

**Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists**

***Conveying Christianity to Grade School  
Children Through Nonverbal Activities  
and Communication***

by

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### **Introduction**

According to numerous research studies, during our entire lives, we have spent about 75 percent of each day engaged in communication. (Tubbs & Moss, 1987) Human communication is very important. It is the medium God employs in conveying His truth. Communication could even be called the heart of knowing, comprehending and learning. To prove the point, before anything is interpreted, understood or learned, and vice versa, communication must take place. Wherever we may be, whether we like it or not, we communicate whenever we are in contact with man, God or even animals. John Wenburg (1985) says, "When we are in interpersonal contact with another person, everything we do or do not do communicates... we are always communicating (pp. 99, 100).

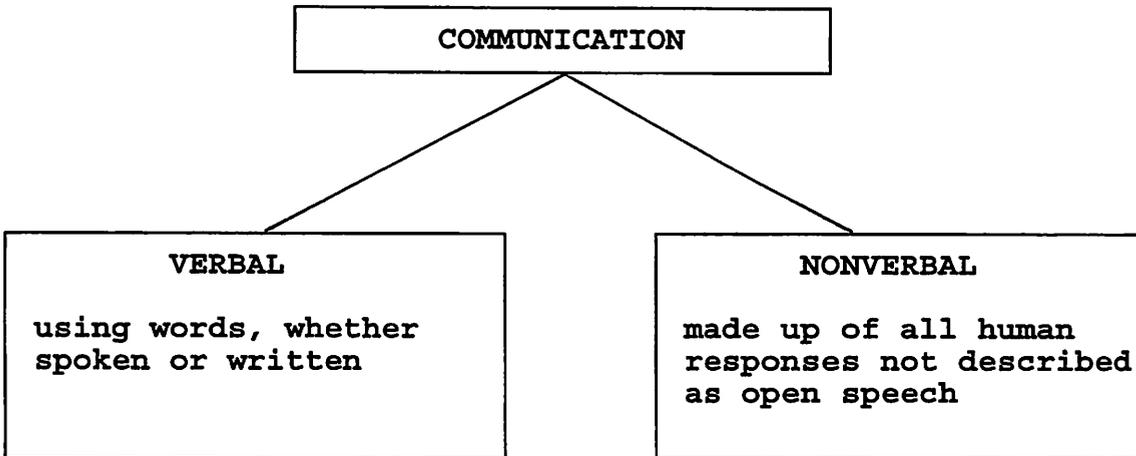
This paper focuses on a type of communication called nonverbal as a means of conveying Christianity to grade school children in the school setting. It intends to underscore the role nonverbal communication plays in teaching and imparting values to the pupils by way of modeling and academic activities. The paper aims to present the effect of nonverbal connections in relation to faith and learning. Nonverbal activities such as viewing pictures, working on manipulatives, ocular examination of animate and inanimate objects need inculcation of faith. Likewise, the influences of nonverbal transmittal such as facial expressions, body language, gestures, and others in learning and cultivation of faith of the pupils will also be tackled.

### **Definitions of Communication**

According to Bedwell, Hunt, Touzel, and Wiseman (1991), communication is a process, not a set of isolated events. The Random House Dictionary defines it thus, "to express thoughts, feeling, or information easily or

effectively; an indirect or gradual transmission." Simply, communication involves a sender, a meaningful message, and a language with which to send the message. (Bedwell, et al.)

Communication has two broad categories--verbal and nonverbal:



### The Meaning of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

When we are in the company of other people, self is always presented. This is a process that is carried out either verbally or nonverbally. (Villard and Whipple 1976) Moreover, both are usually operational as a person sends and receives messages. (Verderber, 1987) Robinson (1977) quotes researchers Archer and Akert as saying, "in general, people are perceived much more accurately when visual information is available as well as purely verbal messages," concurring with Verderber's thought.

For further understanding, let us look at the meaning of verbal and nonverbal communication and how they are carried out.

### Verbal Communication

Generally, authors of communication books define verbal communication as words or verbal symbols that come to us one at a time. Sequentially,

we hear the spoken words, and see the printed or written words. Spoken words begin and stop from the mouth. (Verderber, 1987)

Tubbs and Moss (1987) define it better by classifying verbal communication into two categories, namely, verbal/vocal communication, which refers to communication through the spoken word and verbal/nonvocal communication which means words are involved but no speaking takes place. Saying to somebody, "It is nice to meet you," is verbal/vocal communication, while writing him the same message is verbal/nonvocal. Interestingly, verbal presentation is the most obvious mode of self-communication.

In school, verbal instruction is widely used as a common means of imparting knowledge to the students. The teachers either vocally or nonvocally teach the lesson. Basically, when communicating concepts, values, and even faith to people, the communicator may need the aid of verbal contact. Paul in his letter to the Romans verifies the above statement saying,

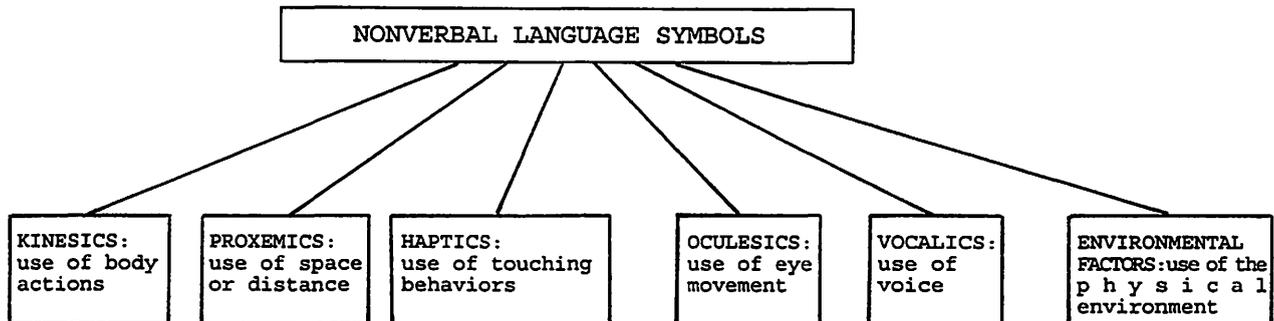
But before people can trust in the Lord for help, they must believe Him. And before they can believe in the Lord, they must hear about Him. And for them to hear about the Lord, someone must tell them (Romans 10:14, New Century Version).

### Nonverbal Communication

If verbal communication is consciously performed, nonverbal communication is unconsciously done. Nonverbal communication is communication without words. It is continuous, taking place as long as a person is in another's presence; it is multi-channeled, expressed through the five senses. Touching, gestures, postures, facial expressions, eye contact, spatial arrangement, odors, clothing, pictures, dance, architecture and design are ways by which nonverbal communication takes place.

James P. Engei in his book, "Getting Your Message Across," enumerates twelve ways to communicate. Significantly, nine out of the twelve are nonverbal cues. McCroskey's diagram below shows the types of nonverbal

symbols that may benefit classroom teachers (cited in Bedwell, et al., 1991, p. 78):



Several possible relationships are suggested between nonverbal and verbal messages. Deetz and Stevenson (1986, p. 67) quotes Knapp who says "nonverbal messages often *repeat* verbal messages, e.g., when people point while giving the directions. Nonverbal messages may *complement* the verbal, reinforcing the feeling expressed. Nonverbal messages may also *substitute* for verbal ones as in frowning rather than saying you are unhappy. It can *regulate* verbal interaction, for example, looking at the person to encourage them to talk."

Forsdale (1974) quotes Professor Ray Birdwhistell, a leading scholar in the field of communication who estimated that "about 65 percent of our signals to one another in face situations are nonverbal ones. Only about 35 percent of our signals are verbal." Accordingly, nonverbal communication should never be discounted when it comes to everyday instruction, whether inside or outside the classroom. A classroom teacher spends almost the whole day with his students. Whatever he communicates nonverbally could greatly affect the learning process and the cultivation of faith in his students.

### **Nonverbal Communication and Culture**

In an international school setting like ours where students come from different countries, breakdown in verbal and nonverbal communication is always expected. Focusing on nonverbal, the cause of a breakdown may be

culturally related. In listening alone, three possibilities should be considered when students look down while the teacher speaks: boredom, embarrassment, or respect--depending on the culture of the student. (Condon & Yousef, 1987)

In America, the students show respect to their teachers by making eye contact with them while they are talking. However, in Jamaica, the same action is a sign of disrespect. Asian students would seldom disagree with their teachers, but not the western students, who are bold to disagree. (Samovar & Porter, 1991) To the Japanese, smiling at a stranger, especially a girl, is impolite. In other cultures, smiling at a non-acquaintance may give a negative connotation.

Students in the classroom are not homogeneous in many aspects, more so in their beliefs, values, and world views. As always mentioned in this write-up, the teacher as a model is presenting himself louder in his manners, disposition, behavior, and the like than in his actual words. No matter how sound these nonverbal cues are, the enemy is always there to attempt a distortion of, and to jam the circuit of communication.

Mack (1991) believes that oftentimes nonverbal communication is misunderstood. Even God is also misunderstood many times when He sends messages to us. Nevertheless, He does not stop there. He makes sure that He is understood sooner or later.

When we, feeble as we are, are misunderstood by our students, we should use other means as the Lord would, to break the barrier of communication between us and our students. This is when we could use verbal communication to clarify the situation.

### **Nonverbal Communication in the Classroom**

An axiom of communication states that "one cannot not communicate." (Howard, 1979, p. 101) This axiom acknowledges the fact that communication is not by words alone but also by gestures, behavior,

expressions of face and eyes, touch and others. Some writers include a person's height, race, color, and physique.

Lewis and Page (1974) (cited in Myers and Myers, 1976) found a definite relationship between nonverbal messages and the kind of learning which takes place in the classroom. The study revealed that students develop confidence in the teacher's honesty and authenticity by observing nonverbal cues. In cases where students possess verbal inadequacy, have a learning disability, or are culturally disadvantaged, the same students rely even more heavily on nonverbal communication in the classroom. They expect to get "clarification of verbal material by watching the nonverbal systems," as well as establish a teacher's credibility by means of what he communicates nonverbally. This study reveals, therefore, the importance of nonverbal communication and the way we conduct it in our classrooms.

When you give a nod, it may mean approval or in agreement with. A pat on the back may mean a job well done. A hug signals an expression of joy, love or excitement. Spacing, or the speaking distance, also communicates a message to someone we are speaking to.

We also communicate with our facial expressions. Our frowns, smiles, smirks, pouts, worried, angry or fearful facial expressions, all convey a message. (Mack, 1991) The way one dresses and carries himself or herself also communicates. Ellen G. White (1943) emphasizes the need for teachers to exemplify the Christian character in dress, in deportment and in their ways in order to reveal that they are under the wise discipline of the Master Teacher.

The saying, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day" stresses the fact that people prefer to see consistent exemplified values over verbally communicated values. Psychologists Mischel and Liebert conducted a study in which two groups of children were placed in game situations with an adult. Each child had to determine a level or standard of performance by which he or she would abide. In one of the groups, the supervising adult was inconsistent,

displaying leniency in front of the children. In the other group, the supervising adult remained steadfast to the standard set, both in words and actions. The results of the study revealed that as long as the adults were present, the behavior of the kids in the two groups did not differ. They continued to adhere to the standard the adult had imposed. However, when the children were left alone, many of those who had observed the inconsistent adult lowered their standards. But none of those taught by the consistent adult lowered theirs. (Fraenkel, 1977)

### The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Conveying Christianity

Nonverbal information should stand alongside verbal influences. (Galloway, 1976) Likewise, there should be consistency between verbal and nonverbal communication. Negreli and Miguel (Christ in the Classroom, Vol 2, 1988) recall how their lives were affected by the silent language and good influences of many of their teachers. They also cited how they were affected by teachers whose behaviors were contrary to Christian virtues.

A nonverbal message can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional nonverbal messages are messages we want to transmit. Unintentional nonverbal messages are those aspects of our behavior over which we have no control. (Tubbs & Moss, 1987) John Wenburg (1985, p. 103) cites an example:

While attending a seminar, a student disagreed with the professor's point of view. The disagreement became heated: since he couldn't "cool it," the student said, "I guess you just don't want me to disagree with you." The professor with a red face and in a very loud disagreeable voice said, "I want you to disagree." The verbal and nonverbal messages were clearly contradictory.

In such a setting as cited above, the message verbally expressed is contrary to what is non-verbally expressed. Values spoken but not seen in the

life may not be transmitted. Thus, teachers communication behaviors play a big part in conveying values to the learner. Teachers deportment and personality cast an influence that could not be undervalued. In the training of young minds, it is imperative that teachers should have Christian deportment. Cadwallader (1988, p. 299) in advising Adventist administrators in the choice of teachers states,

It follows from the nature of the case, that teachers in an institution of Christian education should be consecrated, highly moral, and principled persons. If criteria were to be set up for screening out applicants for a post in a denominational school, the teachers' spiritual qualifications would be first in importance.

To achieve the goal of integration of faith and learning, the students in a Christian school should distinctly see and feel in their mentors "that the principle of all truth is God's truth means not only words but also deeds." (Gaebelein, 1968, p. 35) If teachers make the Bible the center of their lives and live by its precepts, their world views become so steeped in God's word that whatever they communicate could effect transformation of the students' lives and world views. The best visual aid which Jesus used everyday wherever He went and whatever He was engaged in was Himself. Likewise, the teacher and his life become the most important visual aid to young minds. White (1943, p. 191) admonishes us "connect with God and by doing so, it will be felt and seen by the children we minister to."

### The Role of Nonverbal Language in Discipline

Gaebelein (1968, p. 91) further stresses the role of the silent language in the school: "The acid test of a Christian school ... is its handling of discipline. The manner in which an erring student is dealt with speaks volumes about the one who deals with him." Christ's *look* of compassion and loving concern for the salvation of sinners who have been in contact with Him, caused a complete transformation in their lives. A genuine concern for an

erring pupil can be felt and sensed by the student because actions and behavior communicate.

When a student breaks a school rule and suffers the consequence of it, does our move show empathy and let him feel that he is still accepted as part of the group? When a hug is shared at the time of or even after the commission of the offense, the offender may not only realize his blunder but perceive Christ-like forgiveness and acceptance. As observed, it is interesting to note that "chimpanzees in the jungles come together and physically embrace each other when they perceive an outside threat. Chimpanzees, as well as men, naturally transmit comfort, consolation, and a feeling of security through touch." (Robinson, 1978, p. 31) The way a teacher reacts to one who has erred will influence, whether for good or bad, that pupil's future life. It may draw him to the Master Teacher, or drive him farther away.

### **The Use of Nonverbal Activities in the Integration of Faith and Learning**

Christ, the Master Teacher, employed various techniques in His teachings and presentations of principles and values. The materials He used were not as sophisticated, but they were attractive and meaningful. Christ engaged His students in numerous activities, a few of which are often applied by committed Christian teachers particularly at the elementary level.

#### The Use of Visual Aids

On one occasion, Jesus called the attention of His disciples to the birds and the flowers to teach them the lesson of implicit trust in God and His love. He said, "consider the ravens for they neither sow nor reap... God feedeth them. How much more are you better than the fowls... Consider the lilies how they grow... (Luke 12:24, 27). Whether His approach to a lesson be inductive or deductive, He always used concrete visual aids and saw to it that the lesson imparted was crystal clear to His hearers.

Elder Milton Thorman once asked, "Do your pupils see God in your bulletin board displays?" I believe he did not mean only hanging or posting pictures of Jesus in the classroom, but rather, using various ways for children to sense God's attributes even within the confines of the classroom. A committed school master will extend his bulletin board display from his or her classroom to the classroom of Jesus--nature. Ellen White (1923) counsels,

Children should be encouraged to search out in nature the objects that illustrates Bible teachings and to trace in the Bible the similarities drawn from nature... They may learn to hear His voice in the song of the birds, in the sighing of the trees, in the rolling thunder, and in the music of the sea.. (p. 120).

### The Use of Manipulatives

When God created man, He did not create man in the same way he did the plants, animals and the whole creation. Instead, He formed the man, Adam, out of the dust. Did He do it only for the sake of art? Perhaps so. However, I believe that He must have felt love beyond description when He was performing this act of the creation of man.

Working on manipulatives as an activity in school has a dual purpose: to develop the children's psychomotor skills, and to reinforce the acquired lesson. The enemy with his cunning mind invented manipulatives that destroy instead of build. It is sad to note than some of these manipulatives such as playing cards, brick games and even computer games, are infiltrating Christian schools.

## **Strategies and Applications**

### Nonverbal Activities

Citing passages, stories or examples from the Bible does not necessarily constitute integration of faith in teaching. How may teachers in a Christian grade school integrate faith in their non-verbal activities such as art

work, visual aids and working on manipulatives? Planning and administering these kinds of activities take effort, commitment, dedication and much prayer. The following are some suggestions on the use of nonverbal activities in the attempt to draw the pupils closer to the Master Teacher.

**Visual aids.** Bring the students out of the classroom into the midst of nature. Give them time to capture and reflect on the theme of the lesson presented earlier in the classroom. Let them perceive through their senses the lessons of nature. It is always best to present them God's creation and work first than man's work.

When using pictures, with the aid of verbal communication, stimulate their imaginative mind by eliciting thought-provoking questions from pictures shown to them. Help them to dwell upon the truths of God's Word, and apply biblical precepts presented to them in their lives.

**Art Work.** Using modeling clay, integrate the creative power of God as they role-play it through this type of manipulative. As they put expression to their drawings or paintings of sceneries and objects, guide them to see some of God's attributes in their art work.

As we help them discriminate contrasting colors, we could explain to them that God doesn't regard the color of the skin, and that He loves us equally, whatever our race or our station in life.

While introducing the different shapes and sizes of objects, we may infuse present life's realities: with God, man could have unity amidst diversity.

**Manipulatives.** Expose and train the pupils to manual skills like gardening, wood working and other similar activities. Share the Christian values espoused in such activities.

One activity which has a great impact on grade children is a science lesson dealing with seed growth. As they plant the seed in different mediums, they are led to conclude that God is omnipotent. When they watch a chrysalis turn into a beautiful butterfly, they glean gems from the lesson of the glorious resurrection.

As the children help in the making of a terrarium, do not only aim to develop their creative or artistic skills, but also impart the spiritual concepts and lessons of creation to their young minds by employing verbal cues.

Let your cooking classes provide great opportunities for students to conceive the important lessons that Jesus is the Bread of Life, that the effects of seasoning is like unto the changes the Holy Spirit brings to one's life.

### Nonverbal Communication

As pointed out earlier, nonverbal communication involves gestures, body movements, physical appearance, dress and so on. How an educator behaves and acts serves as an example to the students. Such examples influence and affect their lives. Jesus understood the power of nonverbal influence when He, the Creator of the universe, the long-awaited, but unrecognized and rejected Messiah, the Rabbi and leader of the twelve disciples, exemplified true humility by washing His disciples feet, including the feet of the one who betrayed Him. His action was an eloquent sermon on humility.

Small deeds done out of genuine concern, like tying the shoe lace of a small grade one pupil, helping him comb his unruly hair, helping him put on his raincoat and boots, putting a dressing on a knee wounded during playtime, may seem too insignificant to be noticed by a child. But such kind deeds will never go unnoticed. To cite an example, my Christian view of servanthood and humility was reinforced by the small deeds exhibited by Dr. Enrique Becera during the time he was with us in this Twelfth Faith and Learning Seminar. I noticed him offering his seat to anyone who came late. He would always take the initiative of doing odd jobs like erasing the board without passing it to another member of the team. The doer may not be aware of how his actions affect others, but actions always speak.

Christianity lived and practiced is always transmitted. In a classroom where student and teacher interaction takes place almost one-third of the day, the effect of nonverbal communication should be recognized and valued. Ellen White (1943) says of teachers, "they should be refined in manner, neat in dress, careful in all their habits; and they should have that true Christian courtesy that wins confidence and respect. The teacher should be himself what he wishes his students to become." If he wants his students to be refined in character, he should be. If he wants his students to live by principles, he should also be principled.

To summarize this section, let me share with you this parable from the book "Christ and the Fine Arts" written by Amos R. Wells, a Protestant writer:

A Sunday-school teacher was dreaming. You say there is nothing strange about that. Teachers often dream and sometimes their dreams are nightmares. But this dream was different in that it contained the Lord Jesus. He was standing before his dreaming teacher with His arms outstretched, and an eager look in His eyes. "Where are the souls of My children?" He asked the teacher. "Here are their bodies," the teacher was able to reply. "They come to school very regularly and promptly." Jesus took their bodies in His hands, and lo! they turned to dust before the teacher's eyes.

"Where are the *souls* of My children?" Christ insisted. "Here are their manners," faltered the teacher. "They are quiet and very respectful; they listen very carefully. Indeed, they are beautifully behaved." Jesus took their manners, and they also turned to ashes in His hands.

Again the Lord repeated His question, "Where are the *souls* of My children?" "I can give you their brains," the teacher answered. "They can name all the books of the Bible, forward and backward; they can repeat the list of the Hebrew kings. They know in order the seventy events in Your life here on earth; and they can recite the Sermon on the Mount from

beginning to end. Really, they are excellent scholars." Jesus took their brains, and lo! they dissolved into vapor and a puff of wind blew them away.

"But where are the SOULS of My children?" urges the Master, with sorrowful longing.

Then the teacher was filled with agony that broke the bonds of slumber. "Alas!" cried the teacher, "I have done much for my children; but it is all as nothing, because I have not done the ONE THING needful. Henceforth my teaching, though it traverse many ways, shall have the ONE GOAL, and perhaps it will be given me to dream that dream again."

### **Conclusion**

The conveying of Christianity to the pupils in school is not solely the use of verbal communication by a Christian teacher. He realizes that the use of nonverbal language is an even more effective tool to achieve his goal.

Through consistent exemplary deeds and demeanor, his pupils are influenced to good and likely drawn to the Master Teacher. The attention he devotes to each pupil is well caught. "In the elementary grades, the most powerful reinforcer is the teacher's attention. Every nod, grin and small word of approval--every interaction, whether negative, or positive--is affecting a child's behavior. The teacher is one of the most significant people in the child's life" (Sprick, 1981, p. 3).

The nonverbal classroom activities directed to the inculcation of faith create a meaningful impact on the lives of the school children. As they manipulate objects using their tactile and other sensory perception, precious gems of truth are impressed in their hearts.

A hug, a touch, or a word of encouragement along with prayer, given to an offender in school makes him realize his mistakes and sense a feeling of being accepted and forgiven in spite of the offense committed.

This is a big challenge presented to the Christian teacher in this end-time period.

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