

SUMMER 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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From Control to Connection: How Nonviolent Communication Helped Me Fall in Love With Teaching Again

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From Control to Connection: How Nonviolent Communication Helped Me Fall in Love with Teaching Again

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From an early age, I knew I wanted to work with children. I was the child who loved holding babies, the teenager who relished babysitting, and the community babysitter whom parents sought out because their children requested me. I engaged with them, played with them - I was the babysitter my younger self would have wanted.

I pursued a degree in Child Psychology, during which I volunteered in the speech department at a nearby hospital with plans to become a Speech Pathologist. However, it was during my fourth-year practicum at a local elementary school that my calling became clear - I was meant to be a teacher.

Over the course of my 29-year career, I taught in various roles and districts, moving frequently in my early years due to my husband's career. I taught music classes in the mountains of British Columbia, I was a classroom teacher in a one-room schoolhouse covering grades 1 to 9 on the Alberta prairies, and amidst that time I had my share of substitute teaching positions while away and upon returning to Ontario. After I began my first contract position and between four maternity leaves and an education leave, I embraced a range of teaching experiences within the elementary system.

The Inner Conflict of Classroom Management

Like many new teachers, I began my career with enthusiasm and love for the profession. However, I quickly faced an unexpected challenge: managing a classroom of approximately 25 students. The tension between fostering a nurturing learning environment and enforcing discipline became a persistent struggle. Was I a facilitator of learning or a dictator of behavior? The expectations placed on teachers regarding student behavior often seemed to prioritize control over connection.

Over these years, one thing continued to occur... the inner conflict I would experience when I used classroom management strategies that I learned in Teachers' College. They sometimes worked but often there were those one or two students in the classroom that would not conform. I remember thinking: I am the teacher; I am the boss - right? They have to respect me, right? And when they did not, in those moments, I sooo disliked my job. So many times I would ask myself why I became a teacher? Was it worth dealing with this disrespectful behavior? Why can't I just teach? Why do I have to be the bad cop all the time? Why can't they just behave?



My mind would search for someone to blame. I was using the strategies I had been trained to use - so if they didn't work, was I failing as a teacher? Some suggested I needed to be stricter or more intimidating. But as a 5-foot-tall woman, the idea of using fear as a classroom management tool seemed laughable. I envied the 6-foot male teachers who could command instant silence with a deep voice and a few stern words.

The education system is deeply rooted in punitive justice. Even when strategies appeared to succeed, they left me uneasy. I entered teaching because I loved children - so why was I speaking to them in ways I would never want to be spoken to? Why did some days I leave work feeling depleted, recognizing that I had prioritized controlling behavior over truly connecting with my students?



Discovering Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

One day, I was sitting in the staff room listening to a colleague vent about a challenging student. I offered some thoughts, and another teacher, overhearing our conversation, asked if I had training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I had never heard of it. She lent me a booklet from her training, which included six CDs. That evening, I started listening on my drive home.

Emotional moments followed as I realized I had found what I had been longing for my entire career - a way to communicate with students that fostered both connection and collaboration.

At the time, I was teaching music and drama, racing from classroom to classroom with my cart. Before NVC, I would stand outside a room listening to the teacher instruct students on how to prepare for my arrival, mentally preparing myself for the challenge of managing a room full of energetic children. But after beginning my NVC journey, my internal question shifted from,

“How am I going to control all these bodies?” to

“How am I going to connect with these fellow human beings? Young people who have feelings and needs just like me.”

This paradigm shift rekindled my love for teaching. It was no longer about managing behavior but instead about questioning my own deeply ingrained beliefs about authority and control. Letting go of the hierarchical, domination-based paradigm was challenging, but the more I valued connection over compliance, the less I needed traditional disciplinary strategies.



Living NVC in the Classroom

As I became more proficient in the language of NVC, I transitioned from simply using it to truly living it. I began teaching it explicitly to my students rather than just modeling it.

In drama, I replaced published scripts with “real play.” Students brought real-life conflicts into class, and together, we practiced NVC to navigate them. Disagreements on the playground? Sibling conflicts? Frustrations about school? All were welcomed and explored through an empathetic, needs-based lens. In music class, our “song of the month” always centered on feelings, needs, and human connection. While learning musical elements, students were also deepening their self-awareness and empathy for others.

NVC gave me the tools to guide students through conflict, shifting the focus from right and wrong to underlying needs. Conflict arises when two individuals are employing strategies to meet their needs in opposing ways. Instead of imposing consequences, I helped students listen to each other with curiosity, seeking to understand what need the other was trying to fulfill. When students felt seen and heard, their defensive strategies dissolved, and collaborative solutions naturally emerged.

Welcoming “No”

One of the key shifts I introduced to my students was learning to welcome honesty - especially when it comes in the form of a “no” - without taking it personally. We’ve all been there: upset over something someone said or did, only to be told, *“Don’t take it personally.”* But what does that actually mean? How do we *not* take it personally?

From a young age, most of us unknowingly learn that other people’s opinions of us shape how we see ourselves. It becomes ingrained - what someone else thinks of us *must* mean something about who we are. This belief can make a simple “no” feel like rejection rather than honesty.

In my classroom, I always started the day with a “Meet and Greet” song. The moment that song played, students knew it was time to wrap up what they were doing and gather at the carpet for a morning greeting - whether a handshake, a high-five, a namaste, or a hug. But I made one thing clear: a hug was only for those who *truly* wanted to give or receive one. If not, a simple “No, thank you” was absolutely okay.

And yet, even at just four years old, children were already taking a “no” personally. I could see it in their faces - the slight hesitation, the uncertainty, the disappointment. That’s when I introduced a reframe: instead of thinking of “no” as rejection, what if we saw it as a gift of honesty? I told them, *When someone says no, it doesn’t mean they don’t like you. It means they trust you enough to share their truth. And when you can welcome their no, you can trust their yes.*

One day, I noticed several students reluctantly accepting hugs they clearly weren’t comfortable with. So I decided to try an experiment. I invited everyone to ask for a hug, but with the understanding that each and every person *must* say no. What happened next surprised me: the room filled with laughter. Some kids confidently said no with their arms at their sides, while others, giggling, reached out for a hug anyway - even as they said “no.”

It struck me that for some, saying no - especially to an adult - was a new and exhilarating experience. They weren’t used to their “no” being heard without consequence. In that moment, they weren’t rejecting each other; they were playing with the power of their own voice. And for me, that was the lesson in action: *No* isn’t unkind. It’s just honest. And when we can accept it with an open heart, we make space for deeper trust and authentic connection.

“Real Play” in Drama Class

When I first started teaching drama, I relied on scripts for my older students. But one day, two sixth graders burst into the classroom, arguing over a ball.

“He took my ball!” one shouted.

“He wouldn’t let me play anymore, and that’s not fair!” the other protested.

I used to dread moments like these - being asked to be the judge over a situation I hadn’t even witnessed. But that day, I decided to scrap my lesson plan and try something different. I asked if we could use *their* conflict as our drama lesson. After reassuring them that no one was in trouble and no one was going to be punished, that we were simply going to learn from what happened, they agreed.

I explained the scenario to the class and invited them to approach it through the lens of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). I reminded them that every action is an attempt to meet a need and asked them to step into empathy: *What might each person be feeling?*

Hands shot up. *Angry? Frustrated? Lonely?*

I nodded. *Yes! And what do we usually do with those feelings?*

We look for someone to blame. We falsely believe someone *made* us feel this way. And when we believe that, we become victims, powerless until the other person changes, apologizes, or just *acts differently* so we can feel better. But in NVC, we see uncomfortable feelings differently - not as something caused *by* someone else, but as signals pointing to an unmet need.

I asked the class to guess: *What needs might Suraj have had when Clay took the ball?*

More hands. *Respect? Consideration? Trust?*

Suraj let out a deep sigh and nodded.

Then I asked, *And what do you think Clay was needing when he took the ball?*

More guesses. *Connection? Acceptance? A sense of belonging?*

Clay’s eyes welled with tears as he whispered, *Yeah.*

This is the moment I love most - the moment when conflict shifts from blame to shared understanding. I reminded them that conflict itself isn’t bad; it’s simply a signal that communication has broken down. Yet how often do we punish kids for lacking the self-awareness and communication skills that we’ve never actually taught them?

This is why I tell my students: *When we pause, take a deep breath, and get compassionately curious, we stop being victims. We become empathetic classmates instead. Conflict only happens at the level of strategy - what we do to meet our needs. But when we look beneath the strategy and connect at the level of need, that’s where real problem-solving happens.*





And then, the magic of NVC unfolded.

As soon as these two boys felt truly seen - once they received empathy and knew that their needs mattered, *that they mattered* - their walls came down. And once they verbalized what they heard the *other* person needed, they naturally came up with their own creative solutions.

And what happened next in my drama lesson? The class broke into small groups and “*real played*” how to navigate “*Someone Took My Ball*” through the lens of NVC. No need to be right. No need for punishment. Just a shared commitment to understanding and collaboration.

Because my job as a teacher isn’t to be the judge or the punisher.

My job is to be a facilitator of communication; to guide my students toward what’s really on the other side of conflict: *deep connection*.

A New Chapter: Teaching in a Bigger Classroom

I loved my job. I don’t think I could have loved it more.

But in the spring of 2024, I was informed that I would no longer be the Music and Drama Teacher. I was being reassigned to a position that I knew would drain me. I saw this as my sign - it was time to leave the school system and take my teaching to a broader audience.

I miss my students greatly, but I remind myself why I left. I am now dedicating myself to supporting educators and administrators in learning a paradigm that will not only help them fall in love with teaching again but will also foster a new generation of self-aware, empathetic adults capable of effective listening, creative collaboration and compassionate connection.

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will live as one.”



Jill McPherson has been a teacher for more than twenty-five years, from kindergarten to grade 8, as well as Special Education and the Arts, providing invaluable experience addressing children’s needs and behaviors. She has a degree in Child Psychology from the University of Guelph and a Bachelor of Education from Brock University, as well as training in counselling and Nonviolent Communication.



Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

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