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Chapter

Use of Nonviolent Communication: Deepening Teacher–Student Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

Human beings are social animals and communication between humans is an inevitable component of human life. In a formal school setup, the routine interpersonal interactions in classrooms form the building block of the teacher–student relationships. Strong healthy interpersonal relationships between students and teachers necessitate skills that revolve around the ability of both to create a positive educational setting encompassing conditions of empathy, warmth, mutual respect, amongst others. Teachers in the capacity of being far more experienced than students will need to exercise their agency with an exclusive set of behavioral actions and act as professionals with a different set of responsibilities in the best interest of their students. Daily talk and actions may reflect a kind of violence that can disrupt relationships creating unhealthy environment. Violence can be manifested in different forms of communication that inhibits autonomy, fails to recognize one's and others' needs, among others. Rosenberg emphasizes the importance of nonviolence in everyday life and brings out the essence of a good interpersonal relationship through non-violent communication (NVC). Within this context, the present chapter will explore ways of non-violent communication that can enable teachers to develop and nurture healthy positive interpersonal relationships with students.

Keywords: nonviolent communication, interpersonal relationships, teacher–student relationships, classroom context

We have a vocabulary of words (verbal and non-verbal) to talk to each other, convey what we wish to, get our things done, and live a life full that we are blessed with. Then why do we always find it difficult to connect, why is there always some kind of conflict going on with others and more so with oneself? Ironically, we experience this not only with random people in our life, but with people whom we feel close to, with whom we are always together, with whom we don't wish to hold grudges, i.e. Our Own People!! Are we falling short of vocabulary? Are we showing our true self to them? Are we afraid of something? Are we being insensitive? Our interpersonal relationships are far too perplexing.

1. Introduction

Human beings are social animals and communication between humans is an inevitable component of human life. Without connecting to people or communicating with others,

people feel lonely. Every individual is unique in his/her own ways of thinking, perceiving, talking, acting, communicating, etc. It demands a whole lot of patience and understanding to manage differences and conflicts that arise during exchange of communication with others and maintain and nurture healthy relationships. One can compare interpersonal relationships to a garden that is full of different flowers, plants, fruits, vegetables, all growing simultaneously side by side and needing maintenance to help them grow.

Every relationship goes hand in hand with certain extent of expectations. Within social psychology, social exchange theorists documented decades ago how interpersonal relationships are governed by reciprocity concerns [1, 2]. This asserts the 'give and take' principle of relationships with varying intensities. Interpersonal relationships as the name suggests cannot be one sided. Interpersonal relationships need to be essentially built through skills like being empathetic, actively listening to others, cooperating, helping others, making the right decision, finding the common ground by negotiation, etc.

2. Violence: an element of communication

Individuals' social and emotional needs include needs of praise, respect, love, affection, achievement and so on. Strong caring relationships result in healthy and better life, whereas poor relationships may promote depression, drug abuse, and other mental health problems. Daily talk and actions may intentionally or unintentionally reflect a kind of violence that can disrupt relationships and ruin the healthy environment. Violence can be manifested in different forms of communication that inhibits autonomy, fails to recognize one's and others' needs, devalues others or be ruthless to both self and others. Other than forms of violence like physical abuse; murder; rape amongst other actions, violence in interpersonal relationships can be manifested in being rude; labelling' hurting others' feelings; bullying; not listening; neglecting; criticizing; passive-aggressiveness; violating confidentiality; causing embarrassment, etc. Similar kind of aversive interpersonal behaviors can have negative effects on the emotional, social and psychological well-being of the individual who is at the receiving end [3].

3. Non-violent communication: the key to positive interpersonal relationships

Rosenberg emphasizes the importance of nonviolence in everyday life and brings out the essence of a good interpersonal relationship through non-violent communication (NVC) which includes four components: observation, feelings, needs and appeal/request. Rosenberg conveys that nonviolent communication leads to the transformation of the way we express ourselves and hear others, directs us to honest and clear expression and at the same leads to paying attention to each other with respect and empathy [4].

Do read the poem 'Words are Windows or They're Walls' by Ruth Bebermeyer.

Rosenberg in his book 'Nonviolent communication: a language of life' talks about how he identified a specific approach to communicating—both speaking and listening—that leads us to give from the heart, connecting us with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. He refers to this approach as Nonviolent Communication, using the term nonviolence as Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian freedom fighter used it—to refer to our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart. Generally we may not consciously realize that the way we talk may be 'violent', but words may often lead to hurt and pain, both for others or ourselves.

Nonviolent communication is not something new or that we are unfamiliar with; it's a conscious attempt to remind us about how we as humans are meant to relate to one another and assist us in a way of living that manifest this knowledge. This kind of communication assists us in reframing and revisiting our ways of expressions and listening characteristics. It enables individuals to carefully choose words or responses based on awareness of what one is perceiving, feeling, and wanting. Individuals using nonviolent communication tend to express themselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention. Such kind of exchanges drive our awareness towards our own needs and of others. In the course of such exchanges, we are trained to observe carefully, specify the behaviors and conditions that are affecting us and learn to articulate our needs in any given situation. Though this sounds very simple, it is powerfully transformative. NVC fosters respect, attentiveness, and empathy and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart. It may not be considered as a technique that can complete bring to end arguments or any kind of disagreements in dialog, but rather a method designed to increase empathy and the quality of relationships of individuals who use NVC with people in their environment.

4. The NVC process

Rosenberg refers to NVC as more than a process or a language. One needs to focus the light of consciousness on four areas—referred to as the four components of the NVC model, observation, feeling, need, and request.

Let us understand the presence of awareness of the first three components when we use NVC to clearly and honestly express how we are.

Initially an individual observes the occurrences or happenings in a situation; this observation of others' words or actions may or may not be as favorable to the individual. The next step is how the individual is able to articulate this observation without judging or evaluating the words and actions by just assuming that whatever is happening is either favorable to the individual or unfavorable to the individual. Further the individual expresses one's feelings like joy, sadness, irritation, frustration, happiness, etc. when s/he observes the actions. Next the individual may voice out one's needs that maybe connected to the feelings that s/he expresses.

The fourth component addresses that which the individual wants/needs from the other person and that which will be favorable for the individual and enrich his/her life.

Thus, part of NVC is to express the pieces of information very clearly, whether verbally or by other means. The other part of this communication consists of receiving the same pieces of information from others. One connects with them by first sensing what one is observing, feeling, and needing; then discover what would enrich one's lives by receiving the final piece—their request.

4.1 NVC process

- The concrete actions we observe
- How we feel in relation to what we observe
- The needs that create our feelings
- The concrete actions we request to enrich our lives

- The essence of NVC is in one's consciousness of the four components, not in the actual words that are exchanged.

5. Interpersonal relationships in educational context

Virginia Satir once said, "I see communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings." If this is true, why is there so little attention to the umbrella? [5].

Man educates him/herself to live a life appropriate to self and the surroundings. If we consider a formal education setup like a classroom constituted of students and teachers, different types, modes, or styles of communication are embedded in the teacher–student relationships and the routine interpersonal interactions in classrooms form the building block of these relationships. Positive teacher–student relationships also contribute to student learning. Problematic relationships have been found to be detrimental to the attainment of student outcomes and development. Warm and supportive interactions between teacher–student and student–student lead to productive learning environments. Martin and Dowson, while mentioning the context of a student's life emphasize the need for positive interpersonal attachments to parents, teachers, and peers in fostering healthy social, emotional and intellectual functioning, as well as positive feelings of self-esteem and self-worth [6].

The education system in general is still orchestrated within power dynamics and a culturally appropriated control over the 'so-called' superior knowledge. Students enjoy little or no autonomy and learning takes the form of transmission or transfer of knowledge from the teacher as authority to the student as the receiver of knowledge. Such an educational system places harsh demands on the student community which primarily seeks to succeed for survival based on fear of failure or rebuke, thus hindering the overall growth and enrichment of the individual's life. This strongly demands a need to create a culture of acceptance, support, and mutual respect where true growth can take place for teachers and learners alike.

Strong healthy interpersonal relationships between students and teachers necessitate skills that revolve around the ability of both to create a positive educational setting encompassing conditions of empathy, warmth, mutual respect, amongst others. Teachers in the capacity of being far more educated and experienced than students will need to exercise their agency with an exclusive set of behavioral actions and act as professionals with a different set of responsibilities in the best interest of their students. Given the constraints of time in completing the syllabi prescribed in a loaded curriculum, and the kind of academic and administrative responsibilities that teachers are expected to shoulder, teachers will ideally not have the luxury of time to solely dedicate, to building relationships with students. It is thus essential to focus on how teachers can build positive interpersonal relationships with students into the daily course of their interactions embedded in both routine discourse and pedagogy in the classroom.

6. Teacher: student interpersonal skills

"Children need far more than basic skills in reading, writing, and math, as important as those might be. Children also need to learn how to think for themselves, how to find meaning in what they learn, and how to work and live together." —Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. [7]

First and foremost, a student-centered classroom is a primary ingredient of a safe and sound classroom and the quality and type of teacher–student communication determines this type of classroom. The effective teacher in this kind of classroom is able to facilitate the use of student’s ability to express personal experiences and guide the learning to encompass student needs and interests. Carkhuff et al., believe that, good interpersonal skills enable the teacher to enter the learner’s frame of reference and prepare him/her for learning [7]. This further enables to create a situation wherein students feel related to teachers and feel that their needs are satisfied thus allowing for their optimal function and development. Teacher–student interactions are the main determinants of these type of environments.

7. Creating a safe and trustful classroom

What can teachers do to thrive—to engage in joyful learning and compassionate interactions? And how can they contribute to meeting these needs?

A teacher’s relation to self and with others, especially her students, are vital to create a safe and desirable environment for students’ overall development.

7.1 Recognizing students’ needs

In creating a relation with self and others, one needs to be mindful of needs of students’ needs.

Discipline is a very traditional hallmark of a classroom. Teachers usually expect strict discipline from students—discipline in being quiet in class, completing tasks on time, listen to their instructions, be obedient most of the times, be well-behaved at all times, take responsibility and more. Disciplinary control practices like punishment, rewards, judgments, comparisons, threats, etc. induce fear in children. Disciplinary measures by teachers often tend to have detrimental effects on students’ outcomes. Besides physical violence, bullying, labelling, taunting, amongst others, that are causes of concern for children’s safety, other daily routine occurrences at school induce fear in students and undermine their emotional safety.

In addition to academic subjects, content knowledge and other related tasks, classroom relationships; safety; trust; student needs; teacher needs; and modes of communication are highly important to create a compassionate learning community where engaged learning flourishes.

In order to create a fearless environment for students, their needs should be acknowledged and met with appropriately. William Glasser refers the basic human needs as needs for survival, power, belonging, freedom, and fun. Abraham Maslow refers to the basic human needs like survival, protection/safety, belonging, competence/learning, and autonomy or self-actualization [5]. The vocabulary of needs is quite vast. Categorizing students’ needs in an educational context, students bring to school needs for belonging, fun, freedom, competence, and autonomy besides learning. Unless these needs are fulfilled to their satisfaction, students will not feel safe enough to fully engage in the learning process.

A classroom setting comprises students from diverse backgrounds and possessing differential capabilities. If a teacher is able to support students’ common needs rather than ranking their academic differences, s/he will be able to create a safe space filled with trust in the school context. This emphasizes the need to shift the focus from disciplining students to meeting their needs.

Acknowledging students' needs is not sufficient; there is more to it. How one communicates the needs and listens to others' needs determines the likeliness of fulfillment of the needs. This is all about the language of giving and receiving, which necessitates the practice of the art of empathy. Teachers need to practice a way of language that is not aggressive in nature. Aligned to this, teachers will have to practice skills like guessing students' feelings from verbal and non-verbal cues; identifying values—one's own and of students; translating judgments into statements of feelings and needs or strategies for meeting needs; and taking responsibility for one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

7.2 Building relations with self

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.
—Carl Rogers [5]

At the outset, a teacher has to build a relationship with self. This entails taking time out to make deliberate attempts to observe oneself and ask questions to self about self. The questions can range from one's intention or goal, interests, talents, qualities that one values and would like to cultivate in students, the kind of relationships one would like to nurture and so on.

- The teacher should be able to question herself about what s/he thinks about self. Since a tendency to criticize and judge oneself usually results in being critical of others whereas compassion for oneself is more likely to result in compassion for others.
- The teacher should be able to recognize one's own contributions and successes and at the same time also be able to notice one's mistakes and learn from these mistakes.
- The teacher has to be able to identify the moments and activities that s/he enjoys doing and how often s/he encounters such instances.
- The teacher should be able to ask for help or support from others without hesitation to be able to cope with one's own challenges and frustrations and also be able to take time to celebrate one's successes with others.

True compassion requires us to attend to our own humanity, to come to a deep acceptance of our own life as it is. It requires us to come into right relationship with that which is most human in ourselves. — Rachel Naomi Remen

7.3 Building relationships with students

- To be able to connect with students, teachers should be able to let students know that their thoughts and feelings matter, they are listened to and their view points are given importance. A teacher is likely to experience feelings of excitement and joy only if s/he is able to see students as whole human beings with their own thoughts, feelings, needs, talents, interests, and gifts to share. The way students are perceived by teachers through the classroom contexts often communicates louder than words.

- Teachers should be able to listen carefully to students and value what they say. This contributes to understanding, connection, and trust. Teacher should question themselves as to how many times do they give an attentive ear to their students.
- It is very important to deliberate on the fact that for what is it that you are listening to students. Is it just the academic content, textbook responses, or academic knowledge or something beyond that? The teacher should be able to listen to students' needs, understand their feelings and encourage them to grow themselves from the inside out.
- The teacher should be able to maintain a balance between fulfilling one's own needs and the students' needs. At times, when students end up doing something that is against teacher's expectations or needs, the teacher should be able to let them know that s/he cares about their needs getting met as much as s/he cares about meeting one's own needs by avoiding any kind of force on students to do as per the teacher's needs or using any power strategies. Any kind of verbal or non-verbal punishment for not conforming to the teacher's needs should be avoided. This does not mean that the teacher should sacrifice one's own needs. S/he should find out ways to ensure that needs of both the teacher and students are fulfilled.

8. NVC: the language of giving and receiving

Nonviolent communication is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. The language of giving and receiving speaks of our common human needs and what would make life more wonderful for us. This way of communicating makes it easy to give to one another and to receive from one another—to enjoy and enrich life.

However, in our routine daily life, one generally tends to speak a language that makes it difficult for people to give and receive in a joyful manner. This language usually meets superficial needs and results in pain including conflicts that arise every day in classrooms.

Unfortunately, this is not the language most of us learned. It is usually referred to as Jackal Language because (metaphorically) the jackal is low to the ground, and its sight is limited to what is right in front of it.

Say for instance a teacher utters the following statements in the classroom:

- “You latecomer, what have you achieved today?” (labelling)
- “You are a dumb student, who always gets low scores in exams. You cannot take part in this competition.” (judging)
- “You have copied in your paper, I can see the exact same responses in ‘X’s’ paper too.” (blaming)
- “You have to complete the assignments by the end of this week, I do not care how you do it.” (demanding)

This language is usually used by teachers who often think about who's good, who's bad, who's right, who's wrong, and who's to blame. It is devoid of feelings and needs

and just conveys thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. Knowing that this is not what one wishes to communicate, yet it has become so automatic that teachers end up communicating in this way before they know what is happening. Teachers need to relearn a language of giving and receiving, where the above statements can be translated into messages that contribute to meeting the needs of students.

The language of giving and receiving has many names, including: Nonviolent communication, Compassionate Communication, and the Language of the Heart. It is also referred to as the Giraffe Language because (metaphorically) the giraffe perspective includes vision and a big heart—the integration of thinking and feeling.

Let us attempt to translate the above classroom statements into a language of giving and receiving.

- “I have been observing that you have been coming late quite often. Is there any way I can help you to keep up with the class sessions?”
- “You may not be performing well in your papers, but I feel that you will be able to do well in this competition, so I think you should try and take part in this competition.”
- “I see that your responses in the answer sheet seem to be same as ‘X’s’ responses. I need to know if you if you are not able to understand what I am teaching in the class. Only then I will be able to ascertain that my objectives are attained.”
- “Can you please complete the assignments by the end of this week, so that the grades can be submitted on time”

As we can see here, the teacher is able to convey via these translated statements, what s/he observes, show concern for both student’s needs and one’s own needs, express his/her feelings and listen to student’s voice. These expressions of the pieces of information given by the teacher enables the teacher to stay motivated solely to give and receive compassionately, and do everything s/he can to let the students know about his/her intention and eventually elicit compassionate responses from students too, thus creating a mutual exchange of compassionate communication resulting in the overall well-being of both the giver and the receiver.

As we glance through these expressions, we can see the four components of ‘Nonviolent Communication’ in the form of giving—observations, feelings, needs, and requests. At the receiving end, students can connect with each component by first sensing what is being observed, felt, and what needs are considered; and then identify what would enrich their lives by receiving the fourth piece of information—the request. Gradually a flow of communication, back and forth, gets internalized until compassion manifests naturally. One needs to be cautious that NVC is not a fixed or agreed upon formula, but it is something that adapts to various situations as well as personal and cultural styles.

As we are familiar, there are a number of different cultures existing on this planet. Each culture comes with a package of its own norms, views, expressions, and beliefs and these elements largely determine the patterns and styles of communication amongst people inhabiting these cultures. Culture also undergoes continuous changes, evolving across time and space, thus adapting to different circumstances and situations. This kind of cultural diversity is strongly influential on ways in which individuals interact with, interpret or understand other individuals. Communication styles are thus subject to discrepancies or conflicts as a result of existing cultural differences.

Say for example we look at two different cultures—the individualist and collectivist cultures. Western culture is generally identified as individualist and the eastern culture as collectivist. The characteristic features of these cultures are independent and interdependent respectively. Individuals from individualist cultures usually follow the norms of exploration, creativity, self-reliance whereas individuals from collectivist cultures follow the norms of conformity and obedience. Thus the principles of tolerance, understanding, conflict management and spirit of mutual co-existence is reflected more in collectivist cultures as compared to individualist cultures. Individuals belonging to individualist societies seem to lack compassion, empathy, mutual respect and expressions of gratitude. These characteristic features of individualist cultures may result in the evolution of unhealthy communication to a large extent [8]. One cannot resort to a fixed strategy of NVC across these cultures. Individuals need to understand the meaning, context and vocabulary of the communication or interaction in that situation to make appropriate use of NVC for the well-being of both the giver and the receiver.

Let us look at another example to understand the dynamic nature of NVC. Family structures or systems also influence the way individuals communicate with each other. Children from a joint family structure demonstrate different value system compared to their peers who come from nuclear family structure. There are a few children who may also belong to broken families. A teacher comes across children from different types of families in the classroom. Dealing with different kinds of children with different value systems can make it quite challenging for teachers to maintain a cordial healthy relationship with students through use of a uniform style or strategy of non-violent communication, since the teacher will have to understand the child's background, value and belief system to utilize the right kind of language and also teach the child the appropriate way of behavior and language to ensure the well-being of both the child and the teacher. Teachers will have to make deliberate attempts to change old habits of thinking, listening, and talking, but it is not totally impossible. They need to make conscious efforts to learn NVC, the language of giving and receiving, and practice over time to develop fluency and adapt to different situations.

9. Why NVC for teacher: student interpersonal relationships

Teachers using the components of NVC in their communication with students display understanding and caring for students and hence are able to establish good interpersonal relationships with students. As a result, students feel they are being cared for by their teachers and hence students tend to care about what their teachers think about their behaviour. Students' behaviors start reflecting the behaviour of their teachers (adults).

A positive student–teacher interpersonal relationship is very crucial for the overall development of students. A teacher's ability to interact with students with warmth, empathy, respect, trust and confidence in his/her students determines the quality of the teacher–student interpersonal relationship and the responsibility of this relationship lies largely with the teacher. Research has widely suggested the importance of interpersonal relationships of students and teachers, and its effect on the outcome of the educational process [9]. Moreover, the positive effects of interpersonal skills do not seem to be limited to student achievement alone, but goes beyond to increased student's self-concept and reduction of negative student behaviors.

10. Conclusions

The present chapter at the outset introduces us to the nature of interpersonal relationships with a strong emphasis on the 'give and take' principle of relationships. It brings to light the social nature of humans who possibly survive through communication and connections with other humans. Having said that, the chapter makes a mention of both implicit and explicit forms of violence that may be manifested in different forms of communication which can have negative effects on the emotional, social and psychological well-being of individuals. In effect to this, the chapter demonstrates the essence of a good interpersonal relationship through non-violent communication (NVC) as proposed by Rosenberg. It elaborates on the transformative power of NVC which is shown as a method designed to increase empathy and the quality of relationships of individuals. The essence of NVC is expressed as one's consciousness of the four components, namely observation, feelings, needs and appeal/request and not in the actual words that are exchanged. The chapter attempts to use this lens of NVC for interpersonal relationships exclusively in the area of teacher–student relationships in the educational context. It describes NVC as the language of giving and receiving and accentuates the need for teachers to make conscious efforts to learn NVC, the language of giving and receiving and practice over time to develop fluency. It further focusses on how teachers using NVC, can build positive interpersonal relationships with students into the daily course of their interactions embedded in both routine discourse and pedagogy in the classroom. Such an interpersonal relationship can be developed between students and teachers when both of them mutually share needs and feelings of each other and build trust and respect, the two key elements to any relationship.

The chapter further facilitates the reader to explore ways and strategies of non-violent communication that can enable teachers to develop and nurture healthy positive interpersonal relationships with students, to manage student behaviors and make the classroom environment, conducive to effective teaching–learning. The chapter concludes by foregrounding the NVC approach to communication, i.e. a way of communicating that leads one to give from the heart, and underscores the results of NVC in bringing about many positive gains for students and teachers alike, contributing to everyone's well-being.


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