

Connie's story

Constance Riba has been teaching for 17 years at Emsbukantambo Secondary School in Soweto. At present she is teaching Grade 9's. Read the interview with Connie below.

What made you start using AVP?

In the past I have attended quite a few conflict resolution workshops, but none of them seemed to help me with the challenges of learners' rights and teachers' rights in the classroom. Then late last year I attended an AVP workshop, where I began to realise that giving learners their rights in the classroom did not necessarily mean that teachers' rights had to be ignored, or that asserting teachers' rights did not need to be at the expense of learners' rights.

I learnt that there is a third way in which learners and educators can work together to uphold everyone's rights. Yes, we all come from different backgrounds, so we see things differently, and yes, there are certain constitutional principles in place, which prevent us, as educators, from reprimanding or punishing our learners in the same way as we used to, but this does not mean the learners cannot enjoy their rights while I also enjoy mine.

How are you using AVP in your classroom?

At the beginning of the year I found myself in a class that all the other educators were complaining about, because learners did not want to attend classes or work, and they were often deliberately disruptive in class.

Then I remembered how we had spent a lot of time at the beginning of our AVP workshop drawing up a Boundary Agreement – ourselves – to enable us to work constructively together during the two days. I thought; if we could do this in the workshop, then how about me trying it in my class?

I started speaking to the learners asking them, in this new year, what kind of a school they would like to see and what they would like to achieve for themselves this year. I explained that we do not want our learning to be a waste and we want to have a successful school on the map. We shared our ideas and together we dreamed our dreams of an excellent school in which we all achieve our goals.

I then asked them, so what can we do to make this happen?

Together we did a brainstorm of what we could do to make this happen, and the learners said things like, we must communicate with each other when we have problems, we must help one another and we must participate fully in class. I also said how I felt, especially about communication, explaining that for me communication was a two-way process; it didn't just mean me speaking, it meant that the learners too would give me feedback and ask when they did not understand something. And so we built up our own Boundary Agreement for the year.

I also spent time doing another exercise we did at AVP and that is to ask the learners about their names and the meanings of their names. This was very touching because it reminded all of us of the dreams that our parents had for us when they gave us our names, and it encouraged us to work hard to achieve these dreams.

As time went on, I also mentioned other AVP pillars, like the concept of “Affirmation”, which means that we must start looking for and praising the good in ourselves and others. This helped me a lot and fits in so well with the OBE assessment methods, because it is not only me doing the assessing – the learners assess each other, and this has given them a way of providing constructive feedback to one another. They use what AVP calls the sandwich technique; always starting their assessment with one thing you did well, then one thing you could improve on or do differently next time (we do not use the words, “What you did not do well” because this is destructive), and then ending with another thing you did well. This is where affirmation comes in so well.

What have the results of this process been?

You won’t believe me, but my class has done such wonderful work this year! You see, I believe they just needed some understanding and encouragement to start thinking differently about themselves and their learning.

Gradually this way of working together became a habit; every time we start a new activity we set a Boundary Agreement for ourselves. And we also remind each other of our agreement e.g. if we agreed that we all have to had maximum participation and someone violates your right to participate by being disruptive, we just point to the chart and everyone is reminded of our agreement. Sometimes I forget one of our agreements; I get out of hand and I say things like, “I am going to lose my cool with you now and insult you,” and then the learners say, “Mam.....the AVP rules!!”

A few weeks back I was selected to attend a disciplinary workshop somewhere. When I came back I told my learners that we are not allowed to punish them or shout at them because this is abuse – I then asked them, so what then is expected of you? “But Mam,” they said “The nonviolence way – have you forgotten? Respect my rights and I’ll respect yours!”

What has been the impact of this on your relationships with other educators and the parents?

My colleagues ask me how I manage to cooperate with everybody. I explain that I learnt at AVP that once you are at peace with yourself and you know what you want from life, you are able to share this peace with everyone around you.

I called the parents too at the beginning of the year and explained that I don’t have that much power so we need to work together. They supported and encouraged their children at home, and they were so impressed with their improvement in performance. I now have a list of parents who are willing to join an AVP workshop with their children. I said this would be very good because it would give them a chance to really

know and understand their children. I am very happy with my class now and there is much less stress for me.

Of course, we still have some challenges; this is a journey and a process, which you don't learn in a few days, but we are walking the journey together now.

I just wish that everyone in my school community could have this AVP experience, so that it can be sustained. You see, people are looking at our school as the spotlight of the community, and our learners can influence other learners in other schools around us, so it is very important for us to train in these skills.

What keeps you going on this journey?

I find it an encouragement and an inspiration to build relationships; AVP has given me a start to build healthy relationships with my learners, their parents and my colleagues.