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GESTURE: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

By  
Christina Roviello

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of  
Masters of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
July 2004

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor

Date Approved July 1, 2004  
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## ABSTRACT

Christina Roviello  
GESTURE: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN  
TEACHERS AND STUDENTS  
2003/2004

Dr. Marjorie Madden Professor  
Master of Arts in Reading

Teachers convey nonverbal messages to their class using gestures, body language, tone and physical body placement. Research shows that nonverbal messages can be very powerful tools with students. Research has also shown that nonverbal gestures paired with verbal communication enhance comprehension. This study's purpose is to find evidence that using nonverbal gestures in the classroom improves teacher direction and class attention and understanding. Data analysis shows that particular students benefit from emblems gesture in the classroom setting. Conclusions and implications of this study suggest that nonverbal communication has an influence on the classroom environment; however, further investigation is required.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family for supporting me in this educational endeavor. I also could not have completed this effort without the help of my thesis advisor and fellow Collaborative Teaching classmates.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Four years of education have prepared her for this moment. Here she is twenty-three years old eager and excited, her cooperating teacher has now left her on her own and twenty-one nine year-olds are completely ignoring her! A student teacher's nightmare! She has observed for weeks and the students responded to her nicely, excited to have her in their classroom. But, suddenly she is in charge and the charm of being a new face in the classroom seems to have worn off. The honeymoon is over.

*I want them to listen to me. I deserve the same respect they give their teacher. I am an adult and not their friend. Why are they talking over me? Why do I seem to have no control or authority? What is the teacher next door going to think? I am sure she can hear my students. I certainly do not want her to hear my voice. I never yell. It is not my nature. If I yell now will they students respect me and realize I mean business? Or will they lose all respect for me because I lost my cool? I am hurt at the students' lack of respect for me and I am getting angry and frustrated. What did my textbook say about classroom management? How can I take over in the middle of the year in someone else's classroom?*

Whether you are a novice teacher or not, at some point or another you have been in this situation. The students are challenging you and you have to make a decision. Textbook training has more than prepared you to teach the students subject matter; however, it is just as important to be aware of how you teach students. Verbal communication between teacher and student is a valuable part of education, but not to be overlooked is the nonverbal component of communication that rounds out overall teacher/student interactions. Communication is the process which takes place between people that enables us to share knowledge, attitudes and skills. Although, frequently associated with speech, there is also a nonverbal facet of communication. Nonverbal communication is learned shortly after birth and practiced and refined throughout a person's lifetime. Children first learn nonverbal expression by watching and imitating.

Young children know far more than they can verbalize and generally rely heavily on adults' nonverbal cues. As children and later as adults, we practice nonverbal communication in our everyday lives. We engage in nonverbal communication when we verbally communicate. In fact, nonverbal communication is an ongoing interaction between humans before, during and after verbal communication has ceased.

Humans use nonverbal communication for a number of reasons. First, words have limitations in expressing direction, shape and personality. Secondly, a nonverbal signal is more powerful; often verbal messages deal with surroundings, whereas nonverbal messages convey inner expressions. For example, an individual may say something complimentary about a movie, but their nonverbal communication might identify the comment as sarcastic. Thirdly, nonverbal messages are more likely to be more genuine, based on the fact that nonverbal behaviors cannot be controlled as easily as spoken words. Lastly, a separate communication thread is necessary to help send complex messages; a speaker can add enormously to a verbal message through simple nonverbal signals. (Kansas State University, 2003)

Messages between teachers and students occur in classrooms every day. A teacher has the primary role as director of the classroom and students respond, whether positively or negatively, to the messages sent by the teacher. Every teacher wants to have student attention and focus during instruction. There are obvious ways to accomplish this task verbally, but there is an alternative in nonverbal communication. Teachers use nonverbal communication in their classrooms whether they realize it or not. It is important to harness this form of communication and use it for the teacher's benefit. For example, teachers who educate young children often cover content that has new

vocabulary. In order to help the students assimilate new language into their working vocabulary teachers need to help students connect to the language. Abstract concepts and ideas are hard to describe in words. Often words used to communicate these things can be overwhelming and complex. Ideas can be more clearly expressed when paired with nonverbal communication. For example, when describing acceleration, an individual could use words such as quickening, speed, hastening, hurry, increase of rate and they would suffice; however, pairing acceleration with a gesture to help explain the term, like a gradual motion of one's hand together that slaps the other and then takes off provides a simple visual example of acceleration and supports the verbal explanation. Nonverbal communication through gestures, sounds and signals enriches our curriculum and particularly supports visual learners.

The purpose of this study, then, is to observe, create and implement a specific teacher gesture plan that will help focus students, lessen transition time and increase understanding of teacher direction. My argument becomes that teachers who use nonverbal gestures in their everyday classroom routine are more effective in giving directions and refocusing class attention than teachers who do not use nonverbal gestures to engage the class. My argument will hopefully be supported by evidence gathered in the present study.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that teacher/student communication is the foundation of all educational learning. Communication in the classroom should be clear and concise so that it is beneficial to the student population. In the university setting, teacher training



frequently does not include learning the use of nonverbal cues. Most individuals in education pick up nonverbal communication ideas from observation of past teachers. Ideas about eye contact, gesticulations (gesture), paralanguage (pitch and tone), posture, clothing and overall facial expressions come from everyday experiences in our peer group. Yet, as teachers, we are not in everyday experiences with our peer group. We are held accountable for student learning with a high level of competency. Any resource that can assist in improving our teaching practices is a welcome one. Investigating the effects of nonverbal gestures on a student population with respect to the smoothness and efficiency of student transitions will be beneficial to practitioners.

### Key Terms

The word gesture is often used in a general or ambiguous way. This study would define gesture specifically in terms of its relation to human communication. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, the word gesture refers to: 1.) A motion of the limbs or body made to express or help express thought or to emphasize speech. 2.) The act of moving the limbs or body as an expression of thought or emphasis. In defining gesture, “limbs and body” include facial expressions; “limb and body” movement also include the sounds that occur with that movement. The term gesture is not in reference to a kind thought or advancement to express sympathy. The definition of gesture and its importance will become clearer as the review of the literature and methodology help develop the argument for nonverbal gesture and its place in the classroom environment.

## Organization of the Thesis

In Chapter One I have argued that nonverbal communication is a necessary component of teaching and learning, critical to the field of education. Chapter Two reviews the literature relevant to general nonverbal communication between humans; then it discusses research literature that supports nonverbal communication in the classroom and specifically nonverbal gestures used by teachers. Chapter Three describes the Research Setting and Design Methodology and context for the study, including limitations and boundaries of this particular action research. Chapter Four includes an analysis and discussion of the data collected in the current study. Chapter Five concludes with the findings and implications of this study as well as how these findings support the original questions posed.

## Chapter II

### Review of the Literature

Communication is a vast topic that includes several strains, one of which is nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is also broken up into several smaller areas of study. This chapter will begin with an overview of nonverbal communication, moving from general understandings to the classroom uses of this tool. This chapter will conclude with the specificity of nonverbal gestures used in a classroom setting with special needs students. This review of literature should help emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication and its place in schools.

#### Seven Areas of Nonverbal Communication

The importance of nonverbal communication is evident by the large number of wise old sayings that emphasize its status: “A picture is worth a thousand words,” “Your actions speak so loudly, I can’t hear what you are saying,” “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it,” “Actions speak louder than words,” and “First impressions are lasting impressions.” (White, 2000) According to White, nonverbal communication is categorized into seven areas: eye contact, posture, facial expressions, distance, touch, vocal intonation and gesticulations (gestures). These seven areas impact us in our surrounding world and will be discussed in the following review of the literature. We spend a lifetime reading people and their nonverbal behavior. As Gladis (1985) observes, we “read” others consciously, unconsciously and continuously. Nonverbal

communication is something that we cannot get away from; it uses any and all of our senses at any point during the day. That being said, it is logical that nonverbal communication would be a critical aspect of interpersonal communication in the classroom. If we consider the classroom as a microcosm of the real world, we might consider the idea that students spend their days reading their teacher. This “reading” of their teacher could be for several possibilities one, so that they know what is expected of the day ahead; two, so that they fully understand directions; and three, so that they do not miss social cues and warnings from the teacher. Many cues students use to make judgments about a teacher are obtained by observing the teacher’s nonverbal behavior. (Kansas State University, 2003) Additionally, educators and researchers have found that teachers’ nonverbal behaviors can elicit significantly greater student responses during lessons and classroom activities than their verbal behaviors alone. (Wang, Bernas and Eberhard, 2001) The following subsections discuss the seven aspects of nonverbal behavior that teachers should be aware of in the classroom setting.

### *Eye Contact*

It is important in any life situation to maintain the right amount of eye contact. Too much eye contact can make individuals uncomfortable, whereas too little eye contact can make individuals feel ignored. There exists a middle ground that educators need to find in order to nonverbally communicate to their students that they are being encouraged and listened to. Eye contact can nonverbally communicate to students a number of different emotions and expectations. Individual eye contact with each student throughout

a lesson will indicate attentiveness and enthusiasm on the teacher's part. Gladis (1985) cites that eye contact enhances listener comprehension and speaker credibility. A glance from a teacher can exhibit so many different emotions; for example, sustained eye contact can be evidence of approval, doubt, anger, disinterest and other emotions. Teachers' eyes can emit sympathy, laughter and displeasure. Everyone can remember an excellent teacher who could say more with bright eyes or an icy stare; words were not needed. (White, 2000)

### *Posture*

Posture helps convey an overall internal message from a distance. Before words are said one can read and predict the mood of an individual. Posture as well as eye contact is used to indicate attitudes, status, affective moods, approval, deception, warmth and other variables related to classroom interaction. (Kansas State University, 2003)

The greatest use for posture in the classroom environment is to indicate listening. Teachers often scan the room to select students who look like they are listening. The main indicator of an attentive listener is posture. Students read teacher posture as well; White (2000) noted that for a teacher to be an effective listener, he or she must have a relaxed and open posture. To reinforce the seriousness of a situation, as well as to indicate a need for undivided attention, teachers can square their shoulders to the student. This posture has also been shown to be conducive in channeling conversation towards decision making (White, 2000). While posture alone has no exact meaning it can greatly support or reject the spoken word.

## *Facial Expression*

The eyes, which have already been discussed, are often considered the most important facial means of nonverbal communication; however, all facial expression (i.e. frown, sneer and smile) can carry nonverbal meaning. Each part of the face sends a message to those viewing the whole face. The three different parts of facial expressions (facial appearance, facial cues and facial markers) are explained in the following excerpt:

The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” well describes the meaning of facial expression. Facial appearance including wrinkles, muscle tone, skin coloration, and eye color offers enduring cues that reveal information about age, sex, race, ethnic origin, and status. A less permanent second set of facial cues including length of hair, hairstyle, cleanliness, and facial hair relate to an individual’s idea of beauty. A third group of facial markers are momentary expressions that signal changes in the forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, cheeks, nose, lips, and the chin. Some facial expressions are readily visible, while others are fleeting. Both types can positively or negatively reinforce the spoken word and convey cues concerning emotions and attitudes. (Kansas State University, 2003)

These three types of facial nonverbal communication are all used in the classroom. The focus for this particular review however is the third type, facial markers. These momentary expressions, besides words, are the primary source for determining an individual’s internal feelings. Facial expressions involve some of the smallest body movements, but their impact in the classroom is powerful. The teacher communicates more whether intentionally or accidentally by his or her facial expressions than by any other means. (Kansas State University, 2003)

## *Distance*

Distance refers to the proximity of the speaker to the listener. There are four categories of distance according to Edward T. Hall (Kansas State University, 2003). The first, intimate distance, is that space from individuals literally touching up to eighteen

inches away from an individual. Secondly, personal distance encompasses anywhere from eighteen inches to four feet of space. Thirdly, is social distance that occurs when there is four to twelve feet between individuals. Fourth, is public distance, twelve feet and beyond where the speaker is then viewed in a more formal way. The main concern teachers should have with distance is that the message they send to their students will vary with subject material. In Gladis' view as teachers close the distance between themselves and students, the classroom climate becomes less sterile, more social, more personal and psychologically more intimate. A teacher may vary his or her distance as appropriate to subject matter; however, one should be aware of the message personal space conveys.

### *Touch*

In general, the meaning of touch depends on the situation, culture, sex and age. Touch is one of the strongest facets of body language. Human beings interpret meanings from a simple, single touch. Touch in the classroom has become a sort of taboo. Are teachers allowed to touch? When is too much touching? Legally there are cases concerning teachers that have physically over stepped boundaries and abused their position. All of that is a concern; however, there is research that supports limited amounts of teacher initiated touch. Kansas State University (2003) notes that for children in the lower primary grades, touch plays an important developmental role. It can communicate a sense of belonging, security, and understanding to the child. Conversely, when a teacher withholds touch, a child may feel isolated and rejected, which can lead to the acquisition of negative attitudes towards school. Touch is a nonverbal indicator of emotion and internal expression. The lightness, speed, effort and placement of touch all

emit different messages. When initiating touch, with the previous aspects in mind, teachers can appropriately and positively affect student learning. Gladis' (1985) concludes that effective teacher-student touch can tighten their bond, stimulate further communication and hence facilitate learning.

### *Vocal Intonation*

Vocal intonations or paralanguage (White, 2000), as it is sometimes called, includes such factors as volume, rate, pitch, tone and pronunciation. In order to be an effective speaker, one must create interest by the actual way one speaks. Studies show that variance in vocal technique of a speaker helps audiences retain more information. (Gladis, 1985) This is especially pertinent to teachers when lecturing or directing a group of students. Teachers can help students catch the excitement of a subject with the pitch of their voices. (White, 2000) Or they can emphasize the importance of subject matter by the volume and pronunciation of a word. Teachers use vocal intonations every day in their lessons and activities. This is a form of nonverbal behavior even though it is based on vocalization. A teacher could use the saying, "Class I would like your attention." She could say it softly to imply calm or she could say it loudly and quickly to imply a sense of urgency. A teacher could also use the same phrase in a sarcastic tone, which would imply annoyance and impatience. This nonverbal communication is not based on what you say, but how you say it.

### *Gesture*

Finally, and most importantly to this researcher, gesture and other large body movements are frequently indicators of self-confidence, energy, fatigue or status. (Kansas



State University, 2003) Gestures help underscore and punctuate the spoken word. Games like charades are indicators of how possible it is to convey messages without the spoken word. Large body movement like moving to a part of the room to indicate direction is considered gesture. Specific limb movement like the span of the arms to indicate shape or size is considered gesture. Smaller hand signals such as thumbs up is also considered gesture. Gestures serve an important function with regard to regulating the flow of conversation.

Gestures play a critical part in the classroom as they are used throughout the day even though instruction and training is not necessary. Teachers who effectively use gestures paint a picture, condense material and arouse interest in the students. According to Gladis (1985) drawing visual pictures with gestures enables students to “see” the point more clearly. Gestures can illustrate quickly and graphically how large or small an object is or its size in relationship to something else. With gestures, one can draw a figure, indicate temperature and underline emotion. (Gladis, 1985) Teachers can learn to harness the possibilities that gestures can provide to their students. The following excerpt explains tips for speakers using gestures:

Gladis (1985) found that there are several techniques for improving gesture in the classroom. Try to gesture with both arms and hands to embrace as much of the audience as you can. Keep your hands out in front working for you, not stuffed in your pockets. Hold lecture notes in your non-dominant hand. Make gestures in proportion to the size of the audience. The larger the audience the more sweeping and rigorous the gestures should be. (p 37)

Most individuals use natural nonverbal gestures in their everyday casual conversing; however, when conversing with a large group, an individual’s gestures can become unnatural or even lost. Teachers are often guilty of this. One on one talk with a

child allows for a certain amount of informality (Pedrosa, 1990) which may lead the instructor to use natural gestures. These natural gestures are not a distraction to whole class instruction, but they can help elaborate on the subject matter. White (2000) notes that gesture can reinforce teaching:

The president of a large East Coast consulting company emphasizes the importance of nonverbal cues this way: Raising his right hand, he touches his pointer finger to his thumb to form a circle, and then asks the new employees in the session to do likewise. When everyone has a finger thumb circle formed, the president tells them to touch that circle to their chin, but as he does he touches his own finger thumb circle to his cheek. What happens? You guessed it. About 80 percent of the group members follow what they see the president do (touching his cheek) rather than following what they hear ("touch your chin"). (White, 2000 p. 1)

This example illustrates that most individuals will physically follow a person in a leadership role. This also rings true for teachers. Students are in a subordinate role in school, they follow the lead of the teacher. Modes of body language, such as head gestures and hand movements are well known to have strong effects on interpersonal relationships, such as teacher to student. (Pedrosa, 1990) With time appropriate gestures, a teacher can accentuate any verbal instruction.

### Special Needs Students and Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can be especially beneficial when working with special needs students. More specifically, studies have shown that students with Mental Retardation (MR) and students who do not speak English as their first language (ESL) profit most from nonverbal forms of communication (Wang et al. 2001). In a study on understanding inarticulate students, Smith (2002) identified two different types of teacher

views on nonverbal communication. The first, deficit-oriented teachers, often perceive their students with developmental articulation issues and as lacking a basic understanding of the things going on around them. The second, competence-oriented teachers, perceive students as whole persons and teach with the student's strength in mind (Smith, 2002). An inarticulate student's strength may not lie in words, but in gestures. Assessment for these students, according to the competence-oriented teacher may allow the student to act out, point out or demonstrate agreement to correct answer choices. With regard to ESL students, teachers might demonstrate a respect for them by a willingness to use body language and gesture to convey meaning (Valadez, 2001). Using nonverbal gesture may help ESL students better assimilate into their surroundings and gather more information from the words used around them.

Wang et al. (2001) found that teachers' gestures used in classroom interactions are critical in maximizing the learning potential of students with special needs. The study discussed scaffolding as a way during class interactions that teachers support students by providing clues, demonstrations, encouragement and questions that are concordant with the children's capabilities. In this study gesture was broken up into four sub-categories: iconic, metaphoric, deictic and emblems.

Iconic bears a close relationship to the object or action described in the speech. Metaphoric present abstract concepts rather than concrete objects or events. Deictic is a pointing gesture that indicates an object or event. Emblems are conventional gestures that can be recognized by people from a community or a culture. (Wang et al. 2001)

Wang et al. (2001) concluded that teachers using these four forms of gesture in conjunction with verbal instruction in classroom activities better understood the cognitive levels of students with mental retardation. Further, student achievement, completion time

and on task focus all improved. The results of this study imply that when teachers increase their use of gestures in interacting with children with mental retardation, these children are more successful in everyday classroom activities and maximize their learning potential (Wang et al. 2001).

## Summary

All of the literature reviewed stated the positive effects of nonverbal communication. Teacher awareness and consistency in nonverbal communication is beneficial to the learning process. Of specific interest to this study is the information supporting nonverbal gesture and the benefits to special needs students. This is a study concerning gesture, which focuses heavily on emblems gesture, an agreed upon signal. My study will argue that emblems gesture is critical to teachers when communicating with both special needs students and the general student population.

## Chapter III

### Research Setting and Design Methodology

This study was completed during the final semester of my Master's of Science in Teaching program. This chapter provides a description of my placement and the individuals which I worked with. It describes the culture of the classroom and the elementary school where I completed the study, as well as a look at the district population and socioeconomic background. As a means of further investigating the facet of nonverbal communication, emblems gesture, my planned response is an action research study. As teacher-researcher, I monitored and practiced classroom routines during my first weeks at the school, so as to become part of the classroom culture. Based on the pre-study data collected about classroom routines with regards to efficiency, I then implemented a classroom intervention that I believed would benefit the class by using emblems gesture. After class agreement, practice and implementation, data was collected again. The three sources of data come from my teacher observation field journal, student surveys, and student emblems gesture suggestions. These sources are used to triangulate data and to determine possible strands of interest that resulted from emblems gesture implementation.

#### Research Setting

This study took place in Bush Glen Township, in southern New Jersey. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Bush Glen Township has a population of 28,967

people with 7,381 of those individuals of school age. (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) The research data was collected from a public elementary school during a graduate level clinical teaching field experience of sixteen weeks. The data collection took place between January and May of 2004, after I received the consent of Richardson University and of the cooperating school district.

The context of this study is a third grade classroom with 21 students. The proposed timeline for this study is an eight-week period. The study takes place in a third grade inclusive classroom, with ESL and basic skills students no other classified students are in the class. The average age of the students is eight years old. Typical physical development for this age group is refinement of gross motor skills, growing interest in games requiring coordination of muscles, and practicing skills for improvement in order to gain social status. Socially, these students demonstrate more self control and are typically interested in the welfare of the group. Emotionally, these third graders show the first signs of competitiveness. They also exhibit readiness to take on responsibility and have an increased attention span.

### Methodology Design

The pre-observation data collection took place over a three-week period during the beginning of my sixteen-week stay at Bush Glen. During the first week, anecdotal observations were conducted in order to determine in which subject the intervention plan should be implemented. During the following two weeks, pre-observation data collection focused on latency within that particular subject matter. The latency chart specifically studied the wait time between when the directive was given and how much time passed

before the students took action. The latency chart recorded the date, the verbal directive, the time elapsed and a description of the student behavior during the course of the recording. The purpose of collecting such data show how long it takes to accomplish a task in a particular subject and to test whether an emblems gesture would improve the effectiveness of direction giving in the classroom. After the three-week pre-observation data collection, an appropriate emblem gesture was chosen to implement in the classroom. The emblem gesture was strictly nonverbal and decided upon by the class. This gesture was discussed, agreed upon and practiced by the class community.

The gesture was implemented for three weeks by the researcher and coordinating teacher. After that time period the gesture was continually implemented by both adults and the researcher collected final data for the remaining five weeks of the study.

The research conducted for this study is qualitative, as described by Creswell (p. 154) in Research Design Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. This work was looked at qualitatively due to the subject matter (studying body gestures). Further, in this classroom research that consisted of only one class the numerical data became less important than the rich description of the student and teacher behaviors. Such information can be useful to research audiences. The process consisted of gathering a voluminous amount of data in a particular subject, taking it apart to interpret it, looking for commonalties and patterns and then finally emerging with a larger picture and connecting strands. Data collected for this study included pre, during and post anecdotal observations in a teacher-researcher journal, student surveys and latency records. The anecdotal observations took place throughout the eight weeks of my stay in third grade class environment. The anecdotal observation data assisted me in pinpointing areas of

the classroom culture that might require support. The latency recording data allowed me to better visualize what gesture would best work with the student population, whether it be a limb gesture, a full body placement signal or a teacher made sound. The latency chart was used to help me focus my attention on student behavior.

**Pre-Intervention Latency Chart**

Date	Verbal Directive	Time Elapsed between Directive and Desired Behavior	Number of Students Not Engaged in Desired Behavior	Description of Student Behavior

After the latency data was collected and analyzed, the intern and cooperating teacher implemented the gesture. The same form of data collection, anecdotal and latency was used after the implementation process to gather information on the emblem gesture. The two separate latency data collections were analyzed comparatively. The pre-implementation latency charts, which included verbal directives, were then compared



to the post implementation latency charts, which recorded both verbal and nonverbal directives.

Post Implementation Latency Chart

Date	Nonverbal Emblems Gesture (class selected)	Time Elapsed between Directive and Desired Behavior	Number of Students Not Engaged in Desired Behavior	Description of Student Behavior

Specifically, once the cooperating teacher and I decided to focus on transition behaviors, we met to discuss the implementation process. We discussed the need for improvement in transition behavior openly with the students. We gave several possible suggestions of emblem gestures and the students also contributed possibilities. Then the class voted on which one would work best for the community. After the voting process the teacher, students, and I practiced implementing the gesture. There were several trial

runs of the gesture to make sure that no changes needed to be made before committing to the class gesture.

### Limitations

This study's limitations stem from the fact that the population that was used for this study was assigned at random from my clinical field experience and not based on a need for nonverbal research. Another limitation during this research is that I also had several other responsibilities. I was completing my requirements in order meet all the expectations of her program in Masters of Science of Teaching. The largest limitation in this study seemed to be that a novice teacher (myself) conducted the educational research.

The data collected in this study while reliable in this particular third grade classroom is not generalizable to any other elementary education inclusion class. The data is valid with the understanding that it was collected in an uncontrolled environment. A typical classroom has several disruptions a day and each day is different. The data collected and the gestures implemented are valid during this time and with these twenty-one students in this third grade class.

## Chapter IV

### Data Analysis and Findings

As discussed in Chapter One, this study investigates whether teachers who use nonverbal gestures in their everyday classroom routine are more effective in giving directions and refocusing class attention than teachers who do not use nonverbal gestures to engage the class. This chapter will discuss what was found after the study was implemented.

#### First Days

During my initial days at Bush Glen Elementary School I was soaking up the culture that only comes in an elementary school: construction paper, paste, singing, bright colors and children's laughter. The students' energy was contagious; they were excited to have a new teacher and I was excited to be there. My cooperating teacher was also happy to have the extra help and laughed, "Anything after this class will be a cakewalk for you. You will get the most out of your student teaching experience here." After my first week I realized why. The students while fitting the mold of typical eight and nine year olds, socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically, had a particularly disruptive behavior as an entire class. They continuously talked over one another. The students not only talked while others were speaking, they verbally jumped over top of each other's sentences for attention.

*E.J.: I know the answer. It's five! It is divisible by five. Don't you hear me? She stole my answer. I knew it first.*

*Sam: Don't listen to E.J. The answer is five... Shut up E.J. you don't know what you are talking about.*

*Teacher: Yes, I already said the answer was five E.J. and Sam. What I wanted to know was the other part of the fact family.*

They appeared to have little respect for what their other classmates were saying. This contributed to students repeating answers that were just said by neighbors, asking the same questions over again and missing out on valuable information that we learn from our peers. The teacher and the students all seemed distracted and disturbed by this class behavior. At times, students and teacher would roll their eyes at others' verbalizations or let out a deep sigh or pound their desk with their fist when they could not hear.

Student chatter and lack of attention frequently carried over to or continued throughout a lesson. The teacher often had to raise her voice and threaten to take away recess time to get results from the students. Class noise levels seemed particularly high anytime the students were transitioning from one subject to the other. There was much confusion; the teacher had high expectations as to what the behavior should be, but realized low results. The threats and consequences for poor behavior were not agreed upon by the class and not consistently reinforced by the teacher.

*E.J., you need to settle down. I am not going to put up with this behavior. You need to control your mouth. We are waiting for you so we can go down to lunch. E.J. makes a funny face and other students laugh. One more time E.J. and you are with me for recess! E.J. shapes up in line, but now Chad makes the same funny face trying to get the same reaction from the class. Chad you owe me recess.*

E.J. was the one who was preventing total class attention. The teacher just wanted an immediate response from the students so they could continue with their day.

Chad just wanted to be liked by his peers. Due to the lack of class agreement on what attention looks like and when it should be given, scenarios such as this frequently took place.

Through the triangulation of data sources there has emerged three points of importance to classroom environment and communication for this particular study. First, students are aware of negative classroom communication and disruptions; however, they are not sure of how to problem solve these areas. Second, some students are aware of verbal and nonverbal teacher communication strategies in order to get class attention and they agree that class attention is important in a functioning classroom. Thirdly, signals can be beneficial to different communicators in a class setting; for example students who are uncomfortable verbally correcting their peers may be more likely to participate in a class community in such a role with the help of a class signal. The three following ideas will be covered chronologically (pre, during, and post) in the chapter ahead along with an analysis of the use of the class gesture in this setting.

#### Student Awareness of Negative Classroom Communication

Students seemed to be aware of how they communicate with each other in the classroom. The pre-assessment surveys (shown below) assisted the researcher in collecting data on student opinions about nonverbal communication. The survey also indicated student awareness of teacher use of nonverbal communication.

Pre-Assessment Survey

- 1.) How do you communicate with your friends, teachers and family?
- 2.) Can you communicate WITHOUT using words? How might you do this?
- 3.) What problems do you think might occur/happen if you could not use words or talk to express ideas?
- 4.) Can you think of an example when someone communicated to you without using his or her voice?
- 5.) How do you feel when someone communicates with you without using his or her voice?
- 6.) Think about our classroom. In what ways do we communicate to get one another's attention?

Questions four and five on the pre-assessment survey asked students to give examples of nonverbal communication in their lives.

*#4 My mom made an angry face. #5 I felt like she did not understand me.*

*#4 My mom used her finger to come here. #5 I felt unhappy.*

*#4 My mom pointed at me to come here. #5 I feel like I am in trouble.*

While showing competency in knowing that people can communicate without using verbalization, students did not show a high level of belief that people can understand one another without verbalization or that people used nonverbal communication in positive manner as noted by their answers.

The pre-assessment data also suggests that the students understand that excessive noise levels create classroom distractions, but they do not associate silent signals with positive interactions. This could be the reason the students do not use silent signals with each other or it just may be less natural. The survey answers for number six do indicate that the students are aware of their classroom noise levels and the way we attend to those noise distractions. Having observed this need for more structure in the classroom and

wanting to decrease the noise level and not add to it, I believed that minimizing the classroom distractions could be helped through emblems gesture or a silent signal.

At the conclusion of the study, field observations indicated that students did show a new awareness of their peers' verbal distractions. The class as a whole demonstrated a lower tolerance of wait time for their peers and their antics. Teacher field notes recorded a "shorter fuse that the class seemed to be operating on." Nevertheless the intervention did not achieve an improvement in efficiency of getting class attention; however, there did result a more acute student awareness of "who to blame" when class attention was disrupted. Although, this was not the intention of the study it is interesting that rather than problem solving by relying on the agreed upon class signal for attention, the students chose to verbally criticize those preventing class attention.

Question six on the survey asked the students how they communicate in the classroom setting. Sample student responses in reference to how they communicate with their peers follow:

*We yell.*

*We raise our voice.*

*We tell one another to be quiet.*

*We put our finger to our lips and SHHHH!*

This data led me to believe that the students' first inclination of communicating with one another is a negative one. The student responses represented different ways the children communicated with one another in a demeaning way.

## Teacher Communication Strategies: Verbal and Nonverbal

Question number six, the same as above, on the survey also asked the students to think about our classroom. In what ways do we communicate to get one another's attention? Some students interpreted this as meaning how we communicate with each other. Other students interpreted this question as how the teacher communicated with her students. The responses provide an interesting insight into ways students see and understand strategies that the teacher is using.

*She whispers.*

*She taps on someone's shoulder.*

*She holds up five fingers and says, "I'll wait."*

*She says, "SHHHH" in a mean way.*

*She uses her desk bell.*

*Teacher stands still.*

*She yells over voices.*

*Teacher shuts the lights out.*

The students' responses lead me to believe that these signals are being noticed, but they are not as effective as they could be. Since the students already have a working knowledge of the need for class attention, a more effective tool for getting class attention could be capitalized on. With this information I decided that the class should create a new class signal, emblems gesture.

But before I could create and implement a new emblems gesture program for this class, I needed to know what the students knew about nonverbal communication.

Question three on the pre-assessment survey provided pertinent information. Fifty



percent of the class suggested using sign language to communicate with people who could not speak; if the students did not specifically state using sign language, they wrote a description of using fingers and hands to spell out ideas and get a point across. Forty percent of the class suggested using facial expressions, more specifically a smile, eyes, and eyebrows; these students described communicating in showing people how you feel, such as happy, angry or surprised. And lastly, ten percent of the class suggested that you could write down what you wanted to communicate if you could not speak.

More related specifically to classroom behaviors, students stated that teachers get class attention by turning the lights off, by raising a hand, by using a bell on the teacher's desk, by putting one finger to their lips and by standing still with arms folded. These students' responses lead me to believe that these signals are being observed, but perhaps they are not big enough or understood and agreed upon by the class community.

Based on the student surveys, I asked the class to brainstorm and come up with possible class signals that we could use to improve class attention. Opening this discussion I cited three or four instances that illustrated inattention and disrespect.

*Teacher: Nick, do you remember when you were presenting your picture prompt on the car chase and the class continued to talk when you were ready in front of the room?*

*Nick: Yes.*

*Teacher: How did that make you feel?*

*Nick: Bad. Like no one wanted to hear my story. Like I wasn't even standing there.*

I asked these students to talk about how it made them feel to be ignored and what they would like to change. I shared personal experiences when the students had ignored me as

a teacher and my cooperating teacher did the same. Then, I posed the question, “Do we have a problem in our class with listening to one another?” The students agreed that we did and began to brainstorm strategies that we could use to make sure we have class attention before we speak.

Several suggestions emerged, verbal and nonverbal:

*Knocking on the wall*

*Yelling “Silence!”*

*Blowing a whistle*

*Yelling a chant, “We want, we want, quiet!”*

*Tapping a ruler on a desk*

I wrote all suggestions down on the board. Once we had exhausted ideas, I began to play devil’s advocate. To each suggestion I posed several questions.

*Could I use it during an assembly?*

*Will this disturb other classes?*

*Will everyone hear it?*

*Will this hurt if I have to do it more than once throughout the day?*

*Could we all do this signal or is it too complicated?*

Based on my questions to the ideas on the board I had the student who suggested the signal either validate the suggestion or give permission to throw out the idea if it didn’t pass the teacher questioning. The class narrowed the possible class gestures quickly as the students seems to be getting the point that the signal whatever it was going to be could not add to the classroom noise.

What remained at the end of our discussion were several gestures that included clapping our hands or stomping our feet. Despite my questioning the students came up with justifications for keeping these gestures. We narrowed the possibilities down to one clapping gesture and one stomping gesture. From there we took a class vote using written ballots. Students reasoning for using either gesture varied as indicated in the following chart:

#### Emblems Gesture Class Vote

Student	Gesture	Reason
1	Stomp & finger to lips	<i>Because when the students hear the teacher's feet stomp all the students will stop because all they will hear is "bing."</i>
2	Clapping pattern	A clap you can use it because it is your hand. You will listen only when the teacher does it.
3	Clapping pattern	Clap because you could use it wherever you go and you can't forget it. People will listen to it because you could do it very loud so they could hear it.
6	Stomp & finger to lips	I can use it and I will listen to it.
9	Stomp & finger to lips	I will listen to it.
10	Stomp & finger to lips	I will listen to it. I can use it.
11	Stomp & finger to lips	You can use your feet to get attention and people will listen to it.
15	Clapping pattern	Yes, I can use it and yes, I will listen to it.

Above is a representative listing of student responses. Not all students gave reasons for their votes as asked and five students were absent for this class vote; however, the students who did write down reasons for casting their vote showed a new consciousness of how a class signal could and should be effective. Several of the students referenced back to the teacher's devil's advocate questions. Final count showed

that seventy-five percent of the students voted for stomping, even though the teachers' votes were both for clapping. Consequently, the new class signal became two stomps and one finger to the lips.

Students then took turns trying out the signal and the teachers practiced it too. Then the floor was reopened to possible changes to the signal. One student said that the signal would be better if it was two stomps and then wave a hand over the persons head so that it was up high and people had a better chance of seeing the gesture from far away. We took another vote, with heads down and hands up. The signal was changed by seventy-five percent of the class vote. The new class signal was two stomps and a wave above the head.

At this point in the study the students seemed enthusiastic about using nonverbal communication to problem solve the class issue of group attention. The students seemed empowered by this new strategy and a new energy was flowing through the class.

*Thank you for all your great contributions to this new class project. Remember to use the signal to help out other classmates, not to tell them what to do. This way our class will have less yelling and less hurt feelings. Okay, let's line up for lunch.* Class quietly lines up as one student performs two stomps and a wave and we were quickly and quietly off to lunch.

Students enjoy being a part of planning or running things and often help make up class rules and consequences. This philosophy is based on the idea that if students create the rules then they will see the benefits in obeying them. This is also another way of helping students see that rules make the classroom a fair place function in. However, there is a backlash to having students create the rules; sometimes their inexperience leads them to making unwise choices. That is what I believe happened in this particular intervention. In giving the students total control over what signal to use I allowed them

to choose a signal that could be used aggressively. The two stomps and a wave when not responded to then turned into two stomps at or towards someone, which then turned to a verbal command to recognize the two stomps. All of this added up to noise and chaos. The silent signal too easily could become verbal with no consequences.

Unfortunately too, the honeymoon period did not last long. The signal was still used, but not with the same pride as the first day. The first day with the signal was the most effective day; from that point, I characterize my study as a slow down hill climb, steadily loosing effectiveness.

#### Communicator Roles in the Classroom Setting

During the first day I observed many uses of the emblems gesture (class signal). Students used it in small groups during the science lab experiment and again in the hallway when the students were walking back from lunch as a group. The teacher also used it when lining the students up for their next activity.

### Day One of Emblems Gesture

Date	Nonverbal Emblems Gesture (class selected)	Time Elapsed between Directive and Desired Behavior	Number of Students Not Engaged in Desired Behavior	Description of Student Behavior
3/17/04	Two stomps and a wave	34 seconds	4/21	Class attention to signal immediate for most
3/17/04	Two stomps and a wave	40 seconds	6/21	Response to hallway behavior and another teacher closing her door.
3/17/04	Two stomps and a wave	30 seconds	3/21	Students in classroom at science stations. Eager to hear directions.

During the next three weeks my cooperating teacher and I reminded the students of the gesture and used it ourselves. We used it when the students were doing small group activities to get whole class attention and we also used it during hallway movement. The successes were limited; frequently the students did not respond as quickly as we wanted them to, so a verbal reminder was used in addition to the class gesture. Field notes indicated that while students were using the gesture, the use was not effective enough to meet teacher expectations. *Not an effective use of the class signal today. I waited until students were too loud to hear it and it was useless. I hushed the students in the hallway for a quick response while walking past other classrooms.* (Field Notes, March 25, 2004)

However, there were small triumphs. Two of my shyest and soft-spoken students used the gesture when presenting to the class and most students responded. These students, typically not comfortable with peer confrontation, used the signal effectively and commanded a response from their peers. The gesture seemed to work best when

used by students or teachers that were five to six feet away from their intended audience; this would be considered the personal distance discussed previously. (Kansas State University, 2003)

At the end of the three weeks my cooperating teacher and I assessed the intervention and its use in the classroom. We both confessed that we were a little embarrassed stomping to get attention, especially in the hallway or at school wide events.

*It is not effective in certain shoes. I am embarrassed to do it, because I feel that the students won't respond to the signal. It hurts my knees.*

Collaboratively we agreed that the signal was not effective for us as teachers and that neither one of us really felt comfortable using the signal. We both confessed that at times we were so frustrated as teachers and offended by the students' lack of respect that we forgot to use the signal altogether.

*Today I presented the Batik Fabric project to the class. A fun activity that required a little explaining on the teacher's part. Students talked over instructions and missed important parts of the project. Time and effort were put into this activity. I was too frustrated and personally offended to remember to use the signal. (Field Notes, April 8, 2004)*

My cooperating teacher and I both agreed that gestures were a good idea; however, we would want to use something else as a silent signal for class attention.

We discussed going through a class intervention again with stricter guidelines so that the students would have to choose from more suitable gestures. We also discussed picking just a teacher gesture that would signal class attention. After discussing these possibilities we decided the original class signal would be best to stick with as the students did have ownership in creating it. We also decided that we would only revise the signal if we felt the students were also growing frustrated with it.

The signal did prove beneficial during a fire alarm. This was not a planned drill and the students could read the panic on the teachers' faces. As the students lined up at the door the line leader demonstrated the class signal and it was passed down the line until everyone received the message. The students were calm and quiet throughout the drill, with little need for reminders of correct fire alarm behavior. I found this particular display of the signal important in that it was student-correcting-student. It was effective and not bossy or demeaning to the other students. This is how I envisioned the signal being used in everyday activities.

I observed that without reminders to use the class signal its use and effectiveness broke down. The students did not show signs of frustration with the signal; they just found no purpose for it and stopped using it. The teachers also reverted back to using other signals such as shutting off the lights, or writing names on the board to take away recess that provided more effective results.

## Summary

This is not how I intended the study to end; however, there are key insights that I believe came out of this study. First, students *are* aware of negative classroom communication and disruptions; however, they are not sure of how to problem solve these areas. Second, some students are aware of verbal and nonverbal teacher communication strategies in order to get class attention and they agree that class attention is important in a functioning classroom. Thirdly, signals can be beneficial to different communicators in a class setting; for example students who are uncomfortable verbally correcting their peers may be more likely to participate in a class community in such a



role with the help of a class signal. A more detailed discussion of implications and possible improvements for the study are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion and Implications

In this chapter I will discuss the finding and implications of this study as well as how these findings support the original question: “Are teachers who use nonverbal gestures in their everyday classroom routine more effective in giving directions and refocusing class attention than teachers who do not use nonverbal gestures to engage the class?” The results of this study while not definitive do indicate that nonverbal gesture use does hold merit in the field of education.

#### What I Learned

The results of this study did not meet the expectations of the original question. Not only was the data was not concrete enough to make any determinations as to whether the emblems gesture helped create a more efficient classroom, the data collection tools that were used did not measure what was being argued. Nevertheless, the teacher journal and anecdotal observation notes provide insights into classroom culture and communication. And while efficiency was not proven by the use of emblems gesture, a definite impact was made on the classroom environment by gestures. This data led to clearer questions that require further investigation, for example, questions about student levels of tolerance for disruptions and matching student personalities with emblems gesture.

I learned that while nonverbal communication did not pique the interest of all students, it did reach some of the students. Students, who are shy or avoid confrontation, seemed empowered by the gesture strategy. This data led me to believe that more investigation on nonverbal social cues is worth investigating. Socially, some students may need to have a predetermined and agreed upon signal in order to communicate with peers until a comfort level is reached. Classroom wide nonverbal communication may help ease these students through awkward and confusing social situations, for example like presenting in front of the class.

I learned that it would help to pilot your research with the tools chosen to collect data. Research needs to be specific enough that a particular tool will measure the area being selected to study. The tools I chose for my study were not used to their full extent in the study's busy and active classroom.

As a first time researcher, I learned that a comfort level is necessary, without which data may possibly become skewed. Inexperience, nerves, shock, and feelings of being overwhelmed all combine and inhibit the beginning researcher; in my case, I found that novice teachers, especially student teachers, do not make the best researchers. If research is to be conducted in a scientific way, the researcher is to be accurate and as unbiased as possible so that precise results can be found. Take that mindset and put it into a third grade classroom mid-year that you are about to take over and teach. Not only are you about to take over where someone you do not know left off, but you are about to run a classroom where for the first time you are *not* the student. Collecting data while attempting classroom management, learning the curriculum, planning effective lessons and differentiating instruction was no minor task. Numerous times in my teacher journal

were remarks of frustration and lack of time for the research and data collection that I had set out originally to achieve. Although precision was the attempted goal, I can say with utmost certainty that it was not achieved to its potential.

### Implications of My Research

As stated in my review of the literature, studies have found that emblems gesture can be beneficial to special needs students and ESL students. In my study, although I did not specifically separate the data from my ESL students, I did observe the benefits of body language in general for those students. Acting things out, describing things with your hands, helping those students to really “see” what we are talking about immeasurably increases these students chances of success. Teachers can learn from my study simply by becoming more aware of body language and the importance of body motions in elementary school curriculums. Students frequently respond to enthusiastic body language, which helps with student attention. For example, students in my classroom responded better to and tested more accurately on vocabulary words that were acted it out in a game of charades than written as notes to take home and study.

Teachers also need to reach all their learners. This means finding a way to reach visual, kinesthetic, and tactile learners. Gestures and body language can be used as a tool for teaching, not just classroom management. This teaching method is not only beneficial for the general education classroom, but special needs students as well. Teachers can achieve this through modeling or having other students model the desired behavior or activity. By using gestures and encouraging students to use gesture, teachers can help bring clarity to the curriculum and effectively reach more learners.

### For Next Time

In retrospect, if I would do this study again, I would want to be strictly an observer. I think the data would be more precise and more on target with the original question if the researcher did not get personally involved with the study. In other words, I believe that if it is not “your kids”, the researcher can be more objective and have a clearer picture of the study.

I strongly believe in teacher research. Who better to collect data in a classroom environment than the teacher herself? Unfortunately, other factors play into being a teacher researcher. Number one, the teacher has to feel there is a need to conduct the research in the first place. My study was predetermined before I met my class and so it is unclear if this study on nonverbal communication really was a need in this classroom. Secondly, the teacher has to feel confident in her teaching abilities in order to balance the workload between educator and researcher. Lastly, the teacher researcher needs to feel that there is a level of flexibility in her research; if something is not working, she can change without worrying about time limitations. These three factors were not completely present during my research; if I could conduct the study again I would need to feel fully confident in these factors.

I would also be more specific as to when to use the emblems gesture for the class. I think it would be clearer to the students and easier for the researcher to study if the gesture were for a specific place and time throughout the school day. This would cut down on confusion and increase both student and teacher interest and momentum with the gesture.

### Closing Thoughts

In researching this topic of nonverbal communication between teachers and students, I seem to have created more questions than answers; however, the questions raised are clearer, points of interest than when I started this subject area. I feel more competent as a researcher as I have learned more about the process of creating a study. I am unsatisfied with the results of this study, but that only leads me to believe that there is more to learn and investigate about this topic in the classroom environment.

*Today is the last day of the study... eight weeks completed. Students did not use the signal today... however today was more of an open forum. I wanted the students to feel as though they could just say what was on their minds. Although the noise level did get out of hand, it was due to the excitement of the subject matter. Most students were respectful of each other... my impression was that they finally trusted me enough as a teacher that they knew I would get to them and their ideas eventually. Most students waited their turn and seemed genuinely interested in the other students' responses. (Teacher Journal, April 16, 2004)*

When I read this excerpt from my teacher journal, I feel heartened. It re-emphasizes the small successes that I did realize from my study. And it underscores the reality that a teacher relies most on her management skills when her students are disengaged. Grab the students' attention and appropriate classroom behavior follows. Plan innovative and exciting lessons to make the school day invigorating for the students and you as a teacher, *but* have reliable established signals that bring the students back down to where their behavior is acceptable.

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