

## Finding NVC as a Teacher

In my first year of retirement I'm doing a lot of reflecting on my years as a teacher. One of the big decisions a retired teacher has to make is whether or not to substitute teach. This in itself is a driving force for reflection. The reason I came to the answer of no is simple; it's too stressful. Just looking back at preparing a sub plan as a teacher is stressful because it's all about minimizing the inevitable anxiety of the kids who are counting on their beloved teacher to keep them reassured and at ease. Forget about the math lesson and it's content. It's about how the lesson gets executed. Teaching is more about the how than it is about the what.

It took me a while to be conscious of this phenomenon. The how, of course is way harder than the what. So, for many years, as hard as I tried and as amazing as I could be at times, I felt like a failure. That's a bold statement but in all honesty I wasn't happy with myself too much of the time. I would feel frustrated with the class and then upset with myself because deep down I could tell that I was missing something.

What I was missing became clearer and clearer when I started learning Nonviolent Communication. At the heart of NVC is the concept of empathy. Empathy is the opposite of problem-solving and problem-solving was what I was putting my energy into. It was behind all of the how of my teaching. I thought it was my job to problem-solve. If I could come up with a solution for the problem in front of me at any given moment, I felt like I was doing my job. If that didn't help, I would tell myself that at least I was doing my job. What I was missing is that much of the time the people with the problem are not seeking a solution, they are seeking relief. And relief does not usually come from a solution. It comes from a listening ear. It comes from the feeling that someone cares; that someone wants to understand; that one is no longer alone with the distress. It took awhile for me to grasp this but when I did I began to experiment with it.

Sure enough, being present and really wanting to understand was a life-saver for all concerned. I couldn't believe what a shift it was in my teaching world. A first-grader would come to me with "She hates me!" I would relax and say something like "That's gotta hurt!" "YES!" "Let's check in later about this. It's a big deal." Then of course, I'd go back to whatever I needed to do in a very densely packed morning of timers, books, papers and color pencils. Checking in later rarely happened because that first grader had already received the empathy they craved.

I did many experiments with my students and the notion of giving and receiving empathy. The more NVC I learned, the more depth I created in the how of my teaching. I instituted empathy cards. I used quality children's literature to teach the NVC skills of making requests vs. demands, shared the wonders of expressing regret, the value of appreciation and the importance of sharing power.

As an experienced teacher I crafted a model using elements from three sources: Nonviolent Communication, circles (fundamental to Responsive Classrooms and Restorative Justice) and self-empowerment (from Positive Discipline).

Ultimately, I implemented three systems to knit all that I was doing into an effective viable empowering learning community. Year by year my classroom turned into a place where trust, compassion and empowerment became possible and realized.

After sharing the systems with people, I was asked to write a book. It took me a while to envision the whole idea of sharing my gifts with the world and thereby making a difference in the world. Now it is all happening. The vision is realized. I wrote the book to be easily usable for classroom teachers, parents and other care-providers, guidance counselors anyone who want children to be empowered to use empathy to solve the challenging situations of life.

<http://www.teachingfromyourheart.org>

### **BIO**

Gina Simm has been an early childhood educator for over thirty years. Her background in Montessori education and children's theater launched her into the world of public teaching, where she has spent most of her career as a first-grade teacher. Gina also taught parenting classes. Most significantly, her knowledge of Nonviolent Communication has transformed her classroom into a place where systems of the heart create a child-centered environment for moving through conflict. Gina lives in the Pioneer Valley Cohousing Community in Amherst, Massachusetts. This is her first book.

*Gina will be offering an online workshop on Zoom June 29, 30, & June 1 9 – 11:30 am  
FMI <https://hutchinsoncenter.umaine.edu/professional-development-programs/>*