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Understanding students' perspectives on embodied and verbal communication in parent-teacher conferences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide in-depth knowledge of what students consider significant during parent-teacher conferences, beyond the formal content. The study focuses particularly on communicative aspects, including the role of both verbal and nonverbal communication from a student perspective. This study employed a case study design within a lifeworld phenomenological framework, using interviews as the primary method of data collection. The results indicate that it is essential for all conference participants to have the opportunity to speak. Teachers should communicate in ways that are understandable to students and ask questions in a friendly manner. Teachers' body language is very important. From a lifeworld phenomenological perspective, supported by the concept of intersubjectivity, verbal and non-verbal communication are closely intertwined and related to students' experiences of participation. Glances, gestures, and the way questions are posed influence students' experiences during parent-teacher conferences. The study concludes that teachers need in-depth knowledge of both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as strong relational competence, to create effective opportunities for interaction with students during parent-teacher conferences. The results imply that teachers need to develop communicative and relational skills and recommend further research into students' perspectives on communication.

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Introduction

Effective collaboration between teachers and guardians is crucial to the academic success of elementary school students. Such effective collaboration can be expressed through so-called parent-teacher conferences (Epstein, 2010; Matthiesen, 2016; Moore & Lasky, 2000). However, it is challenging for teachers to lead parent-teacher conferences as these conversations lie at the intersection of the public sphere of the school and the private sphere of the home (Hofvendahl, 2006; Inglis, 2012; Leenders et al., 2019; Ranagården, 2009). The challenges may involve navigating differing expectations and disagreements between home and school, as well as bridging cultural and institutional differences (Lareau, 2015). Teachers must be able to manage, balance, and accommodate not only their own, the students', and the guardians' individual interests, but also the collective interests of the class (Mårell-Olsson, 2012). In Sweden, the Education Act stipulates that parent-teacher conferences in elementary school should be held twice per school year and that they are conversations of value and an essential link in the cooperation between home and school (SFS 2010:800). The didactic dimension of a parent-teacher conference includes the teacher documenting and explaining student's knowledge development as well as clarifying the roles of each party and how the school will provide the support the student will need to meet assessment or grading criteria or reach as far as possible in their knowledge development (SFS 2010:800; Skolverket, 2022). In the present study, the concept parent-teacher conference is used similarly to how

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the concept is used in the systematic research overview by Munthe & Westergård (2023), describing that parent-teacher conferences include the student, the teacher, and one or both caregivers, and the discussions are mostly led by teachers or occasionally by the students.

In preparation for a parent-teacher conference and in everyday schoolwork, it is important that students themselves are given time to reflect on their knowledge development and learning, as it strengthens their self-regulating and metacognitive abilities, and teachers must support that reflection (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Ponomariovienė & Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2024). A parent-teacher conference can be seen as interwoven with other teaching activities, extending from preparation to implementation and follow-up agreements, and students need to be involved in these activities (Bader, 2023).

Several researchers (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lundy, 2018; Tisdall, 2015) have called for the recognition of students' views and have pointed out that their experiences are often neither sought nor taken seriously, even though the questions and content in a parent-teacher conference concerns the students. In the study by Uthus and Aas (2025), it is found that when students have the opportunity to express their views and receive support from committed teachers who translate them into action, it becomes possible to effect changes in teaching practice.

When teachers and students communicate, they present themselves to one another as a person. They give meaning to words and actions and are interwoven in a historical, private, and shared world (Bengtsson, 2005; Berndtsson et al., 2007; Husserl, 1989/1995; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Schütz, 1999; van Manen, 2014). Teachers show who they are as individuals through words and actions grounded in their memories, emotions, and ambitions (Halvor Hoveid & Honerød Hoveid, 2019; Kettunen et al., 2025), and the communication between teachers and students appears to encompass several essential aspects, with particular attention given to verbal and non-verbal communication. Both verbal and non-verbal communication, such as bodily signals, are critical because they are easier to remember, spontaneous and immediate, and convey emotions and moral values (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003). Both teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication have been shown to affect teacher-student interaction in teaching (Wahyuni, 2018). However, research has, to a limited extent, examined students' experiences of communication during parent-teacher conferences, whether verbal or nonverbal (Munthe & Westergård, 2023).

Against this background, the aim of our study is to contribute in-depth knowledge about what students, in addition to content experience, consider significant regarding communicative aspects, including both verbal and nonverbal communication in a parent-teacher conference.

The research question guiding this study is: What aspects of teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication are recognized as significant from a student's perspective during a parent-teacher conference?

Policy implications and previous research

The Swedish school system is governed by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the national curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), which outline overarching goals and guidelines for education. The mission of the school is to promote students' learning and support their personal development so that they grow into active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals. Teachers and students are expected to collaboratively develop rules for schoolwork and social interaction, while cooperation with families is central to the school's work. In school, students should be met with respect for both their person and their work, and education should foster a sense of safety as well as a willingness and desire to learn. Students should also be given opportunities to participate in the planning and evaluation of teaching, with parent-teacher conferences understood as part of this process and as an arena for developing students' influence and responsibility (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022).

The curriculum's intentions align with legislative reforms concerning children and young people and emphasize the importance of involving them, in accordance with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (FN 1989, art 12). Despite this, research shows that students in parent-teacher conferences are often objectified and rarely given genuine opportunities to participate, to have their voices heard, or to contribute their perspectives (Steensen & Helms, 2024). Changes in grading practices, curriculum reforms, and an increased focus on measurable outcomes have also contributed to a performativity culture in Swedish schools (Tanner & Pérez Prieto, 2020). Within this context,

students' participation is often equated with observable verbal activity, which risks reducing participation to an individual performance indicator. Against this backdrop, it is interesting to critically examine communicative aspects in parent-teacher conferences from the perspective of the student with a phenomenological understanding of the world as social and intersubjective, and where people's actions are understood as intertwined (Bengtsson, 2005; Berndtsson et al., 2007).

Verbal communication in teaching

Teaching is a multidimensional task that includes didactic, relational, and emotional dimensions (Aspelin, 2019; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Korthagen, 2016; Tang et al., 2024). The didactic dimension of teaching includes planning, conducting, and evaluating teaching (Jank & Meyer, 2011). The relational dimension of teaching concerns the creation of trusting, reciprocal relationships between teacher and student (Friesen, 2017; Hopkins, 2010; Körkkö & Lutovac, 2024; Marsh, 2012). The emotional dimension encompasses the teacher's intuition, presence, sensitivity, and creativity (Aspelin, 2019; Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Körkkö & Lutovac, 2024; Lindqvist, 2015; van Manen, 1991/1993).

Verbal communication constitutes a central component of the didactic dimension of teaching and students' learning outcomes are positively influenced by teachers' verbal communication (Kasim et al., 2022). Yet research increasingly emphasizes that verbal communication is not merely a vehicle for instructional content but also a relational and emotional practice. Studies show that teachers' tone of voice, pacing, and linguistic choices influence students' motivation, trust, and willingness to participate (Aktay, 2021; Paulmann & Weinstein, 2023). A controlling tone of voice reduces students' motivation and their willingness to share personal information, whereas a supportive tone promotes well-being and collaboration (Paulmann & Weinstein, 2023). This finding is consistent with additional research indicating that verbal expressions, such as clarity, warmth, tone of voice, and responsiveness, help shape students' attitudes toward teaching (Çağrı Engin et al., 2023; Haneef et al., 2014).

However, the research remains divided on whether verbal communication should be conceptualized primarily as a technical skill that can be trained (Harro-Loit et al., 2021; Graham-Clay, 2005) or as an expression of teachers' relational and emotional presence. While communication studies often emphasize skills for effective communication (Graham-Clay, 2005; Wahyuni, 2018) or approaches, strategies, methods, or frameworks (Harro-Loit et al., 2021; Graham-Clay, 2005), phenomenologically oriented researchers argue that verbal communication is inseparable from the teacher's ethical stance and connection with students.

Despite this growing body of evidence, several studies note that teachers' knowledge and understanding of how their verbal communication affects students is insufficient (Hansen, 2011; Karca & Filiz, 2023). This suggests a persistent gap between research insights and teachers' professional awareness, raising questions about how teacher education can better integrate knowledge of verbal communication as both a didactic and relational tool.

International research has long emphasized the importance of teachers receiving training to conduct parent-teacher conferences (Graham-Clay, 2005 ; Lemmer, 2012; Symeou et al., 2012), while also consistently showing that student teachers and practicing teachers lack sufficient training to promote collaboration between home and school (Epstein, 2010; Hirsto, 2010). However, more recent research indicates that student teachers are now offered various simulation techniques to prepare them to lead parent-teacher conferences in as authentic situations as possible (De Coninck et al., 2023; Scarparolo & Mayne, 2022; Sebastian et al., 2024; Thopson et al., 2019). Teachers who understand the value of this form of communication are better equipped to develop as competent educators and to foster meaningful learning experiences (Wahyuni, 2018).

Non-verbal communication and embodied dimensions of teaching

Non-verbal communication, encompassing posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and bodily presence, has been shown to play a decisive role in how students interpret and respond to teachers (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Haneef et al., 2014; Šerić, 2021; Wahyuni, 2018). Research consistently demonstrates that non-verbal cues are often more memorable than spoken words and convey emotional

and moral meanings with immediacy (Abdulrahman et al., 2022; Tosun & Yildiz, 2015). These findings underscore the embodied nature of teaching; a perspective strongly developed within phenomenological scholarship.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the teacher's body is not a neutral instrument but an intentional and expressive presence that shapes the relational space of the classroom (Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; van Manen, 1991/1993). Teachers communicate care, authority, attentiveness, and vulnerability through their bodily compartment, often before any words are spoken. Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch (2003) show that teachers who are attuned to their bodily reactions can create a sense of security and trust by responding sensitively to students' cues. At the same time, communication-oriented studies highlight the functional aspects of non-verbal behavior. For example, posture can signal confidence and control (Tosun & Yildiz, 2015), while eye contact and strategic pausing enhance clarity and engagement (Aktay, 2021).

Despite this convergence on the importance of non-verbal communication, the field remains fragmented. Phenomenological research emphasizes authenticity and ethical presence, whereas pedagogical studies often treat non-verbal behavior as a set of techniques to be mastered. This conceptual tension reflects a broader debate about whether embodied communication is primarily relational or instrumental. Moreover, several studies report that teachers acknowledge the importance of body language but lack conceptual clarity and pedagogical tools to work with it systematically (Aktay, 2021; Haneef et al., 2014; Karca & Filiz, 2023). Once again, research highlights that student teachers and teachers need greater knowledge and understanding of non-verbal communication when conducting parent-teacher conferences.

Students' voice and participation

While research focuses on teachers' communicative practices, few studies examine how students themselves perceive and interpret these practices. Yet students' voices are crucial in understanding how communication, both verbal and non-verbal, shapes their participation, sense of agency, and relational experience in school. Studies that foreground students' perspectives show that they are highly sensitive to teachers' expressive behaviors and often interpret them as indicators of respect, care, or control (Çağrı Engin et al., 2023; Paulmann & Weinstein, 2023).

Students' willingness to participate is closely tied to their experience of the teacher's communicative stance. Supportive tones, open body language, and attentive listening foster a climate in which students feel safe to express themselves, ask questions, and share personal experiences. Conversely, controlling tones, closed postures, or inconsistent non-verbal cues can inhibit participation and reduce students' trust in the teacher (Paulmann & Weinstein, 2023). A study by Tenglet (2023) shows that students' participation in parent-teacher conferences varies, and that students being silent tends to be problematized. Silent students are interpreted as less engaged or less capable, which risks positioning them as deviant. Strengthening students' verbal participation is not only about encouraging them to speak, but also about creating teaching and conversational practices that recognize different forms of participation in ways that actively counteract the constraints imposed by a performativity culture. These findings highlight that communication is not merely a transmission of information but a relational negotiation in which students actively interpret and respond to teachers' signals.

Despite this, students' perspectives remain underrepresented in research on teacher communication and in the collaboration between home and school (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lundy, 2018; Tisdall, 2015). Most studies focus on classroom instruction, while other educational practices, such as parent-teacher conferences, receive far less attention (Munthe & Westergård, 2023). This is particularly notable given that such conferences are emotionally charged encounters where communication plays a decisive role in shaping students' sense of involvement and belonging. Understanding how students perceive teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication in these contexts can therefore provide valuable insights into participation, relational dynamics, and the emotional landscape of teaching and parent-teacher conferences.

Theoretical foundations

The study reported in this article is based on a lifeworld phenomenological perspective and an understanding of the world as social, intersubjective, and historical, where people's experiences, perceptions, and actions are intertwined (Bengtsson, 2005; Berndtsson et al., 2007; Husserl, 1989/1995; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Schütz, 1999; van Manen, 2014). The social dimension involves people meeting, attending to one another, and participating in one another's lives within a shared world. This simultaneity encompasses intersubjectivity and concerns what occurs in the meeting of people's subjects, consciousness, and physical bodies. In communication, people understand and experience with their whole bodies, often intuitively, spontaneously, and emotionally (Berndtsson & Vikner Stafberg, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Communication also involves intentionality, meaning that consciousness does not aimlessly direct itself toward anything but always toward something that is then experienced as something specific and thereby creates meaning (Bengtsson, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Simultaneity entails a temporal dimension in which each person carries their history and prior experiences, as well as a future (Heidegger, 1992; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Schütz, 1999).

Phenomenological studies require sensitivity to the complexity of the lifeworld and attention to the individualities within the phenomenon under study (Ashworth & Greasley, 2009). In our study, the focus is on students' experiences and perceptions of themselves and others during parent-teacher conferences, with particular attention to teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication as phenomena experienced from the students' perspective. The lifeworld phenomenological approach, developed for educational research, combines theoretical grounding with an open stance toward the phenomenon, making it especially suitable for examining complex educational contexts (Bengtsson, 2005; Berndtsson & Vikner Stafberg, 2023) such as parent-teacher conferences.

Teachers and students meet and interact during parent-teacher conferences, where they already have an established relationship. Each brings their own experiences, memories, emotions, and expectations. This can influence which aspects of the teachers' verbal and non-verbal communication the student perceives as significant during the conference, the focus of this study.

From a lifeworld phenomenological perspective, it is not possible to separate people's lives and worlds, as they are intertwined and mutually dependent. It is also not possible to understand verbal and non-verbal communication as separate since the lived body is understood as a whole (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Speech does not consist of individual words alone; it gains its full meaning only when they are combined and understood in relation to facial expressions, emphasis, and gestures. This means that verbal and nonverbal communication can be understood as mutually constitutive (Merleau-Ponty, 1999).

Key lifeworld phenomenological concepts are intersubjectivity and intentionality, which are used as analytical concepts to theoretically explain what students perceive as important in parent-teacher conferences. Intersubjectivity concerns what happens in the meeting between people, between their consciousness and lived bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Meeting is a prerequisite for understanding others, and in communication, we enter each other's lives and worlds. We can agree, correct, and, to some extent, adopt one another's perspectives, thereby intertwining or opening them to new ones (Berndtsson, 2001). Our understanding is that the parent-teacher conferences constitute an intersubjective and intentional arena. Intentionality involves people, in what they take for granted, directing their attention towards something that then appears as something very specific and thereby creates meaning (Bengtsson, 2005; Claesson, 2011). Taken-for-granted assumptions can involve unreflectively repeating actions and holding on to habits. It is only when something unexpected happens that we pause and reflect on what we otherwise take for granted (Claesson, 2009). The unexpected can become visible to us in both verbal and nonverbal communication, for example, by noticing something new when someone asks a question or by attending to pauses, tone, or emphasis. From a lifeworld phenomenological perspective, body language, sitting positions, glances, facial expressions, and gestures are important and can be understood as intertwined expressions of communication (Claesson, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Although intertwining, reciprocity, and the manifestation of something as specific are hallmarks of a lifeworld phenomenological understanding, our interest has been in identifying which aspects of teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication students perceive as significant during parent-teacher conferences.

Method

A fundamental idea in a lifeworld phenomenological perspective is to begin with people's descriptions of experiences, perceptions, and feelings in their everyday lives and, through these, to understand a phenomenon (Bengtsson, 2005; Friesen, 2017). For our study, a case study design was appropriate, and interviews were a suitable method because the focus is on people's experiences and the meaning a phenomenon holds for them.

Participants and data collection

In lifeworld phenomenological studies, interest in the phenomenon is primary rather than the number of participants. This leads to an open approach to sample size and to challenges in addressing questions of saturation and sufficiency (Ahmed, 2025). The number of participants in qualitative research is influenced by several considerations made by the researcher and is also related to the study's rigor and trustworthiness. The amount of data collected must be sufficient to generate new insights into the phenomenon under investigation while remaining sufficiently limited to enable in-depth analysis (Ahmed, 2025; Sharma et al., 2024). This entails an open approach to sample size and poses challenges for addressing data saturation (Ahmed, 2025; Sharma et al., 2024). The empirical data used in this article consist of three interviews with six students in grades 1-6 conducted by one of us. The sample is a convenience sample. The empirical data comes from a dissertation project that aimed to highlight the significance of teachers' leadership in parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools. Data collection took place between 2018 and 2019 at three schools: one F-9 school and two 1–6 schools, all of which were involved in a development project on student-led parent-teacher conferences. The selection criterion was that the participating students should study at these schools. Student-led parent-teacher conferences mean that the student is given time to prepare the conversation and, together with the teacher, conduct it, with the teacher providing support.

The schools are located in a small Swedish community near rural areas. Most students were born in Sweden, and according to statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 80–95% of students met the required knowledge levels and passed the national tests.

The interviews were conducted in secluded, quiet environments at the respective schools. One interview was conducted in a focus group with three students; one in a pair and one individually. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions centered on parent-teacher conferences, students' self-initiated conversations, and the teacher's role in these interactions. Openness was used to foster everyday conversation with students that was as informal as possible. The interviews lasted from 10 to 20 minutes. Each interview began with introductory, general questions about parent-teacher conferences to establish a comfortable conversational climate. This was followed by questions specifically addressing aspects of communication during a parent-teacher conference and students' experiences of it. Subsequently, questions were asked to elicit further details and clarify the students' descriptions. The concluding questions were more conversational in character. During the interviews, questions were reformulated and adapted several times to ensure they were understandable to the students. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. During transcription of the student interviews, special attention was paid to both verbal content and nonverbal communication, with symbols indicating pauses, extended speech, interrupted speech, and emphasis. This enabled interpretation and understanding of key aspects of communication, such as when students challenged one another's taken-for-granted assumptions or expressed agreement.

Data analysis

In a lifeworld phenomenological study, it is necessary to adopt a reflexive approach to the pre-understanding we bring (van Manen, 2014). Both researchers are former trained teachers with experience in teaching and leading parent-teacher conferences, which, of course, affected what could be observed and understood of the phenomenon under study. However, reflexivity, the awareness of one's own

interpretive horizon, and the theoretical concepts used have helped create distance and contribute to the study's trustworthiness.

The analysis and interpretation began as soon as the student interviews were conducted, continued during transcription, and then proceeded using van Manen's (2014) three reading strategies. The first holistic strategy involves reading the text in its entirety to develop an understanding of its content and asking questions about what is most significant in students lived experiences; here, both researchers contributed separately. Questions about what stands out in the students' experiences and what meaning can be captured in the whole were used to guide the reading. The second strategy, selective, involves reading the text repeatedly and looking for particularly relevant statements, thematic expressions, or longer descriptions. The selective reading strategy shifted between selective and holistic reading and required reading the text several times to identify specific expressions, such as students' experiences of teachers' questions, and to compare different interpretations. The third strategy involves reading the text in detail, seeking to get even closer to the essence of the phenomenon and understanding what students lived experiences were. In this step, the joint interpretation was that students lived experiences were largely concerned with involvement and the feelings elicited during parent-teacher conferences. The analysis and interpretation involved moving among the different readings and finally synthesizing them, which contributed to a deeper understanding of what is significant for students in parent-teacher conferences. In the final step, this understanding was explained by using the lifeworld phenomenological concepts of intersubjectivity and intentionality. In the analytical process, from strategy one to three, the students' descriptions were grouped into categories that captured what they recurrently described. During this process of the study, it became clear that the three interviews had yield data saturation from a lifeworld phenomenological perspective. The categories of descriptions were then merged into the following themes: *speaking up, describing and asking questions,* and *bodily expressions*. In the presentation of the results, each theme includes excerpts selected to make the presentation concrete and contextual.

In the excerpts, the interviewer is denoted by 'I', and students by 'S'; the number of students participating in the interview is denoted by 'S1', 'S2', or 'S3'. Content that risks identifying the participants is omitted and marked with the following symbol: […]. The excerpts also include timed pauses, extended and interrupted speech, notes on significant emphases, and bodily expressions such as [giggle].

Ethical considerations

The study follows Swedish research ethics legislation (SFS 2003:460) and the ethical principles established by the Swedish Research Council (2024). This means that the study does not require formal ethical review, as it does not involve sensitive personal data nor pose any risk of harm to participants.

The research was guided by the researchers' professional ethical approach and careful ethical considerations. Prior to the student interviews, the researchers contacted the students' principals via email and telephone. The principals distributed the information letters and consent forms to guardians and students. Guardians and students received written information about the study's purpose, design, and confidentiality procedures (Appendix 1). Before consent was obtained, guardians and students were informed in writing that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Since the students were under 15 years of age, written consent was provided by their guardians (Appendix 2). The principals collected the signed forms and handed them over to one of the researchers.

Interviewing students under the age of 15 involves particular ethical considerations. The information provided to the students needed to be understandable, and the students needed to comprehend what participation entailed (Quennerstedt et al., 2012). In addition to the written information, the researcher conducting the interviews met the students in their classroom to provide oral information, allowing them to feel comfortable and ask questions before deciding whether to participate. The students were also asked immediately before the interviews whether they wished to participate, provided that their guardians had consented. Ethical considerations regarding information and consent are in accordance with current research guidelines (Swedish Research Council, 2024).

The interviews were tailored to the students and conducted in calm, undisturbed environments furnished with sofas, which contributed to comfortable seating, a pleasant atmosphere, and an overall

sense of ease. Students were interviewed in groups and pairs to help them feel safe and comfortable. One interview was conducted individually for practical reasons; however, the researcher had previously met the student during a parent-teacher conference, meaning they were already familiar with one another.

Personal data were processed in accordance with the GDPR (2016/679), meaning that collected data were handled confidentially and stored securely in line with university procedures. Audio recordings from the interviews and anonymized transcripts were stored in a GDPR-compliant storage system provided by the university. Participants were assigned numbers in the presentation of the results to ensure confidentiality.

Results

The results highlight students' perspectives on what is significant to them in their communication with teachers and guardians during a parent-teacher conference. From a lifeworld phenomenological perspective, one can say that it is not possible to separate the lifeworld into distinct themes, as everything is often intertwined in people's lifeworld. The data is, however, sorted into themes to identify key aspects and gain a deeper understanding of each. The themes used divide the empirical material in the analysis, although they were often intertwined and encompassed both verbal and non-verbal communicative aspects, which were interpreted as relating to experiences of participation.

Speaking up

In the focus group interview, students discussed their experiences at the parent-teacher conference and reflected on their own roles in the conversation and on the teacher's influence on the conference's structure and content. The theme *speaking up* demonstrates that students consider it important that all participants in a parent-teacher conference will have the opportunity to speak, ask questions, and offer suggestions. But as evidenced by the students' accounts, participation involves not only speaking but also time to think and listen. They emphasize the importance of being given space for reflection; without this time, the conversation risks being perceived as boring or difficult to engage in. An example of this is illustrated when one student describes how silence on the part of the teacher would have created better conditions for formulating their own thoughts:

> I: – What would you have liked the teacher to talk about if you could choose? S: – That the teacher would have sat quietly. […] Then I could have thought of several things.

The answer shows that the teacher's sensitivity to waiting and allowing pauses is central to students' engagement in speaking. At the same time, the teacher needs to be attentive to situations in which other adults in the room dominate the conversation. Several students report that conversations between teachers and guardians make them feel compelled to remain silent.

> S2: – It feels like I must be very quiet during the conversation.

Another student reports a similar experience, noting that the conversation often centers on topics that interest the adults, thereby reducing the student's opportunity to participate actively.

A recurring theme in the data material is the need for pauses for reflection. When such pauses are absent, the conversation can be perceived as uninteresting or overwhelming.

Conversely, when the teacher allows silence and waits, it gives students more opportunities to formulate their thoughts and contribute to the conversation. When teachers and guardians dominate the conversation, however, students risk feeling excluded, which in turn reduces their participation.

The importance of preparation prior to the parent-teacher conference is also emphasized by the students. Writing down what they want to discuss is described as a support for their daring to and ability to participate actively. Without preparation, the risk increases that students do not know what to say and therefore remain silent. Our interpretation is that preparatory work can both advance the conversation and reduce the risk of awkward silences.

The students also reflect on the concept of student-led parent-teacher conferences, and our interpretation is that, even though students are given a more central role in such conferences, these are seen as

more challenging than teacher-led conferences because they require students to take on greater responsibility for maintaining the conversation. This responsibility can lead to uncertainty and silence when one does not know how to move the conversation forward. One student says:

> S2: – And then you had to say something yourself, you just uh:h:h: […] It became like (2.0) no one could think of what to say, so there were these small, short silent moments.

In this context, the teacher's questions emerge as a crucial form of support. Questions from the teacher not only help move the conversation forward but also give students time to think and structure their responses.

> S1: – It can be a support because then you start talking. […] and then the brain has time to think, and after I have answered that question, I can move on to the next topic.

The teacher's responsiveness, ability to balance speaking time, and use of supportive questions are central to enabling students to have a voice and participate in the parent-teacher conference

Describing and asking questions

The analysis shows that the way questions are posed matters for students. They emphasize that questions should be friendly, nuanced, and framed to invite reflection rather than judgment. The following excerpt illustrates students' reasoning about how they would like teachers to ask questions:

> S2: – […] there is a difference in how questions are asked […] S3: – […] so that they are not rude when they ask. I: – No. S2: – I thought of an example […] if you say that you might have some difficulty, for example, in Swedish and then just uh:h: (1.0) like – S3: – Why do you have that then? S2: – Yes, that's what the teacher says, 'Why do you have that?' instead of 'What do you think it depends on?' or 'How do you think we can improve it?'

Beyond the tone of questioning, students also emphasize that questions should be formulated in ways they can understand. Questions that are perceived as overly complex risk excluding both students and parents from meaningful participation, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> S1: – I mean, it's also good if the teacher tries to ask in a way that you understand, so that it doesn't become complicated for either the parents or the student.

Students further highlight the importance of how teachers describe their knowledge development. Constructive and supportive descriptions are perceived as more meaningful and motivating than blunt or evaluative statements. One student explains how a teacher frames areas for improvement in a way that acknowledges existing knowledge:

> S: – The teacher usually doesn't say that there are things you need to improve by saying, 'You really need to get better'. Instead, she says something like, 'What I've been thinking about is that you need to improve this a bit, but you already know some of it and just need to practice a little more'.

Our interpretation is that these aspects of questioning and describing are closely intertwined with other aspects of the parent-teacher conference, making it difficult to separate analytically. Minimizing awkward situations and uncomfortable silences is closely related to both students' preparatory work and the teacher's questioning practices. One student describes preparation as writing down additional points that can be expanded upon, such as possible questions or answers.

At the same time, students describe challenges with this process, even as they express a desire for questions that help them develop their responses. They may be asked questions they have not prepared for, struggle to formulate answers, or encounter topics they find difficult to discuss. One student, for example, describes difficulties with Swedish and how the expectation to elaborate on answers can lead her to refrain from participating.

Bodily expressions

In addition to the importance of preparation and the way questions are asked, bodily expressions are central to the parent-teacher conference experience. These expressions relate primarily to how attentiveness, engagement, and emotional support are communicated during interaction.

One aspect emphasized by students is eye contact. A student who led their parent-teacher conference together with the teacher highlighted eye contact as essential for ensuring that all participants feel included and understood, and said:

> S1: – No, I mean, it was like this (1.0) you have to try to make eye contact with everyone and try to explain things in a good way so that everyone understands, taking questions and answers in turn and not just saying exactly what it says […] but finding your own way to say it.

The importance of eye contact becomes even clearer when students describe how they want teachers to lead parent-teacher conferences. Eye contact is interpreted as a visible sign that the teacher is listening attentively and taking the student seriously, expressed in the following excerpt:

> I: – How can you say that a teacher is listening and paying attention? S3: – That you can see the teacher doesn't look away or somewhere else. […] That the teacher looks at you. S1: – The teacher can ask questions so that you know she is listening […] She actually cares [and] wants to know what's happening. S2: – It's important that the teacher is engaged in the conference and doesn't just sit there or do something else. I: – How can you see that the teacher is engaged? S3: – Not looking at the clock or at mom or dad.

The evidence that the teacher has listened should be obvious not only in what teachers say but also in bodily expressions such as eye contact, posture, and attentiveness. For example, leaning forward is perceived as showing interest and engagement, whereas avoiding eye contact or appearing distracted signals disinterest. Our interpretation is that, in a parent-teacher conference, the teacher's body language, tone of voice, and manner of interaction play a crucial role in conveying care and engagement. Gestures, glances, and tone should communicate attentiveness to both the student and the content of the conversation and thereby fostering a supportive and positive atmosphere.

Students also describe their own bodily experiences during parent-teacher conferences. Feelings of nervousness are commonly reported, particularly when students anticipate sharing something uncomfortable. One student explains this as follows:

> S1: – […] sometimes it feels a bit nervous, if you've done something and then have to say it to your parents at the parent–teacher conference. I: – Yes. S1: – But it also feels good to say it.

This excerpt illustrates that nervousness can coexist with a sense of relief or comfort in speaking openly. In the focus group, it further emerges that guardians often function as a source of security for students. This is reflected in the following statement:

> I: – How do you feel when you are about to tell? S1: – It feels a bit nervous. I: – Yes. S1: – But it's nice that it's your parents.

Our interpretation is that students to a high degree experience emotional and bodily interactions in parent-teacher conferences and that these experiences influence whether students feel confident enough to speak up and experience a sense of involvement in communication.

In summary, the results show that teachers' questions matter in conversations, both in how they are asked and in what they address. Significantly, the teacher asks questions in a manner that students can understand. Additionally, teachers' bodily expressions, such as eye contact and body posture, clearly signal to students whether the teacher is listening attentively and is interested. It is also important that students participate in parent-teacher conferences when everyone involved has a chance to speak, students have time to reflect, and participants listen to one another. Conversely, the conference may be perceived as boring if adults talk excessively among themselves or if students are not given time to reflect on and determine what they want to say. Students place great importance on preparatory work for potential involvement, as it allows them to write down what they intend to discuss, which helps them remember and answer questions. Preparatory work also reduces the risk that the conversations will become stiff and awkwardly silent. From the students' perspective, the most crucial in parent-teacher conferences are:

- having opportunities to influence the content and structure of the conversation
- being seen and recognized as an active participant,
- experiencing the teacher as attentive, present, and responsive.

- having time and space to prepare and express themselves, which enhances their opportunities for meaningful participation.

The parent-teacher conference from a lifeworld phenomenological perspective

The experience of participation is connected to the teacher's sensitivity to each student's expressions and needs (van Manen, 1991/1993). Teachers, therefore, need to discern when it is appropriate to listen and when to speak; for example, listening when the student wants to share information, or asking questions when the student needs help to advance the conversation. These are aspects that can be linked to the teacher's relational competence. With the support of van Manen's concept of pedagogical tact (van Manen, 2015), which includes what can be observed, experienced as invisible, unspoken, or undone (van Manen, 2015), the teacher's verbal and bodily expressions are perceived by students as either tactful or not. Although we focus on students' perspectives and their experiences of the parent-teacher conference, all participants involved in intersubjective participation are central actors.

During the conference, all participants' perspectives are challenged, approached, united, and from a lifeworld phenomenological perspective, what occurs between the participants can be understood as intertwined, and each participant in the parent-teacher conference influences the conference. During the meeting, the student, teacher, and guardian always direct themselves toward someone or something in a way that ascribes particular significance to it. This includes both verbal and non-verbal communication and how this directedness creates meaning, which can be explained as intentionality. It can be a glance, a gesture, or a question that students need to understand. Intentionality is also intertwined. For example, it is essential for students to maintain eye contact and for teachers to signal, through body posture, that they are listening and interested when students are about to speak. The lifeworld phenomenological perspective has helped clarify that verbal and non-verbal communication are intertwined during a parent-teacher conference and that this communication together creates meaning. A lifeworld phenomenological understanding of parent-teacher conferences as intentional communication provides insights into the need for teachers to have knowledge of and understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication. They need this knowledge to communicate effectively and to ensure that students experience the conversations as meaningful.

Discussion

This article presents results from a case study that aimed to contribute in-depth knowledge about what students, in addition to the content, experience as significant regarding communicative aspects of a parent-teacher conference, including both verbal and non-verbal expressions. Although the student, the guardian, and the teacher are involved in such conferences, the study focuses on students' perspectives, as we believe these perspectives can contribute to prior research, including Bader (2023), which examined parent-teacher conferences from a teacher leadership perspective. Since the study employs a case study design based on interviews with six students, the results cannot be generalized; however, it provides rich descriptions that are transferable to similar situations involving parent-teacher conferences. Students' descriptions have enabled us to identify the meanings attributed to the phenomenon under study, and the lifeworld phenomenological concepts of intersubjectivity and intentionality, where understanding is based on the view that communication is experienced with the whole body and appears as something particular to someone (Berndtsson & Vikner Stafberg, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 2012), have helped us to interpret students' descriptions. Eye contact, for example, helps foster a sense of inclusion and indicates that the teacher is listening and genuinely interested. Even a small bodily expression can be decisive for the student's experience of involvement and intersubjectivity in a parent-teacher conference.

During these conferences, teachers must sensitively address both public and private aspects when school and family meet, balancing agreements among teachers, students, and guardians, and considering both the student's individual needs and the classroom's collective interests (Mårell-Olsson, 2012; Pihlgren, 2017). The results in the present study are in line with (Cook-Sather, 2002; Friesen, 2017; Lundy, 2018; Tisdall, 2015) works underscoring that teachers need to see students as unique individuals,

attend to their experiences and emotions, and actively seek and take their views seriously, especially in matters and content that directly concern them. On the contrary, research shows that students are often objectified in parent-teacher conferences (Steensen & Helms, 2024) and that their opinions and experiences are rarely sought (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lundy, 2018; Tisdall, 2015).

A lifeworld phenomenological understanding of parent-teacher conferences as intentional communication provides insight into the need for both student teachers and practicing teachers to develop knowledge and understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication. This knowledge is necessary for effective communication and for ensuring that students experience the conversations as meaningful. Teachers who recognize the value of this form of communication are better positioned to develop professionally and to create meaningful learning experiences for their students (Wahyuni, 2018). Uthus and Aas (2025) emphasize that teaching can change when teachers support students in expressing themselves, making their voices heard, and giving them room to act, which is supported by the findings of the present study showing that the involvement of the students in parent-teacher conferences both before, under and after the conference can help students to be more active participators in their education.

However, it is the teacher who is responsible for the communication and the quality of the teacher-student relationship, and the relationship-building work ultimately rests with the teacher (Aspelin & Jonsson, 2019; Frelin, 2012; Ljungblad, 2016; Ljungblad & Rinne, 2020). The result of our study shows that when students have the opportunity to participate in planning and leading the conference, the dynamics of the conversation change. Students' influence and participation are strengthened, and their ability to affect the content and form of the conversation increases. The teacher can, for example, focus more on listening, which may also lead guardians to direct their questions to the student rather than the teacher. This, in turn, can contribute to the student's sense of involvement. The results show that teachers and students need to critically reflect on the meanings of student influence and participation and how these concepts should be understood in the context of parent-teacher conferences. This reflection is relevant not only to the conference itself but also to the teaching that precedes and follows it, as the parent-teacher conference is part of the teaching (Bader, 2023). By giving students time to prepare for the conference, teachers can increase students' sense of participation not only during the conference but also in the teaching that it is part of.

The results show that when students lack time or teacher support for preparatory work, it becomes more difficult for them to participate in parent-teacher conferences. Time also matters during the conference itself, as students who are not given sufficient time to reflect on what they want to say risk remaining silent. Time and space for speaking are central factors, as students may feel compelled to remain silent when adults talk among themselves for extended periods. If students do not feel they are active participants in the conversation, they may also perceive it as boring or meaningless. The findings, therefore, indicate that teachers need to be attentive to providing students with both time and space to speak. This requires teachers to be sensitive to turn-taking in the conversation and to be aware of when it is appropriate to remain silent, when students need additional time to think, and when the teacher should take the floor. Previous international research has long demonstrated the importance of teachers' body language (Abdulrahman et al., 2022; Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Haneef et al., 2014; Hansen, 2011; Šerić, 2021; Wahyuni, 2018), and this study further emphasizes this by foregrounding the student perspective. Students' experiences also contribute to a deeper understanding of the consequences of time constraints and limited speaking time in parent-teacher conferences.

Furthermore, the results show that both verbal and nonverbal communicative expressions are of great importance in shaping students' experiences of the conference, results commonly with Paulmann and Weinstein (2023) showing that a teacher's tone of voice influences students' willingness to share, a finding confirmed by our study. Consistent with Aktay (2021), the results indicate that students are attentive to teachers' body language and that this affects their experiences. In our findings, students describe how teachers' listening is expressed, for instance, through eye contact and physical presence during conferences. In line with previous international research (Çağrı Engin et al., 2023; Haneef et al., 2014; Hansen, 2011; Karca & Filiz, 2023), our study underscores the need for teachers moor deeper understanding of non-verbal communication in interactions with students, as it affects students' engagement, motivation, and sense of participation.

Conclusion

In summary, the study's results show that students' participation in parent-teacher conferences is strongly dependent on teachers' ability to create time and space for student involvement through a responsive approach. Both verbal aspects, such as teachers' questioning techniques and tone of voice, and non-verbal aspects, such as teachers' body language and eye contact, are of great importance for students to experience involvement in a parent-teacher conference. If students don't feel involved in a parent-teacher conference, there is a risk that such conferences, instead of supporting students' learning, may have the opposite effect.

Limitations

The study's limitations include a small sample size, a culturally specific Swedish context, and reliance solely on interviews. Triangulation through interviews and observations would have contributed to a deeper understanding of students' everyday lives in the school context. But from a lifeworld-phenomenological perspective, the interviews have contributed to increased knowledge and a deeper understanding of what students describe and perceive as important in parent-teacher conferences.

Implications and further research

The results of the study imply that both students in teacher education and teachers need more in-depth knowledge of the relational aspects of teaching, such as awareness of body language and nonverbal expressions. Different aspects of communication in teaching should therefore be more clearly integrated into teacher education. Relational competences can, for example, be strengthened through explicit training in communication strategies that address both verbal and non-verbal aspects. Structures for student-led conferences can also be developed in both teacher education settings and teachers' work in schools.

From a lifeworld-phenomenological perspective, parent-teacher conferences emerge as verbal and embodied interactions in which students should experience participation, recognition, and agency. Student-centered policies, emphasized in recent curriculum reforms and teacher education, need to shift focus from a teacher-led agenda to meaningful student engagement. Both student teachers and practicing teachers need guidance to:

- see students as unique, intentional individuals with valuable perspectives,
- support dialogic and participatory interactions rather than merely transmitting information,
- be sensitive to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the conversation, ensuring students have sufficient time to reflect and speak,
- pay attention to non-verbal communication.

Genuine student-centered practice develops when teachers understand and enact the embodied, intentional, and intersubjective dimensions of communication, ensuring that students' voices have real significance in their education.

Finally, the study raises questions that motivate further research, such as which forms of support teachers perceive as necessary for developing parent-teacher conferences and how teacher education can better prepare student teachers to meet students and parents in these conferences as part of their teaching. Further research on students' experiences of teaching from a lifeworld phenomenological lifeworld can provide a more differentiated understanding of students' experiences and make it visible how communicative practices influence students' opportunities to be involved in their education. Future studies with cross-cultural comparisons, larger samples, and mixed methods can also be seen as contributing to the field.

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Data availability statement

The dataset cannot be shared due to ethical and private concerns. The data were collected before open data requirements were more prevalent. The participants were therefore informed that only involved researchers should have access. All data are stored on a Swedish Cloud Services, a password-protected cloud service for digital research data; only the authors have access to this data.

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