Actions Speak Louder Than Words:
Improving Nonverbal Communication Skills in the Classroom.

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Abstract

One of the most important tools for a successfully managed classroom is the ability to communicate. There are two ways a teacher can communicate with their students – verbally and nonverbally. Good verbal communication is widely recognized as an important skill for teachers. Verbal communication allows teachers to impart new knowledge and rules, transmit information, and effectively carry out lessons. This paper attempts to examine the use of nonverbal communication as an effective means of teacher/student communication in the classroom. Nonverbal communication can been defined as communication without words. It includes apparent behaviors such as facial expressions, eyes, touching, and tone of voice, as well as less obvious messages such as dress, posture and spatial distance between two or more people. The ability to understand and use nonverbal communication is a powerful tool that can help you connect with others, express what you really mean, and build better relationships.
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*Actions speak louder than words.* This idiom has been used repeatedly throughout history. Most people understand that good verbal communication is important in developing strong relationships but they often underestimate the power of nonverbal communication. A smile, a gesture, a handshake, and the way we dress is being evaluated by those around us. To be an effective leader in today’s classroom one must make a conscious effort to understand and use the power of nonverbal communication. As I was researching this topic my goal was to discover evidence supporting this statement and ways to implement it effectively.

For this paper, I decided to focus on types of nonverbal communication that I think are important to understand and utilize as a teacher and principal. A lot of classroom student problems, conflicts, and confrontations could be avoided if a teacher and/or principal had a strong grasp of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication can be thought of as the process of communicating through sending and receiving wordless cues between people. People will sometimes mistake nonverbal communication with body language, but nonverbal communication is much more than simple body language. It also deals with things like the use of voice, touch, distance, and physical environment/appearance (Benzer, 2012).

Appearance matters. It only takes 30-35 seconds to form a first impression (Benzer, 2012). Once formed, it is difficult to change. When those students first walk into your classroom and/or school, what message are you sending them by the way you look? Clothing brand and style, hair styles, facial hair (for men), and jewelry all send a message to students. The same can be said on the other side of the spectrum as well – what message is a student sending to his/her teacher on that first day of school by the way he/she is dressed? I am reminded of the old
saying “You only have one chance to make a first impression.” Teachers and students will tell each other a lot on that first day of school without actually saying a word. That first impression is made as soon as the student walks into the classroom on that first day.

Body Language. Body language is another type of nonverbal communication. Body language deals with posture, gestures, and body position. Imagine a teacher or student slouching. Neither one seems interested. Constant tapping or movement is unsettling and distracting. Those movements can signal boredom. On the other hand if a person is always too calm and collected it may send a signal of being cold and withdrawn. When people are interested they lean in to a conversation. Crossing of arms across the chest gives the impression that you are closed off (Segal, Smith, Boose, & Jaffre, 2014).

Paralanguage. Paralanguage is the tone, pitch, rhythm, loudness, and pace of speech (Frimannsdottir & Barbara, 2011). Many times what we say is not as important as how we say it. When we speak, other people “read” our voices as well as listening to the spoken words (Segal et. al…2014). A monotone delivery will result in students becoming bored and distracted. If I do not vary my speaking style during lectures the students will not become engaged. Think about the last time you heard a good story. The inflection of the speaker’s voice was most likely as interesting as the words themselves.

Facial expressions make up a significant part of nonverbal communication. There are six expressions that are universal: sadness, happiness, disgust, anger, surprise, and fear (Subapriya, 2009). These emotions are closely related to all forms of nonverbal communication. Being a teacher is clearly an emotional process. In a survey conducted by Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight, 97% of teachers said regulating emotions can make them more effective in the classroom (2009). Eye contact alone is an important tool for developing relationships. If a
teacher is only looking at the projector or the back wall, the students will not be engaged in the lesson. Likewise, if a student is looking around the room or only staring down at the paper the teacher should realize that the student is probably not listening to what is being presented.

How can the above information assist in creating a more successful learning environment in schools? It is not surprising to learn that 96% of teachers polled said professional dress helps gain respect of the students (Benzer, 2012). It also sends a message that students are valued. Teachers can use attire to portray confidence and leadership. Imagine a young teacher wearing a trendy outfit from a popular teenage clothing store. It will be difficult to establish that the teacher is the leader of the classroom and not just another student.

Benzer (2012) surveyed 100 teachers and found that all 100 believed in the importance of utilizing certain body language to enhance education. Unfortunately, all 100 also felt like they had inadequate training in proper body language. Patricia Anguiano (2001) was a first year teacher having trouble controlling her classroom. She decided to utilize four types of nonverbal communication as cited in Konin (1970) and Canter and Canter (1992): eye contact, physical proximity, withitness (showing the students that you have a general awareness of the classroom), and overlapping (the ability to handle two or more events at once). Anguiano discovered that by intervening before misbehavior occurred she could prevent problems, allowing her to devote more time to instruction and less time to discipline. The concepts seem simple yet until she had researched them she did not naturally do them on her own. Eye contact was used to get the attention of a student who was about to disrupt the class. When Anguiano noticed that a student was about to throw a pencil she maintained eye contact until the student put the pencil down. She used proximity by standing next to two students who were talking until they stopped.
both instances she did not verbally express her wishes but the message was clear, “Stop doing that and pay attention.”

Strong teachers share certain characteristics. They are alert, utilize Kounin’s concept of withitness, avoid retreating when children misbehave, attend to more positive than negative actions of students, and use proper pacing and student engagement. They understand that improved student outcomes occur in emotionally supportive and caring environments. (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010)

Why should teachers care about nonverbal communication? Immediacy is a term used to define the perception of physical and psychological closeness between people. (Motte, Parker-Rarley, Cunningham, Beebe, & Raffeld, 2006) It consists of communication behaviors that enhance a feeling of closeness. If students perceive a teacher as having a high level of nonverbal immediacy (good eye contact, a leaning in posture, head nodding) they will have a willingness to participate in the classroom activities (Motte et al., 2006). Children who are participating have less time to get distracted and misbehave.

As a veteran teacher, I often have student teachers in my room. As the classroom leader it is my goal to help them achieve success. Bandrick-Santoyo (2014) emphasized the need to give them immediate feedback. Developing nonverbal signals before class can aid the student teacher during the lesson. Some cues I can use are: moving toward a student who is about to get off task, pointing to my eyes to signal a need for more eye contact with the students, and taking an exaggerated deep breath as a cue to slow down and breathe to help with nerves.

I am the speaker and my students are my audience. Preparing for class is like preparing to give a presentation at a business seminar. Audiences remember the presentation content in this order: everything they see, the tone of the speaker's voice, and lastly the text or content.
(Frimannsdottir & Barbara, 2011). Poet Maya Angelou said it well: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel"

(Hodge, 2009). “One of the essential skills of a strong leader is the ability to make effective presentations that will inspire others, present ideas, and persuade others to action.”

(Frimannsdottir & Barbara, 2011). Utilizing the power of nonverbal communication will result in more success in the classroom.
References


