

# NON VIOLENT COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATION: TWO ACCOUNTS

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and  
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## Lesley Bond writes

I first encountered elements of Non Violent Communication (NVC) through the Newham Conflict and Change Project which was coming into our school to train students as peer mediators. Some time later, the same organisation was involved in hosting a Marshall Rosenberg workshop at Newham Town Hall, which was well attended by people from all over London. I was very impressed by what I heard that day and by the reactions of workshop participants, some of whom were moved to tears by their introduction to compassionate communication. However, it wasn't until I experienced its power for myself that I really became committed to this approach.

What happened was that I had embarked upon a course of higher education, the director of which I experienced as a bully. She had spoken to me publicly in a way that I found humiliating so I decided I had a choice: I could either ignore it and hope that things would improve, or I could confront her behaviour. Ruling out the former because experience had shown that things would not improve, I was then faced with the frightening prospect of the latter. Gratefully

turning to the four components of NVC: 'When I hear...I feel...because I need...so would you be willing...' I worked out what I needed to say and how I was going to express it. I practised this and the structure gave me the confidence to express what I wanted to say at my next meeting with the director. At first her face was like thunder, but as she heard what I had to say, her expression relaxed and she smiled broadly. From that moment on, our relationship was transformed and I felt close to her in a way that would have been unimaginable a short time before.

More recently I have used it successfully in my relationship with my son whose dedication to his art involves playing music very loudly late at night. After I had expressed my unhappiness about this, he explained how frustrating he found it trying to achieve the high quality he wanted, all the time aware that his music was an annoyance to other people in the house. This meant that he cut corners and produced an end result that did not do him justice. Really empathising with this, I used the four components to let him know that I understood how very frustrating this must be for him. We had a fruitful discussion, looking creatively at ways in which we could both get our needs met.

In the secondary school where I work as a counsellor, I have incorporated NVC into assertiveness training courses. I am quite honest about the fact that I am a learner myself and openly share with the students my mistakes in using or failing to use the process. This gives them the confidence to try it out and not to feel bad if they don't always get it right. I tell them that it takes time to develop the skill and the important thing is to practice and be kind to yourself when you make mistakes. At the beginning of each session we gave examples of when we had used it during the previous week and what the outcome had been. The results

were often very positive and empowering for the students who were further encouraged by the group's spontaneous applause upon hearing of NVC successes.

I believe that this approach has the potential to transform schools by changing the relationships between people. It can do this by providing a safe linguistic container for powerful and difficult feelings. In a recent values assessment carried out in the school, what emerged clearly was that not only did people consistently express a desire to move towards more relationship oriented values, but they specifically pinpointed their longing for greater respect which is something that NVC is perfectly equipped to deliver.

Bullying and 'cussing' amongst young people are perennial problems in schools, whilst difficult interchanges between staff and students can also lead to a huge waste of time, energy and goodwill. There are many reasons why bullying and indiscipline are so common in schools but there is one connection that is rarely made between the two: it seems fairly obvious that in a compulsory and hierarchical education system, students will rebel at their lack of autonomy and, when punished, will take out their anger on other young people. Obligated to enforce a statutory education service, teachers often resort to coercion, praise, punishment and reward. These methods can appear to be pretty successful in terms of achieving academic results and enforcing reasonable behaviour, but they fail to take into account the factors that motivate people truly to co-operate, and to grow as human beings.

'We all pay dearly when people respond to our values and needs, not out of a desire to give from the heart, but out of fear, guilt, or shame. Sooner or later, we will experience the consequences of diminished goodwill on the part of those who comply with our values out of a sense of either external or internal

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coercion. They, too, pay emotionally, for they are likely to feel resentment and decreased self-esteem when they respond to us out of fear, guilt, or shame. Furthermore, each time others associate us in their minds with any of those feelings, we decrease the likelihood of their responding compassionately to our needs and values in the future.'

(Marshall Rosenberg)

As mentioned earlier, NVC can be seen as a linguistic container for powerful feelings, but it is much more than that; it is based on respect and compassion for ourselves and others and can be demonstrated both non-verbally and through listening and empathy. These last two skills are key to the whole approach; many of the problems which arise

in the lives of young people are to do with their feeling that others are not listening to them. Recently a young man told me how he had been watching television in his father's room when his dad walked in and told him to put the headphones on. The boy asked why this was necessary and was told, 'Because that's the rule.' He complained that this wasn't a satisfactory reason, whereupon his father started shouting at him, leading to an altercation which ended with the boy telling his father to 'Get lost.' When he told his mother what had happened, she explained that she and her husband wanted headphones to be worn in their room as they wanted a place of peace and quiet in their often quite noisy house. In addition, they did not want the neighbours to be disturbed. When he heard this, the boy said, 'Well, if he'd just said that, I would have understood.' In NVC terms, the boy had been feeling puzzled because he needed information, whereas the father had been feeling annoyed because he needed peace. Unhappily, neither of them had had their needs met in this interchange.

This sort of failure to meet on the level of feelings and needs happens all the time in schools and leads to untold amounts of unnecessary suffering. It is difficult for teachers to move on from well-tried systems that work up to a point, to a process which is relatively untried but potentially transformative. There may be an understandable fear that to get into the region of feelings and needs is to make oneself vulnerable and open oneself to being seen as weak. Nothing could be further from the truth; it is widely recognised that some of the best teachers are those who are most genuine with the children. Some people may fear that anarchy will ensue if young people are given choices, but on the whole, they respond to respect with respect. What is vital is that requests are just that – requests – not demands. Two of our deepest needs

are for appreciation and autonomy and when these are valued and lived through the NVC process, mutual understanding, co-operation and trust can be established.

## Robin Shohet writes

I first came across NVC three years ago when I met its founder Marshall Rosenberg. I liked him and was impressed with how many conflict situations in the world he had gone into and how, quite quickly, he had been able to have all parties express their needs to each other and end their conflict.

NVC is based on the recognition that human needs are not in conflict with each other; only strategies can be in conflict. Through ensuring that both parties hear and connect fully with each other's needs, the idea is to find strategies that would meet as many of those needs as possible for all parties involved.

I wondered whether NVC would be a useful tool in schools, whether it could be applied.

I wondered if it could help teachers to listen to the needs of pupils behind their antisocial behaviour, and enable both parties to express their needs rather than simply trying to control each other. I also wanted to explore how this method could be of use in helping to reduce stress.

However, I think it is very challenging. As Miki Kashtan, an NVC trainer, writes:

NVC consciousness shift is at odds with the assumptions on which most of our schools and social institutions are built.....The collective belief that human beings must be controlled and punished leads us to create institutions that constrain, control and manipulate people. It predisposes us to create educational systems like the ones we have at present where control, discipline, reward and

punishment are the norm, and where choice, spontaneity, curiosity and inquiry are frowned upon.

Strong words. He goes on to describe reactions of teachers on an introductory workshop. They say,

'NVC is wonderful and I can see how much it can enhance my personal life, but there's no way you can possibly apply this in school. My students need structure and discipline. Without it they'll never make it in a culture they don't know. If I let go of rules and negotiate with them about every little thing, they won't be able to function.'

Another teacher said

'Trying to develop mutual relationships will open up a can of worms for me. The high school students I teach have been told what to do and how to do it for years. If I invite them to talk about their

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feelings and to engage in learning because they want to, not because they have to, they won't learn anything at all.'

And another:

'My principal will never go for it. He's very formal and can't stand any talk of feelings.'

So even though all those quoted liked NVC, it was difficult for them to imagine applying it in schools. We are encountering a real challenge to the way we look at the world - a challenge to such core beliefs as 'human beings are not self directing and need punishment, control and reward to learn.' The trouble is that these beliefs become self fulfilling. Once we have been repressed, when we are offered freedom, we will not know easily how to use it, and may well be tempted to exploit it, which reinforces the belief that we should never have been given it in the first place. Once more the status quo reigns, as the experiment is terminated with a reinforcement of the idea that human beings are not to be trusted.

The question Kashtan asks is how do we learn the art of dialogue when we are primed to respond to relationships by imposing our needs or giving up on them as soon as conflict exists or seems to be brewing?

It seems quite hard to be in touch with our needs as it makes us feel vulnerable. We could get laughed at, rejected, refused for having them. So we resort to manipulation, control without even realising that we are trying to protect ourselves. And we back this up with logic. 'Children will never be able to function otherwise.' 'Feelings are an indulgence.' 'You have to live in the real world.' Some of these beliefs and rationalisations are so core to us and institutionally reinforced, that we are considered mad, woolly, flakey, if we don't adopt them, even though they do not serve us.

On humanitarian grounds alone I believe NVC would be worth doing. However, indications are that pupils achieve more or at least just as much. Somehow we have created an either/or polarity - either we pay attention to students' needs, or to the curriculum. I think both are possible.

In an earlier article in this edition a teacher who had given out leaflets for the students to take home found them lying on the floor. Rather than blaming the students for their thoughtlessness, she explained that clearing them up meant that she had less time with her family which she really wanted. It never happened again. It was far more effective to express her need than to resort to sanctions.

I looked up NVC on the website and found someone who was using it extensively in her school. In fact this school was founded on NVC principles. I was so impressed that I went to interview Marianne Gothlin in Stockholm. What follows is a combination of an article she has written and our interview.

What concerned her was not to teach the way she was taught. Almost all of us have been through the school system, just as we have all had parents. In spite of our best intentions, it is harder to break the patterns we have inherited. In fact Marianne found this. Rather than teach it to the children, her and her staff had to 'be it' themselves first. The teachers had to put NVC into practice rather than teach it as a technique. She had assumed she was just going to teach it.

'We did not set out formally to teach children NVC, nor did we set out to teach children compassion, because how can you do that? We teachers agreed that what was important was to live the consciousness of NVC.

Along the way they encountered a group of students who used this method as a way of defying the teachers. The teachers set about trying to understand the needs behind the

'no' that the students expressed and saw it as an important step for them. The students were exercising their power of choice to see if they would still be respected.

It is not only the children who have to unlearn. Parents and teachers, and probably most adults, do too. How many of us as parents with just two children have resorted to trying to exercise power? How much more difficult it must be with a group of thirty where the norms are such that 'power over' seems the only way. Teachers or parents of bosses - how do we get to the point where we do not protect ourselves but be willing to share and be open?

Perhaps the most important point that Marianne said was NVC was not something you added which took up time. It gives meaning to the time you already have. *It is a way of looking at the world.* The cry will go up that all this will take more time. Marianne said that there were already meetings - now they had become more alive. The time is now made use of better. I found this working with appreciative inquiry at Brampton where the topics of meetings came up. The school now has a positive observer to watch if they are slipping into negativity who will bring them back to the positive which will be more efficient.

Behind some simple techniques are some basic assumptions that initially might be quite difficult to take on board, such as human beings will naturally want to support each other. She found that people would ask for help or supervision spontaneously when they were able to connect to their needs, and know that these needs would be respected.

She said that part of the process was mourning her own schooling - that she did not have this for herself. Some of her ideas seemed very similar to appreciative inquiry where we focus on the positive as an attitude of mind, and to Circle Time where we build on the idea that children and adults will naturally cooperate given the right circumstances. She said that she was concerned how much we forget to be human when we become goal orientated.

The model of education that seems to run us is one of a machine where efficiency is the aim. League tables seem to be driving this need for a product. As this model is, in fact, very inefficient, we may need to look at why we are so attached to it. Certainly NVC asks a lot of us - a willingness to give up trying to impose our will or blame others and instead be willing to listen, empathise and be vulnerable. I do yet know how it can be introduced into schools in a systematic way. But I think it has tremendous potential.

### Further Reading

Kashtans, Mikis. 'Transforming Power Relations - The Invisible Revolution'. Encounter. 2002 Number 3

Hart, Sura and Gothlin, Marianne. 'Lessons from the Skarpnacks Free School' by. Encounter 2002 Number 3

Rosenberg, Marshall. Non Violent Communication. Puddle Dancer Press. 2003

Rosenberg, Marshall. Life-Enriching Education.. Puddle Dancer Press 2003

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