

Skarpnäcks Free School – a school for joyful learning

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In this text I share some from our work to build a school from inclusion, with partnership relations, where pupils work from willingness as much as possible, and without punishments and rewards. **Nonviolent Communication** is our main inspiration and guidance in this work.

Brief background

The Skarpnäcks Free School started with an initiative from some parents who were unhappy with the authoritarian structure of the schools their children attended. They were worried about how their seven-year-olds already were losing their desire to learn and go to school. These parents wanted a different kind of school for their children—one based on democratic principles outlined in our national curriculum and respectful compassionate interactions, a place where their children could be more active in their learning and free to express themselves. I had shared NVC to some of these parents and invited them to an evening presentation with Marshall Rosenberg and after that they were clear that they wanted a NVC school. I was working as an elementary classroom teacher when they asked me if I would help them start a school founded on the principles of NVC. From the moment I said “Yes” up to the present, it has been a journey of great learning for me and everybody involved and I feel proud to share some of the results from our persistent exploration of holistic learning with NVC in focus.

Skarpnäcks began in the fall of 1998 with 24 children, ages 6-9 and four teachers. Nine years later, we have 80 students, ages 6-15, and nine teachers. We set up the school as a cooperative where the parents are part of the leadership team, the administration and the maintenance of the school. We intentionally kept from having a principal – a hierarchical form - as we were committed to work from values of equality and shared responsibility and deeply knew from experience that traditional top-steering would not support us. (In Sweden we have public schools, free schools and private schools - all working with the same national curriculum. Public schools and free schools are financially fully funded from the government and we have an open system where you are free to choose any school.)

We started from simple wisdom and from the notion that schooling can be more fun and effective than most of us have experienced. We saw the connection between our curriculum and NVC and were eager to explore new and more life-affirming ways of education. Some of our shared ideas:

- Needs for **safety, acceptance and inclusion** are essential for joyful learning. When feeling stressed – the brain is not ready for learning. Therefore we emphasize building partnership relations and agree to **create a supportive learning environment** built on participation and co-operation together with the students.
- We would like our students to be as eager and happy to learn when they leave school after 9 years as when they start the first day. It is not acceptable that children lose **connection with their natural curiosity to explore and learn, and their spirit**, along with the time they spend in school. Therefore we will support our students to stay in their genuine **willingness** to learn, include them in planning content and methods as much as possible and support their different learning styles and individual pace of learning.

- We decided to put as much **attention to values and needs** as to the goal-oriented knowledge in subjects that both are outlined in our national curriculum. Most schools keep emphasizing academic achievement at the cost of the values lived during the education.
- Parents to be included in the school - to support the need of building **safety and security** for their children, to **share responsibility** and **co-operate**, to open up for engagement and discussions about schooling and learning in the school community, for parents to do maintenance work and run the school which give us financial resources to hire more teachers.

To make this happen we have mainly focused on three areas: to create structures that support our vision, to use NVC language and to build partnership relations.

Starting up

We built a school community with children, parents and teachers. We started to form a vision for our school and agreed to some basic values that we wanted to emphasise. Inclusion, cooperation, safety, learning from doing, organic food, outdoor education etc.

We knew a lot about what we did not want in our school from our common experiences and what can interfere with joyful learning. One was school bells ringing in the middle of the learning process and another was the habit of short lessons and change of subjects. So we work without bells, we schedule longer lessons, 1-2 hours, to serve engagement and focus. Longer breaks so children get time enough to engage in their playing and to catch more of the daylight all seasons. One full hour outdoor at lunchtime. It was a real challenge to be free to find out and create what we really wanted. We have stayed persistent in keeping from school traditions when it is not serving our vision and needs, and rather to find ways to manage the chaos of not knowing. Seemingly simple questions to be dealt with from a need perspective. How do we start in the morning? How do we end the semester?

We decided to have no routine homework. If children spend most of their daytime in school we find it likely that they have “learnt” enough. Time for free play, leisure and relaxation to be acknowledged. And now it shows on the evaluations that our students learn more than the average in the country.

As an example I can mention that we asked ourselves what time to start school in the morning. All schools in Sweden start at about 8 am and now we could choose from our needs when to start. Everybody had different ideas – covering starting times from 7 am to 11 am. I noticed myself that it was not easy to find my own answer and after some discussions we decided to start at 9:20, because some of the children came with a bus arriving at that time. To attend to needs, decide together from the best we know at that moment, and then have a constant ongoing evaluation if needs are met or not, is how we have worked to form this school.

From my experience, what interferes the most with joyful learning is the demanding, “should and have to”-attitude, built on punishment and rewards that we traditionally have in schools. So from the very beginning we were clear that NVC- language and principles were needed to build a new tradition of school to be a place for joyful learning, where you learn how to relate

to authorities differently and where you will get the competency how to express yourself, with feelings and needs and to listen with empathy to others.

A giraffe school?

We did not set out to formally teach children NVC. We teachers agreed that what was important was to live the consciousness of NVC: to listen to the children and care equally about children's needs and adults' needs at the school—to focus on meeting needs and creating a school environment where we are all giving and receiving in a way we enjoy.

Labels tend to limit our ability to see reality; when we believe there is a thing called "a child," "a teacher," "a parent," "a giraffe," or a "giraffe school," we will have certain expectations and assumptions that most often get in the way of seeing and responding directly to Life as it is. For this reason the pedagogues do not call it, or think of it as, a "giraffe school". Nor do they insist that students "learn NVC". We have tried to stay tuned and true to our intention in as many situations as possible and find support and guidance in that work from continuously practicing NVC language.

Though, if what one means by "giraffe school" is ...A mutually respectful, life-serving learning community, where students and teachers (and parents and staff) learns together and from each other, where learning objectives and rules are agreed upon by all affected by them, where learners are motivated by intrinsic values, needs and desires and there is no coercion of any kind.....then we are one of the schools on the planet with allegiance to these values and the intention to evolve this way.

If when someone asks about "giraffe schools", one also means a school where the teachers, administrators, and parents, and students, consciously hold the intention to focus on meeting needs, and where they actively practice the language of Nonviolent Communication for this purpose, then Skarpnäcks is one of those.

NVC-training at Skarpnäcks

Skarpnäcks is built on the NVC values which are the same democratic values as in our national curriculum. To personally integrate and to implement the values in our school all the teachers at Skarpnäcks train NVC continuously and support each other to live and model NVC in the daily work. We look for, and employ only teachers that agree to this focus and to be an equal part in creating a learning environment from these values.

Every year we have an introduction to NVC offered to our school community. There are always new families and teachers to be included in our work and others that like to get a reminder of the intention and work with NVC. This intro is provided by a certified trainer.

We have NVC-training for all the teachers together as a group continuously. This monthly training is also provided by certified trainers. In addition to these common training teachers are encouraged to participate in workshops, offered in Sweden or other countries, for personal choice and growth. Each year one or two of the teachers take part in an One-year NVC deepening programmes offered in Sweden. The school pay for the trainings and also for written NVC material the teachers like to use.

We offer some NVC-training for parents every year. This year we have a monthly evening practice group for parents. Parents have not participated in NVC-training as frequent as the

pedagogues would have liked for the common understanding and co-work towards our vision. Some parents seem to relax when they see their children being happy in school and choose to put priority to other things than NVC. Since all parents also do practical work in our school beside their own work it is also a question about time. Some parents take part in workshops and are very engaged, others agree to the NVC focus without being very active. Sometimes our students help their parents with their motivation. A parent came to a practice group lately and said. *-My 8 year old son express himself far better than I do, I am coming here to keep up with him!*

NVC is of course trained/practised in many daily situations within our school community. There is a constant ongoing training to keep your giraffe ears on when you hear judgments addressed. To stay focused on a need level within yourself and to support a non-judgmental attitude that is essential for the sense of respect and trust. Teachers are encouraged to step out of a challenging situation if they get stuck in jackal thinking and to get support from a colleague. This is to protect guilt games and blaming.

Teachers bring situations to the weekly meetings and celebrate, mourn and explore together ways to handle actual situations according to NVC.

Teachers are offered individual counselling, to support the internal growth and to give space to individual reflection.

Students are mainly learning NVC from the way teachers connect with them and model NVC in the daily work. We keep from naming it NVC or giraffe language with the students as we want to hold it as natural and not separate from who we are and what we do in school. We do some basic language training with students to help the process grow, like practising finding words expressing feelings and needs, guessing needs behind expressions etc. Sometimes we present the four steps to our students. It could for instance happen naturally while dealing with a conflict. Sometimes students request information about NVC as they hear about “giraffe language” and of course we give them information according to their interest.

Marshall Rosenberg has visited us two times. Last time was in November 2006 when we gathered more than 100 people, teachers, parents, students to an inspiring evening with NVC sharing.

What does a day look like?

We do the same things and use the same material as in many other schools... but with a different focus and from another attitude. We have classes, groups of children sizes 10-22, and we mix them in ages and numbers according to needs. Each group have one teacher or two teachers that are responsible for that group and they also meet all the other teachers regularly. We have a weekly schedule. Starting our days together at 9 and ending in the afternoon at about 15-16.

The way we do things are different from many other schools and not easy to describe. We start from the notion that we are all different and that we all need to express ourselves and listen to each other to know how to build respect and work together. We are all teachers and learners and you never know who will learn from who. The shared vision, the personal relationships, the sense of care and support, is the platform for skill building in all subjects.

Quote from visitor:

There is a constructive chaos. Children coming in the morning (between 7 and 9) can greet the teachers or not, can do nothing or start reading or drawing or something else. There are no rules for that. The school is like a home. They feel free to do what they like. They sit on tables; sit on a chair the way they choose. A boy asked where I came from. A teacher got the atlas out and they found Holland and much more that was interesting to look at. Another child got an atlas out. Others set around her. The curiosity was aroused. To me this is a natural way of learning in surroundings where the conditions and the material is present.

More about the chaos. I was at a project lesson where children were working on a car that was kind to the environment with all sorts of material. Children climbed over the tables, worked with concentration either talking or in silence, they helped others or asked for help, one started working when the time was almost over and continued till everyone had cleared his stuff away. The teacher didn't once push a child to do anything. The children didn't take advantage of the chaos to be mean or to tease or whatever.

I am happy to say that this is quite a typical observation if you visit our school. Children are engaged in their learning, they co-operate to support each other and they have learnt to create a learning environment that is flexible according to the needs in the moment. They will be very quiet if they work individually with math, and there will be natural chatting and noise from interactions in lessons when they work together. What I frequently hear from visitors is that our students seem very calm, connected and relaxed. To scream, make noise and “disturb” is not needed here as they in general get their need for attention, to be seen and supported met.

Quote from parent:

“My children came from very hard and violent experiences in another school to Skarpnäcks. The change of school was not without pain. It can be hard to be accepted in a new group, especially if your self-esteem is not on top, but with the common efforts made it was a fast process to overcome those difficulties. And when I write common, I really mean it, everybody was involved, the children, pedagogues, us parents, the rest of the children in the group, and also other children's parents.

My children grow in self-esteem every day. I saw them feeling well from being seen and recognized. This school holds a sense of tolerance that I have not seen anywhere else. You can be as you are, without too much lecturing and hidden codes. Everybody participate from their conditions. Two years ago I watched a soccer match where 6-year olds as well as 14- year olds were participating and the most fascinating was to watch how the children made the rules: Naturally the rules were simpler for the 6-year olds, but that was not all, even a 13-year old that was not use to play soccer played with easier rules than the group that were more experienced.”

NVC consciousness and language have contributed to the caring atmosphere in the school. The attitude from the pedagogues is contagious and some of the children are really skilled in conflict resolution. Skarpnäcks is not a school without conflicts – far from! But conflicts are given space, often seen like wonderful opportunities to learn about ourselves and others and how we can find ways together.

Quote from a previous student, now in high school:

“It is kind of funny, because I did not really have a sense of how much I learnt at Skarpnäcks when I was there. We just worked our way, had fun and sometimes not fun, and now I can see that I have learnt so much more than my friends in high school. When there is a conflict they always ask me for support, and I can easily help.”

Recently we received a 15 year old boy that was suffering from deep anxiety. His mother told us that he had been “bullied in a subtle and manipulative way” for years and simple could not go to school anymore. His teacher kept to her evaluation that there were no problems and no signs of bullying in the class and they chose to leave the school. After some weeks in Skarpnäcks the boy started to buy the T-shirts that he have always liked but not dared to wear in his previous school and he said to his mother: *I like this school, here I am free to be me. I would like my children to go to this school.*

Quote from a pedagogue:

“Three weeks ago I started my work as a cook at Skarpnäcks. And here it comes: it feels fantastic! It is about the atmosphere in the school. Skarpnäcks have a pedagogy grounded in the insight about how we humans want to live, children’s integrity and joy of learning, and a willingness to change. It is a school where children and young people learn to be responsible individuals that care, belong to each other and cooperate. And suddenly I discover that I am not selling myself to make my own money to my own life, but I see myself as a link in a chain, a part of wholeness, one piece in a puzzle. My work have become a human relation containing all that I have lived beside of in my work life for so many years, and that make everything so much more joyful. I think of my food making more than ever and have an inner willingness to make good food because the once eating the food are worth good, nourishing food made from love and care. And from cooking in a school where you acknowledge and see each other as humans I experience doing something meaningful with my time. The whole function “to work” like “make your money for living” is shaken into the ground; it has become joyful and worthy. In Skarpnäcks children, young people and adults walk around and learn all day long, and for that to work some things are needed, one of them is food. I make the food. I have a satisfying feeling from my contribution as being one detail for the wholeness to function. That feeling make it worth getting up in the morning and go to work. That feeling in my body, my friends, make me feel that I am part of a change in this world. For real.”

And now...

After nine year of exploring and finding new ways to educate our children we have many, many learning experiences to share. There have been major transformative process work for the pedagogues to be clear authorities without using power-over dynamics and not acting from the roll of “being a teacher” but being a human, showing ones values and needs while working as a teacher. In the beginning of that process we sometimes fell into more permissiveness than what was safe for children and it is a fine art to know yourself and act from trusting that everybody’s needs matter equally, every moment and under all conditions. *We are still learning every day!*

This is just a glimpse into our process and I hope the part shared here will give you some reflections and inspiration. Below you can read some quotes about Skarpnäcks from the national school authority inspection report last year. We at Skarpnäcks feel very proud and relieved that our effort is seen and valued and we hope this credible report will encourage more people to support a life-serving development in schools

Report from authorities:

The ministry of education make a 2-3 days inspection every third year to thoroughly go through the results in regard to the learning objectives and the democratic values in the national curriculum. The report is built on concrete observations during daily work in the school for two days, and interviews with students, teachers, parents, and principal. This report is from December 2006.

A brief summary of the evaluation:

“The inspectors evaluate Skarpnäcks Fria Skola to give the students a peaceful and safe environment. Teachers are very engaged. The school gives space for questions about democracy, about life and about ethics in a very good way. The follow up of the students work is of high quality. The students have individual plans for learning that gives students and parents’ good information about the areas to be developed.”

“Norms and values:

All the interviews give a consistent picture that there are no incidents of violating actions in the school. Parents express that teachers connect with them as soon as some thing happens with their children in school. And the students say that they feel safe. From the interviews and from observing the daily work, it shows that the students hold an acceptance of the equal value of all human beings.

The students express that they have plenty of opportunity to influence their studies and even the work in the school in general. Parents express that their children have understanding of what the concepts of democracy implies, and the students on their hand, can describe that they learn what democracy is. Inspectors evaluate the schools result of work with norms and values to be of good quality.”

“Knowledge:

Students express that they learn a lot in school and they feel confident that they will do well in high school. The official statistics for 2006 shows that graduation class (year 9) at Skarpnäcks Fria Skola have higher grades, a higher number of students that are prepared for the next level of studies, and a higher number of students that have accomplished grades in all subject, than the average in the area and in the whole country.”

“Working with learning environment and influence:

In the schools yearly quality report, there are descriptions of the work with influence, equality and democratic values. According to the interviews the school work actively with those values on the basis of Nonviolent Communication. Through different forms like drama exercises and discussions and in the daily interactions, the students are trained to work well in partnership, and to care for each other. During the visit the inspectors could observe that this was something that was ingrained in the whole school. Inspectors emphasizes that the work with the learning environment and influence in this school is of very high quality.”