

# Valuing Nonverbal Communication In Order To Include Children With SEN In Mainstream Education

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## Abstract

Taking into account the fact that in the current education the emphasis is on verbal communication, while the nonverbal language occupies a secondary role, but also that the tendency to integrate children with special educational needs in mainstream education is observed, this article wants to emphasize the need to combine the two forms of communication, in order to streamline the communicative act and the understanding of the message, but also to transmit positive behaviours including to facilitate the inclusion of children with special educational needs. In this article we present our research in the field of early education whose results have shown that nonverbal elements streamline communication with students with SEN, facilitating their integration in mainstream kindergartens. The main conclusions of the research showed that the conscious, intentional use of nonverbal elements produces positive effects on didactic communication, increasing the level of attention of pre-schoolers.

**Keywords:** nonverbal communication, special educational needs, didactic communication, educational methods, educational message

**JEL Classification:** I20, I29

## 1. Introduction

"Without communication it is beyond possible to live." – Socrates. This is what Mihai Dinu said (2014, p. 12) in the work *Communication. Fundamental landmarks*. We understand, therefore,

that a condition of human existence can be communication itself, since it represents one of the most natural activities specific to both humans and animals, an activity carried out even before birth. Communication is the action of talking to someone, communication is also represented by the internet or television, the spread of information, but also hairdressing, clothing, smile and the list goes on and on.

Human communication takes many forms. In this work we mention three forms of communication: verbal communication, paraverbal communication and nonverbal communication, although some authors consider that the elements of paraverbal language can be included in nonverbal communication.

If in verbal communication the information is transmitted through the articulated language, the nonverbal communication has a wider scope of coverage and designates the intentional or unintentional modification of the bodily elements. Thus, it is manifested through gestures, gaze, attire, proxemic, factors of special importance for the adult man, who can subjectively interpret the message according to these factors. We can say about nonverbal communication that it is inevitable in the sense that we cannot totally mask our feelings and thoughts that can be observed on a physical level, but also omnipresent, because it always accompanies verbal language and can totally change the meaning of the message. For example, the word "ready" can signify both the expression of a man who has reached the end of patience and the actual conclusion of a task, of an activity, the meaning changing depending on the tone with which that word is spoken.

In the didactic communication, the nonverbal side indicates the real mental state of the participants in the educational act, so that, following the nonverbal elements, we can intuit the level of attention, the degree of interest and involvement in the didactic communication, both from the students and from the teachers. Through the effective use of nonverbal communication (smiles, signs of approval, gestures symbolizing obedience, etc.) the teacher can change the educational climate, increase the students' attention level, having as a response a positive feedback from them.

Salome (2003, p. 57) emphasized in the work *Mommy, Daddy, do you hear me?* the importance of the smile, especially if it is used as a "way of calming and stimulating", stating that: "our smile, like that of the child is (...) a sign of well-being, a confirmation and stimulation of the receptors. The smile opens the doors to the reception." Most of the times, the nonverbal

competence of the teachers is the fruit of a hard work, it involves effort in finding a suitable variant for the word, gesture, silence, space, or time.

In the preschool environment, nonverbal communication has a higher incidence than in primary and secondary school, because the receptors of the educational message are young children who have not yet developed the verbal side of communication. The more the current tendency is to include in mainstream schools and kindergartens children with special educational needs, either in groups of two to three or individually, the more we must value in classes nonverbal communication, which is easier to receive, since it is more expressive than the word itself. Let's not forget that body language develops before verbal language (a small child can point the finger at an object, before he can say the name of that object).

According to UNESCO (1995) there are 7 categories of "special educational requirements": learning difficulties/disabilities, mental retardation/deficiency/severe learning difficulties, language disorders (disorders), physical/motor impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments as well as emotional (affective) and behavioural disorders.

Lately, the phrase "special educational needs" is often used in a broader sense, referring also to "children at risk" (children belonging to minority ethnic groups, street children, sick children, delinquent children, children who grow up in disadvantaged environments).

Seeing this wide range of elements that can generate special educational requirements, we realize that in almost every class of students there are a few who can fall into this category. As a result, our task is to include them among the other children as well, giving them equal opportunities in education. Without appearing discriminatory, or that we favour this category of children with special educational needs, we can increase the efficiency of the educational act in the classroom by valuing nonverbal communication, without eliminating verbal communication, but by combining both forms.

## **2. Research methodology**

Starting from the premise that nonverbal language can increase the efficiency of didactic communication in preschool education, because the subjects who receive the instructive-educational message are young children with special needs who do not yet master the verbal language, we establish the purpose, hypotheses, and objectives of our research.

## 2.1. Purpose, Assumptions and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to establish whether the teachers value the nonverbal communication in the educational act in kindergartens; to investigate how teachers nonverbally express their emotions; to discover the gestures most often used by the teachers, and the effects they produce on the children, in order to determine whether they make the educational act more efficient or not.

In order to achieve the intended goal, we formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The more expressive the nonverbal communication of the teachers, the higher the level of attention of the children.

Hypothesis 2. If educators combine verbal and nonverbal communication, then didactic communication is more effective.

In order to verify the assumptions, we formulate the following objectives:

O1: Identify the gestures most often used by the teacher in the teaching approach and determine the extent to which they increase the level of attention of the children with SEN.

O2: Determining the extent to which the use of nonverbal communication contributes to the efficiency of didactic communication.

## 2.2. Research squad

In order to follow the objectives and to verify the formulated hypotheses, we included in the research a number of 22 children aged between 4, 5 and 6 years who attend the Kindergarten with extended program no.5 Mizil. The 22 children under investigation come from the large group, a group in which I carry out my activity as a teacher. The group consists of 12 girls and 10 boys.

We also included in the research a group of 351 teachers, who participated in the research by completing a questionnaire addressed by digital means.

## 2.3. Methods and tools

In this paper we use the questionnaire method and the observation method. Through the questionnaire method, we set out to find out the teachers' opinions on the extent to which the use

of nonverbal communication can streamline didactic communication and increase the level of attention in pre-schoolers with special needs.

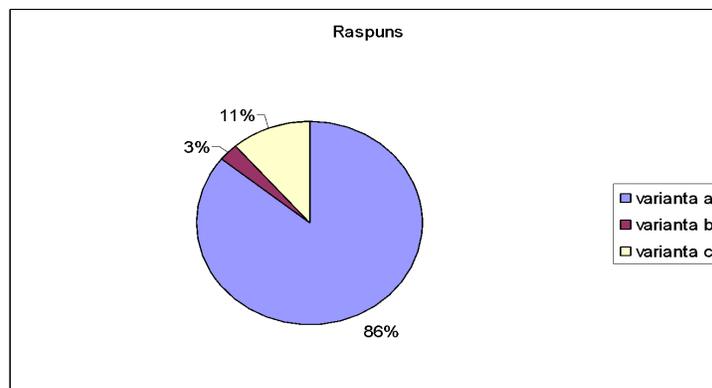
Through the observation method, we set out to observe if when reading a story using paraverbal and nonverbal parameters, the level of attention in pre-schoolers increases, and if inexpressive reading generates inattention boredom among children with SEN.

The tool used is the "Questionnaire on nonverbal communication of educators". This questionnaire aims to identify the types of gestures that predominate in the teaching activity. We chose to use this tool because of the economic and applicative advantages: it is completed quickly and easily, it collects a large amount of information in a short time, it facilitates the statistical analysis of the data, it does not disturb the subject in the elaboration of the answers. The tool used in the research is an observation grid built by us on the basis of theoretical information relevant to the field of nonverbal communication.

### 3. Analysis and interpretation of data

#### Results of the questionnaire

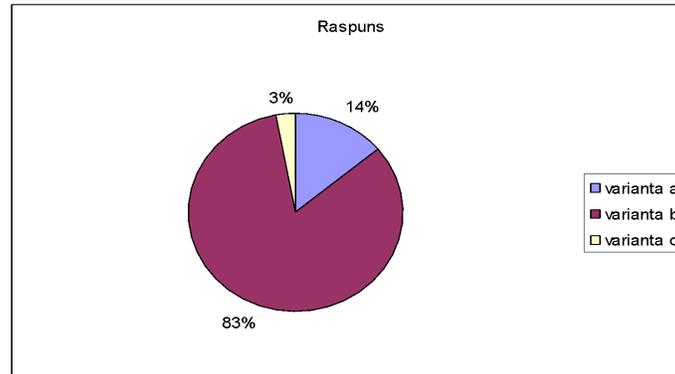
To the question "Do you consider that in pre-school education it is advisable to use...", we received the following answers: 30 teachers chose the *option c* - "both forms of communication in equal measure"-, 4 teachers chose the *option a* - "mostly verbal communication"-, 1 teacher chose *option b* - "mainly nonverbal communication".



**Fig. 1.** The use of forms of communication in pre-school education

I believe that most teachers have chosen *option c*, because it is not only possible to communicate verbally or only nonverbally, but we must combine both variants, the preponderance of one or the other being given by the circumstances.

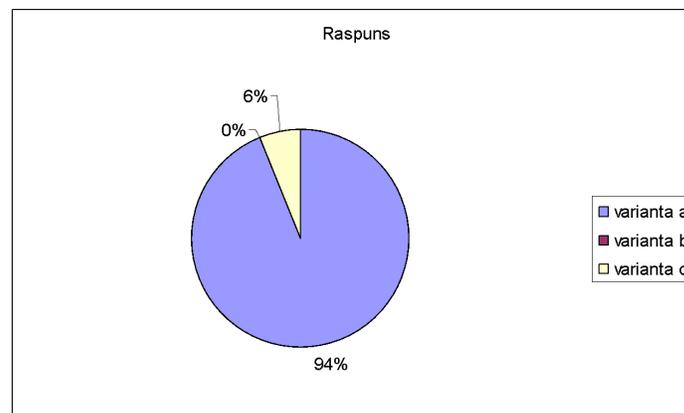
To the question "What do you think it happens when the verbal message is accompanied by nonverbal elements (mimicry, gestures, intonation)?", we received the following answers: 29 teachers chose the *answer c* ("increase the level of attention in children"), 5 have chosen the *variant a* ("the message is more easily received"), 1 educator has chosen the *option b* ("the receptivity of the children to the message is not changed").



**Fig. 2.** Possible reactions to nonverbal parameters

The teachers claim that they have noticed how the SEN children's attention is higher when they send them a verbal message accompanied by proper mimicry and gestures.

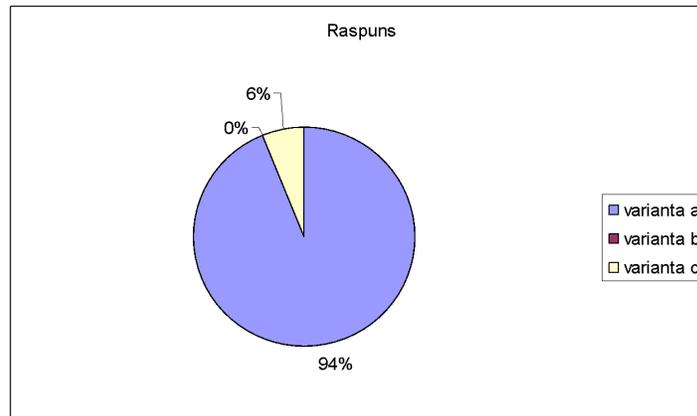
To the question "If we combine verbal communication with nonverbal communication, can the efficiency of didactic communication increase?", we received the following answers: 33 teachers chose the *option a* - "yes, the content can be more easily understood"-, 2 teachers chose the *option c* - "I do not know"-, 0 have chosen the *variant b* - "no".



**Fig. 3.** Nonverbal parameters and message retention

Most teachers responded that it may be that the effectiveness of didactic communication can increase when verbal communication is combined with nonverbal communication.

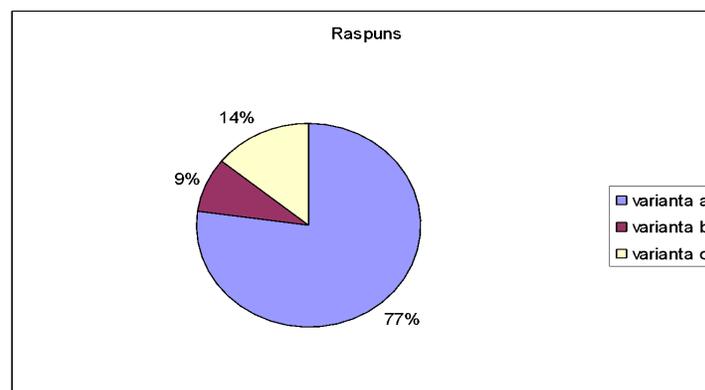
To the question: "If during the teaching discourse, the words are accompanied by specific gestures illustrating the meaning of the words, can the retention of the message be facilitated?" the following answers were given: 33 teachers chose the *option a* ("yes"), 2 teachers chose the *option c* ("I do not know"), 0 have chosen the *variant b* ("no").



**Fig. 4.** Gestures and their effects on message retention

Most teachers have found that when words are accompanied by gestures illustrating their meaning, it is facilitated to retain the message, in the sense that a child can better understand the notion of "Circle", for example, when we show it through gestures.

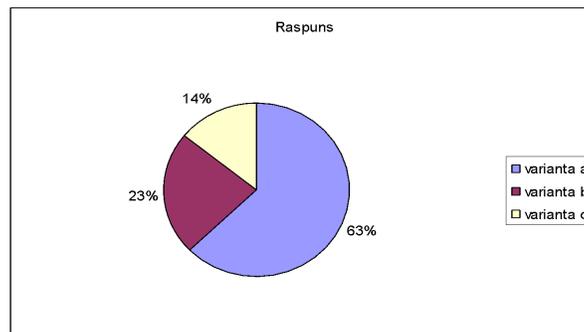
To the question "Have you noticed that the students are more careful when you speak to them using a different tone and intonation than usual?" the following answers were given: 27 teachers chose the *option a* ("yes"), 5 teachers chose the *option c* ("I do not know"), 3 chose *variant b* ("no").



**Fig. 5.** The change in tone and the effects produced on the attention of pre-schoolers

Most teachers have chosen the *option a*, which means that they have noticed that when communicating expressively with the help of paralinguistic elements, the students' attention is higher.

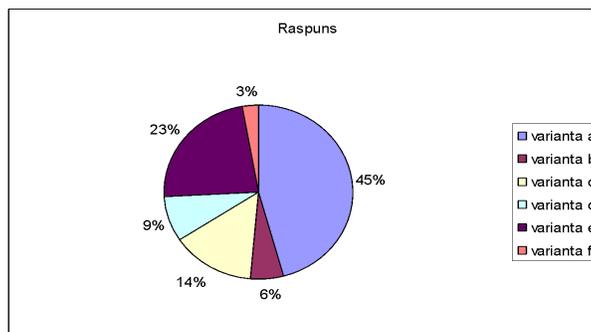
To the question "If during a reading of the teacher missing the elements of paralinguistic (intonation, adequate rhythm, moderate tone), but also an adequate mimicry, it is possible for the students to get bored, to become inattentive?", we received the following answers: 22 teachers chose the *option a* ("yes"), 5 teachers chose the *option c* ("I do not know"), 8 chose *variant b* ("no").



**Fig. 6.** Lack of paraverbal elements and generation of a state of boredom

Most of the teachers considered that when communication is monotonous, devoid of paraverbal and nonverbal elements, children risk becoming inattentive.

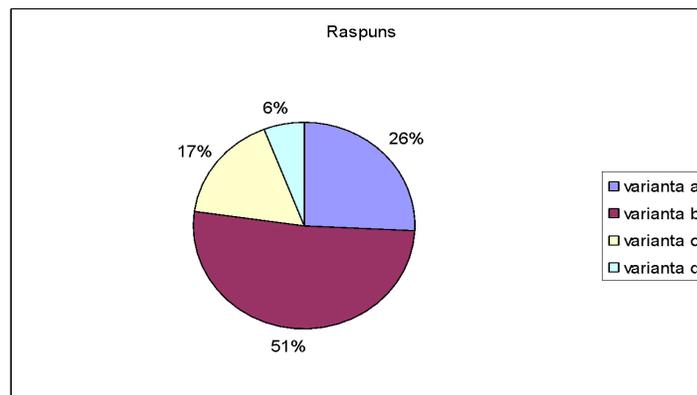
To the question "What gestures do you use to capture the attention of a careless child?", the following answers were received: 16 teachers chose the *option a* ("beat with the palm of the table"), 2 teachers chose *option b* ("knock on the leg"), 5 teachers chose the *option c* ("I move towards him"), 3 teachers chose the *option d* ("I fix it with my eyes"), 8 teachers chose the *option e* ("I'm in a hurry and I raise the tone"), 1 teacher chose the *variant f* ("other - whistle-as its own response").



**Fig. 7.** Variants of nonverbal elements used by educators

The most common gesture of capturing attention is "to clap, or another object in the chair". This gesture may indicate the teacher's despair when the gesture has a high frequency, or it can betray boredom when the gesture has a very low frequency.

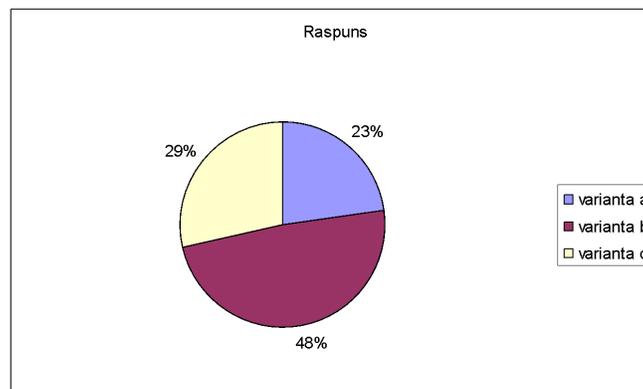
To the question "When you want to appoint a child to answer the questions, how do you proceed?", we received the following answers: 9 teachers chose *option a* ("I call it and indicate it with my finger"), 18 teachers chose *option b* ("I call it and I fix it with my eyes"), 6 teachers chose *option c* ("I call it and approve it by the movement of the head"), 2 teachers chose *variant d* ("I call it without using any gesture").



**Fig. 8.** Variants of appointing pre-schoolers to respond by nonverbal means

Most of the teachers choose to name the student and fix it with their eyes, this gesture being a discreet one, which does not bother, unlike the finger indication, which can intimidate the child in question.

To the question "During teaching communication, how often do you move around class?", the answers were: 8 teachers chose *option a* ("I often move through the classroom"), 17 teachers chose *option b* ("I move only if necessary"), 10 teachers chose *option c* ("I do not move at all").



**Fig. 9.** Frequency of movement through the classroom

The teacher's movements through the classroom can keep the students' attention, preventing them from talking, moving, or finding another concern, but excessive movement can lead to fatigue, to dizziness because the students follow the teacher with their eyes. Even more so at an early age, the teacher is always fixed by the children's eyes, so the teachers' movement must be limited, when a child finds another occupation or discusses with his colleagues.

With the help of **questions 2.**"What do you think happens when the verbal message is accompanied by nonverbal elements (mimicry, gestures, intonation)?", **5.**"Have you noticed that the students are more careful when you speak to them using a different tone and intonation than usual?", and **6.**"If during a reading of the teacher the elements of paralanguage (intonation, adequate rhythm, moderate tone) are missing, but also an adequate mimicry, can it be that the students get bored, become inattentive?", we managed to confirm the first hypothesis of the research, in the sense that most teachers have found that when they use elements of nonverbal communication (mimic, gestures), but also elements of paralanguage (intonation, tone), the language becomes more expressive, which leads to increased attention.

From the answers to **questions 3.**"If we combine verbal communication with nonverbal communication, can didactic communication increase the effectiveness of didactic communication?", and **4.**"If during the teaching discourse, the words are accompanied by specific gestures illustrating the meaning of the words, can the retention of the message be facilitated?", we found that most of the teachers consider that the combination of verbal communication with nonverbal communication leads to the efficiency of didactic communication and implicitly facilitates the retention of information, thus confirming the second hypothesis of the research.

### **The results of the observation**

The observation was made in the natural framework of activity of the pre-schoolers, respectively the classroom where children with SEN are also integrated. The children were seated in a semicircle as for any classical activity, and they listened to a story read by the teacher specific to their age. During the activity we eliminated the disruptive factors that could have interrupted the observation. The chosen story was a known one, for the preschool level: "The Three Little Pigs". Before the actual observation, I had discussions with the teacher in which she agreed to use at the beginning of the activity as many nonverbal elements as possible such as intonation, gestures,

glances, mimicry, etc. and then to reduce to a minimum threshold the expressiveness, reading without using nonverbal elements, in a moderate tone but without intonation, without mimicry, gestures etc. During the reading, as a researcher, I recorded data in the observation sheet that concerned reactions of the children.

Crt No.	The nonverbal element used by the educators	Reactions of pre-schoolers	The level of attention of pre-schoolers		
			Low (Sporadic focus)	Medium (systematic focus)	High (continuous focus)
1.	Gestures: Indicates the characters with the forefinger. Intonation is expressive.	They look to the teachers and the illustrated material	1 of 22 kids 5%	3 of 22 kids 14%	18 of 22 kids 81%
2.	Gestures: Use her hands to illustrate the size/shape of objects in the story. Intonation and tone are frequently changed.	They also mimic the teacher's gestures. OBS: The V.D. child also raises his hands, imitating the teacher	2 of 22 kids 9%	3 of 22 kids 14%	17 of 22 kids 77%
3.	Mimic: it is appropriate to the text: Raises the eyebrows mimicking the amazement, the mouth is semi-open, the eyes wide open. The intonation, the rhythm of speech, the tone varies depending on the text.	The children look to the teachers. OBS: 4 children get up from their chair showing amazement;	0 of 22 kids 0%	1 of 22 kids 5%	21 of 22 kids 95%
4.	Proxemic: The teacher moves easily, imitating the gait of the wolf; Paralanguage accompanies oral communication.	Children imitate withdrawal, sticking their backs to the stool.	1 of 22 kids 5%	1 of 22 kids 5%	20 of 22 kids 95%
5.	Haptic: The teacher gently touches the children's head. Frequent alternations of paralanguage.	Children smile. Notice: The C.M. child squeezes the teacher's hand to his chest, smiling.	2 of 22 kids 9%	2 of 22 kids 9%	18 of 22 kids 82%

6.	Observation: The teacher looks at the children directly. The teacher gives expressiveness to communication through the paraverbal elements used.	The children listen to the teacher, watching her too with their eyes.	3 of 22 kids 14%	2 of 22 kids 9%	17 of 22 kids 77%
7.	The teacher limits the nonverbal elements. Read monotonously, without sketching gestures, glances, mimic, pimp or haptic. Paraverbal elements are missing.	Children become restless, move on chairs, talk to each other. Obs.: Children B.L, U.R, I.A get up and start playing around the classroom.	12 of 22 kids 55%	8 of 22 kids 36%	2 of 22 kids 9%

**Table 1.** Summary of the results recorded by the method of observation

When reading the story "The Three Little Pigs" was done with a particularly accentuated intonation, an alternating rhythm depending on the content and a higher tone, using illustrative gestures, a medium distance and a mimicry corresponding to the text, the attention of kids was higher, but after the way of expression changed, the reading was monotonous, without expressiveness, without any nonverbal element, the SEN children's attention decreased, as they became agitated or bored.

In the final of activity, the conclusions were drawn. As a result of this observation, we found that: at the beginning, when the reading was accompanied by a high expressiveness, the level of attention of the SEN children was increased, so that in the first 3 minutes absolutely all the children were with their eyes fixed on the teacher, listening with interest to the story. After 3 minutes of inexpressive reading, the children's attention level reached a minimum, so that about 90% of the SEN children had a different concern than listening to the story, although the story was at its climax, when the action reached its maximum intensity, which should have attracted their attention.

Conclusion of the observation: reading a text, regardless of its content, must be expressive in order to keep the audience's attention. Thus, the first hypothesis of the research is confirmed: *The more expressive the nonverbal communication of the teachers, the higher the level of attention of the SEN children.*

#### 4. Conclusions of the research

The results of our research confirm the validity of the aforementioned hypotheses, from which we understand that the nonverbal elements (we include here the paraverbal ones) make the didactic communication more efficient in the sense that when the words are accompanied by gestures that are seen, the understanding of the transmitted content is facilitated.

If, for example, we say the word "big" without being accompanied by a gesture that illustrates (gestures the illustrators- Ekman and Friesen, 1969, apud Mărgărițoiu, 2013), it is possible that a student who does not hear very well, will not understand. When the word "great", for example, is accompanied by illustrative gestures (by the distance of the hands), then it can also understand the one who does not hear very well.

These statements come in addition to the data that emerged from the questionnaire addressed to the teachers, from where we found out that 94% of those surveyed have noticed, have noticed throughout their career that the message they have sent is easier to receive if the verbal language is accompanied by nonverbal elements, thus confirming the second hypothesis.

Regarding the first hypothesis, 77% of the interviewed teachers agreed that the level of attention in children is increased when the didactic communication also contains nonverbal elements. We can also add to these results the mention that the teachers, through the attire, posture, mimicry, gestures used transmit to the students their mental state, from which we conclude that the nonverbal communication betrays the inner thoughts of the professor.

So, if when we communicate with students, through nonverbal it conveys boredom, disinterest, then of course our students will not look at us with attention or interest either. But when we communicate a message to them using a mimicry that indicates wonder, a serious tone, a faster pace, then the students will also look at us with interest and attention.

I believe that the present research is useful to teachers, who must be aware of the fact that nonverbal language is present in our daily lives, and therefore also in our professional life, and transmits equally with verbal language, information to our students. In the communication relationship, people show through gestures as well as words their attitude towards those with whom they communicate. The child acquires the gestural culture from an early age.

Mimicry and gestures determine success or failure in communication, in achieving goals, in its own contentment. Children have their own gestural language, specific to the expression of feelings. It has been shown that by receiving positive gestures, the child, through imitation, learns to carry positive feelings to those around him. For this reason, it becomes important to use nonverbal communication in kindergarten, in its most constructive sense, since the child is transmitted certain comportments expressed nonverbally that can soothe the degree of acceptance of children with special needs, without marginalizing them.

If each teacher valued nonverbal communication, he would be concerned with the expressiveness of didactic communication, he could cultivate partnership relationships and would make communication an attractive one that would persist interest and capture the attention of all categories of students, even those with special educational needs.

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