

NVC schools: Is this a thing, or a movement?

By Sura Hart, with Jared Finkelstein

Marshall Rosenberg began talking about “NVC schools” (aka “giraffe schools”) many years ago, and ever since, people have been asking us, “So, where ARE these NVC schools?”

We pause for a deep breath.

Because, honestly, we don’t know. We don’t know of any such thing as an “NVC school.”

Sometimes we mutter to each other, “Marshall shoulda known better,” and revisit our wish that he had never used this label. Remember what he taught us about labels: Labels “kill”—in that they are static, mind-created things. Labels obscure reality—which is not a static thing but an ever-changing *movement of life*.

On this point, Marshall agreed with the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti that any label—including “child,” “parent,” “teacher,” and “student”—is created in the mind. A label reinforces a static image that is never the same as the actual life happening in us and all around us.

And when our sights are set on the image in our mind—What does an NVC school look like?—we miss seeing what’s right in front of us. We miss seeing and responding directly to Life.

Krishnamurti spoke at length about the tragedy of labels, and specifically relating to the process of learning: “So there is no pupil and no teacher, there is only teaching and learning which is going on in me. I am learning and I am also teaching myself: the whole process is one. That is important. That gives vitality, a sense of depth.”
(*On Education*, 1974, p. 149)

And yet, we also understand what motivates the question about “NVC schools.” Because the people who ask this question are, just like us, inspired by Marshall’s vision for a radically different kind of education. For what he liked to call “life-enriching education.”

Our questioners are, like us, parents, who are longing for more humane, vibrant education experiences for their children. They are teachers, longing to work in a school that promotes and supports their values for kindness, care, inclusion, justice, and nonviolence. They are NVC practitioners, who wish they had met NVC when they were young and imagine how their lives would have been so different.

They are visionaries, who dream of a world that works for everyone and who sense the possibilities for this if only children were met by teachers and parents with acceptance, empathy, clear communication, and excitement to play-explore-discover-learn together.

Marshall inspired us with guidelines for a radically new kind of learning environment, a *life-enriching learning community*, with a set of characteristics that includes:

- students and teachers (parents and staff) learn together and from each other

- learning objectives and rules are agreed upon by all affected by them
- learners are motivated by intrinsic values, needs, and desires
- there is no coercion of any kind

These guidelines have for many years inspired the NVC Educators Institute team to support the creation of life-enriching learning communities.

And we celebrate that we are not alone in this work. There are many with the same longings and dreams for education. What we are seeing is a movement in the field of education, moving towards more compassion, communication, authenticity, and empowerment. A movement that inspires educators to make changes in their teaching and in their schools:

Growing numbers of educators—in many parts of the world, in schools that may be called Montessori, or Waldorf, or democratic, free, and public—are making changes in the way their current schools and classrooms are structured and in the way decisions are made, with students having more say in their school experience. They are bringing in sharing circles for connection; restorative circles for when connection has been broken; peer mediation groups; social-emotional awareness and skill building.

Other educators are endeavoring to build their own, new schools that follow the principles of visionary leaders in life-enriching education, Marshall Rosenberg among them.

And, for-profit companies and nonprofit organizations are bringing programs and practices into schools to teach mindfulness; provide counseling support; sponsor peer mediators; and offer trainings in empathy, restorative circles, and compassionate communication.

The educators we meet at our Teach for Life! retreat are part of this movement. They come to meet with like-spirited teachers, school directors and staff, to connect and learn from each other. They're eager to learn best practices for vibrant, compassionate schools. They want to explore the ways that NVC can support them.

At Teach for Life! we focus specifically on the many ways that NVC contributes to this *life-enriching education movement*: We prioritize the embodiment of NVC consciousness and offer needs-based structures, processes, and practices that transform classrooms and schools into vibrant learning communities.

One of our foundational practices is facilitating classroom discussions and agreements that address this fundamental, most important question:

“How do we want to live and learn together?”

We facilitate and model this process so teachers can take it back to their schools. So teachers can replace outdated, extrinsic, rewards-punishment strategies for “making kids learn and behave” with intrinsic, needs-based motivation. So teachers can support students’ natural desire for academic and social-emotional learning.

This process is flexible and adaptive. In whatever form it takes in each school, the result is

increased participation in exploring and co-creating the kind of learning community all members want.

At Mountain Mahogany School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, each class, at the beginning of the year, comes up with class agreements about “how we want to live and learn together.” They continue the conversation throughout the year, making observations about how well they are meeting identified needs and values for their classroom. They make adjustments when things aren’t working as well as they’d like. When an adult on the playground wants to talk to a student about their behavior, they ask for mutual clarity and understanding: “What’s the agreement in your classroom about this?” This question can also serve as a simple reminder of what the student has, continually, authentically agreed to.

At Casa di Mir, in Campbell, California, students and teachers at the beginning of each year spend weeks looking over the universal needs cards and choosing the needs that are most important for each person. Then for their classroom as a whole. Then for the school as a whole. They make drawings and collages to represent what they call “our code of living.” Throughout the year, when community meetings are called, the needs-based code of living provides the framework for addressing problems. In the words of one of the school’s co-directors, “The question of ‘How do we want to live and learn together?’ is a process of daily living at school.”

Empathy is another foundational process and practice at Teach for Life! A third-grade teacher in a Texas public school took away inspiration and specific strategies to strengthen empathy and honesty in her classroom. She had always encouraged her students to think creatively, “outside the box.” So when she was prepping them to take the mandatory standardized tests, she explained that the people who made the tests were thinking “inside the box,” and that her students’ challenge was now to think “inside the box” to answer the test questions.

The students aced the tests and also demonstrated their empathic muscle by expressing how sad it must be for the test-makers to limit their thinking to “inside the box.”

We are excited, hopeful, inspired to witness a growing life-enriching education movement. And we are committed to contributing NVC consciousness and NVC-based structures, processes, and practices to this movement—in school trainings, consultations, and curriculum development; in teacher workshops; and at our annual six-day Teach for Life! retreat. We hope you will refer your educator friends and associates to our website: www.nvceducatorsinstitute.com.

*This article is a collaboration of the NVC Educators Institute team: Sura Hart, Jean Morrison, Jared Finkelstein, and Jennifer Warnick. We are all certified trainers with the Center for Nonviolent Communication. We are passionate about enriching the lives of young people and the adults who live and learn with them—in homes, youth programs and school. We’re very excited to host the 16th annual six-day Teach for Life! retreat in Portland, Oregon, July 30 to August 4, 2017. Learn more: www.nvceducatorsinstitute.com.