

This text is written by Marianne Göthlin, a Swedish school teacher and certified trainer in nonviolent communication (NVC). She has for many years worked with implementing NVC in schools in Sweden.

The text was published as a reflection from Swedish school conditions in Marshall B Rosenberg's book Life-Enriching Education when it was published in Swedish 2007.

The Swedish national curriculum has a double focus on both democracy values to be learned and lived and goal-oriented knowledge objectives and the reader are invited to read how NVC can support under those conditions.

Can NVC add anything to the Swedish schools?

Again and again we get reports from our schools about bullying, violence, aggressive behaviour, threats, truancy, stress and goals that are not reached. I share my concern about young peoples' values and use of language with many others. Even though parents, teachers and politicians have a clear ambition to focus on the kids needs, make collective efforts and have the intentions to create a good learning environment we see increasing problems. These reports show that we still have a lot of work to do to create a safe and inspiring environment for learning.

I was introduced to NVC in the end of the 80th when I was quite fresh as a teacher. I read the book "Mutual Education" by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph D and realized the congruence between his writing and my own values. I also found answers to questions around issues described below and NVC quickly became my most important "tool" as a teacher. Since then I have spent a lot of time and attention to learn, understand and integrate NVC in my life. Together with others, I have continued to explore the possibilities to develop schools based on the NVC-principles.

Questions I asked myself and where NVC came to clarify and support me:

- How do we create tolerance and respect in the class-room?
- How do we establish rules and make them sustainable?
- How can I as a teacher personalize important values without judging those who think differently?
- Do I treat pupils in a similar way - no matter what they achieve?
- How can I support students to work from inner motivation with a goal-oriented curriculum?

Since there is no way to differentiate knowledge and learning from interaction and sharing of values these are some complex questions for teachers. If we want children to grow and become tolerant and respectful individuals, they need to be met that same way!! They need to be invited to a mutual process around their own learning and being at school. They need a learning environment where they experience that they both receive and give something.

If we as teachers have experience of hierarchical structures, but not received any education how to convey democratic values, these questions become significantly more difficult. In my education to become a teacher, there was hardly any content that could support me in how to handle these fundamental skills.

Sadly enough, I hear from teacher students even today that these areas still are not covered. I so wish that the education included communication skills and supervision in the areas of conflict-management, methods for dialogue and attitudes towards children and young people for everyone

that is active in the school system. That would give us more reasonable conditions to handle the development and the social life at school.

Many schools have value based subjects on their everyday agenda. There is a need to find common attitudes and methods to handle the social life and the development of the schools. Teachers are discussing and agreeing on what rules should be implemented, but when it comes to practice they fail.

The discussions have a tendency to get stuck in areas like the use of chewing gum and caps and prohibitions and punishments are connected to this. Another effort is to express some prestigious words about participation and responsibilities without practical anchoring.

If we are serious about wanting to implement democratic values, we need to integrate and express them in the daily work, not only through beautiful words in plans. We need to include colleagues, parents and management in this work as well. In this area NVC can be of great support.

The school professionals are supposed to be competent communicators in many areas. They are supposed to be empathic, responsive to students needs, and they are also expected to communicate goals and methods to parents and pupils in a clear and respectful manner. They are also supposed to be able to resolve conflicts peacefully, and work against racist tendencies and violence.

And finally, teachers are supposed to embrace humanistic *and* ethical values, and make them visible and practical in their teaching.

These are necessary communication knowledge and skills. NVC has the clearest answer I have found to build this competency. In NVC there is a core of care and respect for people that is very appealing. In a powerful way NVC reminds us to be aware of our values, our goals and intentions. NVC gives us the language we need to meet as different, but of equal value, to listen empathically, to express ourselves honestly and to cooperate in the challenging situations of life at school.

Below I describe some questions that from my experience as a teacher I am often asked to share from a NVC-perspective.

NVC in the teacher role

The pressure on teachers in the Swedish schools has increased lately. We have got a lot new assignments to handle. At the same time the resources are cut down and so has the organized care of students. Very often we find ourselves standing alone with a large group of children with very different needs. It is sometimes hard to stay connected to the joy of our work and easy to end up in feelings of insufficiency. NVC has helped me to clarify my feelings and needs and be more aware of the limits of my responsibility. What I am able to do, what my focus is and what I want to influence. But just as much, what I exclude from my list of priority. In the middle of my insufficiency I am able to appreciate what I do - and give myself empathy when I need it.

How do we as teachers use the power we have that is connected to the role of being a teacher?

Are we still overwhelming our students with teaching to avoid chaos or reach certain goals, or are we genuinely interested in them becoming autonomous individuals who can take on responsibilities and develop empathy? And if so, how do we develop strategies to do it? I see this as an ongoing act of balance for teachers; to handle the dilemma of the students' autonomy and responsibility in their learning and the teacher's responsibility for the long-term development of the student. In this challenging work I have again found the most support in Marshall B. Rosenberg's attitude and model, in how to build partnership relations and supportive cooperation.

NVC and handling of conflicts

Central for conflict handling in NVC is to know how to handle you, to find out your own feelings and reactions and separate them from others'. To be able to connect one's feelings to one's needs and express those, instead of accuse and criticize others – which we often habitually do.

How I as a grown-up handle a conflict has a great impact on the students way of handling similar situations in the future. They copy our behaviour. NVC offers practical guidance, so that we every moment will be able to act respectfully and care equally about everyone's needs.

An example:

Once I heard one student saying to the other: "You Asian, you don't belong to us. Go home!"

It is very tempting in such a situation to say something similar back. It will come automatically if we don't reflect and train ourselves to express ourselves differently. After some consideration around needs of self-respect and respect for others, this student found out how she would have liked to respond, it sounded something like this: "When you say: "You Asian, you don't belong to us", to me, I get damn angry because I want to feel of as much value as everyone else. I want to know what you mean when say that. Can you please tell me?"

I got very touched when I heard her, because I really wish that all students would demonstrate respect and use a language that reflects that. This is a clear NVC-example. With a few words she managed to stand up for her need of self-respect and equal value at the same time as she was respecting the other person through her willingness to listen.

Difficult conversations

As a teacher we sometime meet people in crisis. A child might suffer; parents have difficulties, accidents happen. In situations like that I have had very valuable support from my NVC skills. I have practised listening and developed a trust to manage difficult dialogues. I can stay with subjects such as anxiety, despair or death. We are trained to believe that we must have an answer and be able to come up with a solution regarding what we have heard. When we don't, we go quiet. But most important is to take issues and people seriously, to show a genuine interest and provide space for the other person's experience. Without advice or teaching.

Fairly often teachers are addressed with aggression, angry students, dissatisfied parents and critical leaders. Now I am able to listen with empathy to them and hear what they need, without moving in to judgements such as "I did it wrong", or they are "hopeless" or "don't understand". Instead of defending myself I give myself quiet empathy because my intention was to contribute

and the outcome was different from what I intended. I can then express that I wish to have acted differently and ask about how we could move forward.

Some common questions around NVC in the school-system

When I share NVC in schools and pre-schools there are some FAQ and reflections. Below you will find the most common and I respond from experience and my interpretation of NVC.

NVC seems very good, but will we have the time to use it?

NVC saves time!! I agree that in a particular situation I need to give myself time to attend to my needs and intentions to reassure that I'll act without doing unnecessary violence to someone else. That time is well invested and supports trust in relation to myself and others. Time is a question of choice and priorities and we do have time for what we value most.

It might work with one individual, but how does it work with a group?

NVC is an attitude, an approach towards life and that is not related to the amount of people. Sure, it is easier and more powerful to address just one person with a message, but it is very possible to use NVC in groups. With the help of NVC we can for example practise expressing clear requests to a group.

It sounds so simple, I tried it and found it very difficult.

What is simple is often hard to practice. It was almost a chock to me to realize to what degree my language mismatched my values. I used demanding language and threats just by habit, just as I had been taught. We have been living with dominating organizations and authoritarian language 1000 of years, so we need understanding and patience to realize that it takes time to create new habits.

Isn't using NVC manipulation?

If we use the NVC-language model to make other people do what we want them to do it is manipulation and incongruent with the NVC-values about creating contact and mutuality.

I have always thought and acted this way. What is new?

Marshall Rosenberg has gathered old knowledge and given us a model to support us to use the language in harmony with our values. Our language, as we learn to use it, often contributes to the opposite, lack of respect and mutuality. The values that NVC is based upon are the same as are described at many other places i.e. our Swedish curriculum, so those we recognize. NVC can be of help when we want to actively work according to these values.

What kind of results have you got with NVC in the schools?

Evaluations are showing that teachers that practise NVC in general feel more secure when it comes to handling conflicts and difficult conversations. A majority report that they have

increased their ability to listen to themselves and others. Evaluations from one school where we have worked after the NVC- principles since many years show that the relationships in this school significantly differ - in a positive way – from other schools in the same region. "Increased safety", "cooperation", "participation", "here you can be yourself" are some quotes. The students take more responsibilities, work from their own motivation and understand what a school is and what the time in school is about.

Compared to other schools there is more time allocated to planning, agreements and discussions. At the same time the students achieve better results, compared to other schools at tests. Teachers report that they feel less alone and vulnerable in their work and it is allowed to share difficulties at work openly.

My vision

Finally, I would like to confirm my YES-answer to the question in the beginning, if I believe that NVC can contribute in the Swedish school system. We have a lot to gain from this humanistic attitude in our schools. Both in the short run, "here and now" in a conflict situation and long-term in developing a meaningful and engaging school where needs and peoples' wellbeing are taken seriously. In a safe environment, where you are accepted and respected as you are, it is fun to learn and you will learn more than all the goals put together in a curriculum.

My vision is that school professionals, with the support of NVC, will contribute to young people with clear human values and a language that reflects respect and tolerance between people. For school professionals to build a safe and creative learning environment together with the students where differences are welcomed, where students are invited to practise to give a voice to who they are, to stand up for their integrity and at the same time to meet others with mutuality and empathy. It gives me great hope for the coming generation when we in our schoolwork manage to organize us and live according to democratic values and integrate care for everybody's wellbeing and social skills as part of the education. NVC supports this development in a very powerful way!