

Skarpnäck Free School

Skarpnäcks Fria Skola
Horisontvägen 22 - 24
128 34 Skarpnäck
Sweden
+46 8 604 89 40
www.skarpnacksfriaskola.com

January 2009

Skarpnäck Free School

Index

	<i>page</i>
The Skarpnäck Free School Report	3
The Origin of the Vision	4
The Flower and How it Looks	4
How the Vision Became Planted	5
How the Vision Survived, Matured, Thrived	7
How the Plant Seedlings Might be Transplanted	8
Conclusion	11
Annex	12
i A brief summary of The National School Authority's (SNSA) report	13
ii Student reports on the school	14
iii Backgrounds of the contributors of this report	18
iv Text notes to accompany the slide presentation on Skarpnäck Free School	19
v Footnotes	30
vi Commentary by Marianne Göthlin	34

The Skarpnäck Free School Report

On April 10, 2008 the Skarpnäck Free School ¹ (SFS), just outside Stockholm in Sweden, opened its doors for the first time to external observers ² from the United States and Europe, including Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

This introductory report on SFS follows the school from a seed of vision to the flowering of a successful program, an orchid ³ in the educational jungle ⁴, illustrating that teaching compassionately can produce competitive results in the educational market-place.

The report is presented in five parts, the first two being more fact-oriented and the latter three being more analytical:

- 1) the origin of the vision;
- 2) the flower and how it looks;
- 3) how the vision became planted;
- 4) how the vision survived to thrive in students' lives; and
- 5) how the seedling of vision might be transplanted.

The authors of the report include Marianne Göthlin, one of the founders and one of the first teachers at SFS and Roger Sanders, one of the external observers and past President of the Board of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (see Annex for more information).

The SFS venture has been extremely encouraging. The Swedish National School Authority (SNSA) conducted a thorough analysis of the school in 2006. The SNSA assessment objectively concurred with the results the parents, teachers and students anticipated. The SNSA assessment, the parents' expectations, and the students' reports all reflect a consistent picture of student performance and non-violence at the school. This is measured by:

- students treating others with respect, equal value, and equal human dignity;
- a learning environment of very high quality; and
- an extraordinary number of students excelling in their class and prepared for the next higher class, while scoring well above the Swedish national average. ⁵

While reading this presentation, please balance encouraging SFS transformational possibilities with a sober recognition of the unique energy, vision, and chemistry required to achieve them at SFS and elsewhere.

The Origin of the Vision

In 1997 a group of like-minded parents near Stockholm developed the vision of having their children educated in a school where teachers employed the emerging practice of compassionate communication. This form of communication is called Nonviolent Communication ⁶ (also known as 'NVC'). Some of the parents had attended preliminary NVC training. They liked the energy it produced, the freedom, the responsibility, the hope it offered for their children to achieve more of their potential. They wanted to design a different approach to their children's education. ⁷

The parents shared that vision with NVC-trainer Marianne Göthlin. Ms. Göthlin had taught in the Swedish state school system for ten years using an NVC approach and was experiencing the powerful impact of NVC in the classroom. Together they began to explore the parents' vision. After much effort, the Skarpnäck Fria Skola or Skarpnäck Free School was founded.

While there were certain important other principles at work, the parents and the four teachers involved agreed that:

- a) NVC attitude and model of compassionate communication would be central to all learning;
- b) they would have no more than 100 students; 10 in each age
- c) the parents would be substantially involved in planning, budgeting, and supporting the new school, with teachers and parents jointly holding the ownership of the school.

The proposed level of parents' involvement would allow to free up government funding in order to apply it elsewhere ⁸. This would effectively increase the chances for the school's success.

The Flower and How it Looks

The presentation made on April 10, 2008 by Ms. Göthlin, founder, and Ms. Kiki Nilsson, former principal and present teacher at Skarpnäck, is to be found in the Annex. While there may be other salient points drawn from that presentation, the most important is that when building a school like SFS, it is critical to have two basic philosophical foundations: compassion and NVC consciousness.

Had the SFS class started in a typical state school, the teachers would have been subject to typical rules and regulations, restrictions and fluctuations. Parents would have been restricted from helping maintenance and property cleaning. At Skarpnäck, the school was able to redirect funds for maintenance and cleaning into the portion of the budget reserved for hiring teachers. Having the freedom to manage the budget is

critical for this school, as is having school administration aligned in spirit with the teachers so, in the eyes of the students, their administrative duties are exercised seamlessly. The intent is for the same NVC spirit of co-operation and inclusion to pervade all aspects of the school.⁹

How the Vision Became Planted

In retrospect it is clear that the 1997 gathering of parents held the guiding vision that their children had more to give and more to learn than might be experienced in a typical state school. These parents were confident that there could be a school which would bring out more of their children's potential. They sensed that the Nonviolent Communication ideas of Dr. Rosenberg¹⁰ held the key to unlocking this greater potential for learning. The vision they held was a part of a larger sense of openness to whatever might lead to a healthy understanding of the world and their children's potential in it.

Central to those ideas was the energy of openness fostered by NVC. The desire to place NVC at the core of the educational experience led the parents to contact Göthlin. She became the perfect connection as she already had initiated and taught in an NVC environment within a traditional Swedish state school classroom for several years. Through a series of meetings between the parents, the teachers and government officials, the Skarpnäck Free School was born. Twenty-four children ages 6 - 9 were enrolled. Four teachers, Göthlin and three more, were hired. Parent committees provided janitorial services to keep the school clean and to cut costs so that more teachers could be hired from the limited governmental funds available.¹¹ A cook was hired to provide nutritious, organic meals and snacks.¹² Classes began in August, 1998. The Skarpnäck Free School seed was planted.¹³

Göthlin and her associate, Kiki Nilsson, recall in generally fond terms that much of the daily administration of the school, in the beginning stages, was near-chaos. What was the curriculum to be? How could they articulate this new openness to learning free from the traditional expectations of reward and punishment? How could they instill the idea of student initiative? How could they cultivate student appreciation for the option to learn as much as possible? In what ways could they induce a sense of fun and adventure so that the students *and* teachers would want to come back the next day and really pour themselves into that day's opportunities?¹⁴

These questions, balanced by the ever-present pressures of answering phone calls, students arriving late from doctors appointments, talking to food vendors, plumbers, electricians, and building inspectors, filling out reports to government authorities,

preparing lesson-plans, encouraging the discouraged, and bringing a form of traditional order out of the often chaos-threatening variables of a new venture, led to a consuming, daily drain of energy. Göthlin and others often had to learn anew what traditional schools already knew simply because this was, after all, an educational institution. At the open house, with a kind smile, Göthlin recalled how she and the other teachers were often at the edge of fatigue, wondering how they could go forward the next day. But then she said there was the occasional, deeply encouraging Zen-like moment when a student would 'get it': seeing anew some personal possibility, finding some way to lift the spirits of a new student, teaching one another something of the fresh energy offered by the practice of NVC, or going from a sense of the impossible to possible by accomplishing it in very tangible small steps, often with the help of another student. "That would lift our spirits for days," Göthlin recalled. "That was the kind of encouragement we needed to continue trusting our vision."

It wasn't easy. Day after day the SFS community encouraged students to take responsibility, to have fun learning, to follow the course of their own spirits, to learn the required materials their own way. The parents and teachers had agreed to limit class size to foster the kind of direction from the NVC-trained teachers that allowed for much more-than-just-mechanical traditional learning efficiency, letting the spirits roam freer within the structure overseen by the teachers. It was a little like reducing the number of players on the football field, and increasing the number of coaches. The children were expected to follow models of order and respect, but not to rely completely on direction from teachers about what and when and how to learn. Göthlin remembers it took about two years for some students to break the habit of relying on teachers to initiate the learning experience. "They just kept on asking for permission, as if they had to wait on us to learn." It took time and, many, many dialogues to build trust in the congruence between word and intention.

She recalls with a slight emotional hesitation and great pride the example ¹⁵ of a student who, when he first entered SFS, chose to communicate in pictures. He only wanted to spend his time drawing. He would draw. And draw. And draw. That was his way of communicating. His parents were concerned, and so were the teachers. Yet, they were patient. If that was the student's way to communicate what he knew, then they would honour his expression. So, they gave him an even larger sketch pad and encouraged him to draw. Gradually he began to put words to his pictures, a form of cartoon or animated communication. By the time he left school, he had graduated to film-making. And he had learned the required materials, but in his unique way and within his ability. The attentive listening spirit of NVC had guided the teachers through unconventional experience to an excellent result few in traditional schools might have predicted. His was just one of many unusual success stories for students who sought out

SFS's tolerant embrace as a refuge from bullying or experiences of rejection in other schools.

For all the frustration, the often frenetic activity of the school's teachers and parents and supporters, using metaphors, was like the very whirling force of wind and resource that became a cocoon for calm, safe learning. Their persistent, vigorous hard work created a protection for the learning calm in the eye of the near-chaotic storm. Teachers and parents could walk into the class and see the students thriving, even if all the demands of government, budgeting, start-up learning curves and other realities swirled around outside the class room. Somehow, the great vision of the parents, through an enormous amount of hard work and trust, had resulted in a potting soil of the right proportions. The vision had flowered into a little, beauty-filled plant.

How the Vision Survived, Matured, Thrived

Years passed. With time teachers came to realise that the rooted qualities of the SFS plant just seemed to appear more and more. Day after school calendar day, the calendar leaves fell off, not unlike the leaves of trees in a forest, blanketing the forest floor only to become, in time, a part of the soil, the medium for growth. The SFS leaves, however, were leaves of experience falling onto the original soil of collective vision. These were leaves of parental support, of clean up, conversation, cooking, and encouragement. These were leaves of teacher preparation, guidance, and direction. These were leaves of student openness, fun learning, and accomplishment. These were leaves shifting the paradigm of responsibility for learning from teacher to student.

From a modest beginning, almost imperceptibly the soil necessary to sustain the delicate plant began to change. It matured. Göthlin and the others hadn't noticed it at first. They were too busy running around trying to keep teachers in classes, adapting to changing dynamics in each room, adjusting to the daily and hourly variable demands placed on the school by government, budget, parents, group projects, special needs of specially challenged students (medically and physically), and just surviving the requirements to safeguard the compassionate learning environment which initially inspired SFS.

At some point they began to notice. The number of original parents still involved with the school had dwindled. Original students had graduated or their families had moved away; the amount of parental support declined. This happened so gradually, it wasn't obvious. Equally imperceptibly, the amount of self-direction by students increased. When new students or new teachers came to SFS, existing students could and did teach the ways of NVC learning, like a river current pulling a new swimmer into its flow. It took less energy to build the habits and still less to maintain them.

The calendar days of experience had fertilised the original vision. The students and teachers and administrators and parents needed demonstrably less time to define, clarify, and implement the vision. As the soil had gradually been enriched by their collective, sometimes painstaking experience, the SFS flower was maturing. Issues of survival decreased, and they began to understand more of how they had achieved what they achieved.

In that dawning of understanding the people at SFS were able seriously to consider whether their vision could produce seedlings which, through similar combinations of effort and resources, could be transplanted.

How the Plant Seedlings Might be Transplanted

The Skarpnäck Free School has a decade of experience. The ratio of student/teachers from the beginning was extremely high for Swedish standards, 4 teachers: 24 students. The ratio has changed over the years and in school year 2007-08 there were 9 teachers: 80 students. The school offer full-time day-care for the younger students so the school hours are 7:30 am to 5 p.m. The extra SFS personnel are counted as 'teachers', as are personal assistants to students and the cook, all working to support the vision.

These numbers give a snapshot of what the SFS founders believed critical: space and time for quality connection between those who knew how to lead with compassionate energy and those who were just discovering their potential. ¹⁶ While whirlwind activity might be administratively necessary outside the classroom, inside it the SFS parents wanted peaceful space in which their children's potential could develop. By and large, they got it.

Whether they could articulate it at the beginning or not, in hindsight the parents had insisted on a school structure incorporating seven elements:

1. a **quality of energy**: something more than school as usual; a willingness to engage and find ways beyond tradition to live democratic values; ¹⁷
2. a **vision** so that the energy invested equals energy returned: the parents entrusted their children to those skilled in communicating compassionately, allowing for increased development of their children's potential. The energy invested became energy returned;
3. a **special composition** of life-supporting elements:

- a. parental support: committing and contracting to support the vision;
 - b. government framework: providing opportunity to structure a school like this;
 - c. teacher skill: trained in both traditional subject content and NVC;
 - d. student opportunity: openness to new approaches and full inclusion; and
 - e. administrative courage: risking chaos, fatigue, change and success.
4. a **mutual nurturing** of students, parents, and teachers by students, parents, and teachers;
 5. **proportionality** of students to teachers and other resources to insure sustainability;
 6. **demonstrable results** measured in societal accepted competitive terms;
 7. a **cyclical renewal of the original energy**: being inspired by the invigorating energy of the SFS learning experience validates and renews the original vision which led to the original SFS vision and experience.

Varying amounts of these components went into the potting soil mix which supported SFS's growth in the first place. The precise percentages needed to insure success is unfathomable. All that can be said is that to recreate the SFS experience there needs to be an adequate supply of each component. When considering all we know and don't know about how to recreate that experience, we are reminded of author Bryson's humbling conclusion about the dawning of a new age in the development of life in the universe:

"The upshot of all this is that we live in a universe whose age we can't quite compute, surrounded by stars whose distances we don't altogether know, filled with matter we can't identify, operating in conformance with physical laws whose properties we don't truly understand." ¹⁸

At SFS a lot is known; a lot is unknown, inducing a healthy humility and respect for what former Czech President Vaclav Havel called
 "the hidden connections between phenomena." ¹⁹.

So, while experimenting with the components of the SFS experience, while stirring them

around, the founders might additionally offer advice for a greater perspective - like getting advice from a seasoned gardener on how much water for the seedling, at what intervals, and with how much exposure to sunlight, these bits of advice might come in handy:

a) **directional accuracy**: worry less about precision and more about whether you are being directed with the right quality of energy. Is it coming from a place of compassion? does it support the flowering of life? Course correction is in the very nature of working with children who learn within the unexpectedly rich energy of NVC. It's more important to be headed in the right direction than to be worrying about whether you may have to zig or zag from time to time.

b) **incremental change**: relax: it's in the nature of things to make great change slowly, inch by inch; ²⁰

c) **tilting toward compassion**: realise that sure change in organisations comes slowly. Go for the lean, the tilt, the bend rather than pushing an organisation to break with its habits quickly;

d) **'tipping point'** ²¹ **patience**: while prospects for educational progress may seem slim, as taught by Malcolm Gladwell, dramatic change may come quite rapidly when a critical mass for change develops. This is true no matter how long it may take for that critical mass to develop - Americans giving up public smoking, or the fall of the Berlin wall, for example.

e) **the paradoxical contribution principle**: when all seems hopeless, success may actually become easier because universally diminished expectations relieve pressure to perform, making superior performance more likely. That, paradoxically, makes success more likely. So, is it worth a try? After all, you may be surprised at the quality of self-sustaining energy you help generate from such a perspective.

Conclusion

This is not a guarantee or a blue print for educational franchise, a prediction, or even a promise of what anyone else might accomplish in any other situation with any other set of resources, energy, vision, and effort. It is a picture, a vision, a list of recipe ingredients that the SFS founders might use to recreate the SFS experience. This report suggests components for the potting medium into which a SFS plant might be transplanted. How transplanting would fare in Somalia or Bosnia or Ecuador is obviously less calculable than in other parts of Sweden, or even in neighbouring Scandinavian countries where

educational policies are similar to those in Sweden.

It is at the reader's discretion to decide whether the risk of trying to transplant a conceptual seedling from the rare SFS orchid is worthy. It might be helpful to ask students who have experienced both SFS and a typical state school. Or to ask their parents how the two types of school compare. Reading the unbiased Swedish National School Authority evaluation might be of value. And visiting Skarpnäck Free School allows first-hand perspectives of what SFS has to offer.

Whether you chose to visit SFS in person or through reading this report, you may end up with a feeling similar to that of Charles Darwin after reading geologist Charles Lyell's Principles of Geology:

“the great merit of the Principles was that it altered the whole tone of one's mind, and therefore that, when seeing a thing never seen by Lyell, one yet saw it partially through his eyes.”²²

We might predict that in some way ‘the whole tone’ of our minds may be altered to accept that, after ten years of accomplishment, the child's human potential for development has another ally. After investigating SFS, perhaps the reader will see all possibilities for educational innovation at least partially through [SFS] eyes, through the hope of the transforming SFS experience²³

It is the authors' hope that readers hold this report in a balance between optimism and reality. There is yet much to understand, much to learn even by those most involved in SFS²⁴.

Annexes

- i A brief summary of The National School Authority's (SNSA) report
- ii Student reports on the school
- iii Backgrounds of the authors of this report
- iv Text notes to accompany the slide presentation on Skarpnäck Free School
- v Footnotes
- vi Commentary by Marianne Göthlin

Annex i

A summary of The National School Authority's (SNSA) report

(see footnote 6 for more information on SNSA's role)

"The inspectors evaluate Skarpnäcks Fria Skola as providing the students with 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 provide 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 an understanding of what the concepts of democracy implies. The students 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 works actively with values based on Nonviolent Communication. Through different forms like drama exercises, discussions and in daily interactions, the students are trained to work well in partnership, and to care for each other. During the visit the inspectors observed how this was ingrained throughout the whole school. Inspectors emphasize that the work with the learning environment and influence in this school is of very high quality."

Annex ii

Student reports on the school

Student report 1 – 'A visit at our school', written by Karl, 15

"I started in this school at the beginning of 9th grade. The first two years of the upper level of compulsory school I studied in another school, but during 8th grade things didn't turn out so well for me. I didn't like the school at all, my class was very messy and the teachers didn't really seem to care. I was away from the class for half a year because of the way the atmosphere was there. During the summer holiday me and my mum looked for another school, and got a tip about this school from a friend. And well, here I am now!

I really like this school because of the way we work here. The thing with not having homework is a great idea because (at least that's what I think) when I had homework's, I just wanted to get it done, I didn't care if I learned anything from it, just wanted to get it done so I could do the stuff I wanted too. So if someone thinks that homework's are for learning, then they are wrong. Yes, wrong! Everyone I've talked to about his have said the same. They just want to get it done, if you ask them 10 minutes later what the homework was all about they don't remember. It's simply useless.

The thing with the school being so small is great for the studying I think. The teachers have more time for everyone and it's just better to be few! At least that's my opinion, some of the students here think that it's boring with so few people to meet here. I also like the way of working with different themes and bigger projects here. It's much more interesting than the way I'm used too from other schools. Just reading a book and answering questions doesn't work. Get the students interested in learning things and make it in a funny way and they will learn a lot more!

This school is also different from others because of the atmosphere here. In the classroom for example, you can say something without being afraid of that someone will make fun of you because you sound stupid, and that's not what I'm used to. I was very quiet in my last class and I still am, but that's just because I learned to be quiet, no one wants people to call you names and stuff like that just because you open your mouth. Here they encourage you to talk, which is great. The teachers here seem very dedicated to their work compared to my last school, and that makes it funnier and easier to learn.

I am pretty sure that bullying doesn't exist in this school, not anything that I know of anyway. Perhaps because of the atmosphere here, if someone actually did it, other students would stop it. It's a feeling of safety here. I don't know if they do anything here to prevent bullying but I don't feel that it's needed. It just doesn't exist here."

Student report 2 – 'Skarpnäcks fria skola, written by Lara, 15

“Our school is a parent co-operative and that means that the parents and teachers own this school together. The parents are always updated with our latest news but also our plans and what kind of projects we are doing. They are able to effect important decisions because they are members of the board.

The small size of the school makes it easy to know everybody. We all know each others names and the parents have an eye on the students. The whole name thing makes it easier to communicate and start conversations. I think the parents feels very relieved about knowing each other. It's not like everybody hangs out together during free time but it's definitely not the cold kind of atmosphere that I know from experience from my old school. I used to go to a big school with 1000 students and we had about 20 different teachers. There was no control at all and the teachers did not see us as individual people. They saw us as groups and they were not interested to even try to get better contact with us. When I was in 4th grade I'd had enough. Of course it was hard to leave all my friends that I've known for years but Skarpnäcks fria were going to be a fresh start! I was surprised over the way that the teachers treated us.

The teachers here are very easy to talk to and they are also very open-minded and young. I think it's important that they have a young age because it makes us feel like we have good contact with them not only as teachers but as understanding friends too. There is no power game between the teachers and it's nice to see, as a student, that the teachers feel good about each other. They are like a big family! And to see all these ambitious people working to get this atmosphere so nice makes you also want to be involved to create something; so many students feel so comfortable to go to school. The feeling of being taken seriously is very important for young people, especially when it involves the school, because we spend most of our the time here and it makes it a little bit easier to wake up in the morning, knowing that you are going to a place where you can effect everything from the look of the classroom to the decision of who's going to be the new teacher.

We are (most of the time) very involved in big decisions and to know that adults listen makes us take an active interest which can be very unusual with people of our age who not only goes to school but also have homework. We have a homework-free policy, so the teachers don't give us any homework and we do all our projects in school time. Of course we can do homework if we feel like we are a little bit behind the group but that is our own choice. I think the idea of making a school homework-free may scare people. There are many people who are surprised and think that we are dumb because we don't do any exercises in our free time but that is just nonsense. Of course we learn but homework makes people feel a lot of pressure and not free to do what they want, and free time is supposed to be for relaxing and getting energy to go to school and be ambitious the next day. I know that many people are very sceptical for this whole idea but for me it really does make sense. And from the results from our tests we can prove that this works for us. But of course it takes a lot of self responsibility to do the projects by the deadline. So this may not work for people who need to be pushed all the time, because our teachers are not very strict. They have a softer attitude and, like I said before, very easy to communicate with. This soft attitude makes our days filled with fun

activities, laughs and interesting conversations so I really recommend this school for people who feel insecure and scared of being who they are.

Skarpnäcks fria is a place where everybody gets accepted, even if they wear different kind of clothes, have a different kind of style or if they have different kind of thoughts. The students are very mixed but the size of the school limits the freedom to get many friends. It's a little bit hard to find new friends when there is just one class of every age. So that is one of the disadvantages about our school. Something more I have to admit that I don't like is that our school is very into the whole "camping in the forest" thing. I love to hang out and be outside the school but I prefer to lie on the beach under the summer sun and chill out, not sit and freeze in a forest while we are learning how to survive without any modern conveniences. I think it's boring and do not find that very effective. I'd prefer to sit and read a book in the classroom. Anyway, those are just my personal thoughts. There are students and teachers who just love the outdoor life."

Student report 3 - 'About our school', written by Gabriella, 14

"It was in autumn '98, and a new school was about to be born. Was in one of those "ordinary" schools? No, more like the opposite. This was a new school with a brand new concept. With only 24 children at the start, the school worked its way to the top. So, what was the new concept? Well, basically the new thing about this school was that the parents would be very involved in the school. In this school, everybody would be able to get their voice heard. Not only the parents, also the students at the school.

Today the school has around 80-90 students. It may sound like a small number to you, but that's actually the way we want it at our school.

Different things about our school

There are a couple of things about this school that makes it fairly special from other schools. Here are some of the things that make this school special:

No homework. Almost every other school has homework, but not our school. So, is it a good or bad thing? Most of the children of course think it's a very good thing. And actually, I do too. Not because I'm a student and think it takes too much of my free time, but because I don't think homework is always necessary. Maybe it's necessary sometimes, but definitely not always. You can take some responsibility and study at home if you have to. That's something most students at this school are aware of.

It's smaller. Many other schools have around 500-1000 students, while we only have 90 at the most. Some students at the school may think it's boring with such a small school where you know everybody and everybody knows you. And of course, you might feel like that some days. But I really think it's more positive than negative things about going to a small school. Which bring us to the next point...

Better contact between students and teachers. Since the school is smaller than most other schools, I think it's easier to get good contact with the teachers. Personally, I really like that I have fairly good contact with the teachers.

Bullying – not our style!

In this school, I don't think anyone's being bullied. I think it depends on all the students at this school have more sense than to bully another student. I also think it have something to do with that this school is so small.

Since it's such a small school, everybody sees what's happening. If one student is being mean to another and a third student sees it, the third student can tell the person who's being mean to stop. And hopefully, the mean person will stop. And if not, you can ask the teachers for help. Then you can all sit down and talk about what the problem might be.

This school compared to other schools.

I've been on this school for most of my time in school, but when I was in third grade my family decided to move away from town. So from 4th grade to 7th grade, I've been to other schools. I've been to 4 other schools than this one. So, I can tell you that I actually have some experience from other schools.

In one way, very many things are different about this school from other schools. But in another way, it's really not so different. It's not like this school has a completely different system than other schools, it's just... different. If you want exact info about what's different about this school, look under the headline "Different things about this school".

It's not just one thing that makes this school special. It's many different things mixed with other things."

Annex iii

Backgrounds of the contributors of this report

a) Marianne Göthlin, native of Stockholm, Sweden, received her teacher degree from The Teacher Institute in Stockholm 1988, after which she began teaching. She taught in the Swedish state school system for 10 years. However, a turning point for her since 1990, which directly influenced the direction of her teaching, and then the founding of the SFS, was training in NVC. She was principally influenced by the teachings of Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. and one of his earliest certified NVC trainers, Towe Widstrand of Stockholm. Widstrand has been a friend, mentor, and business partner of Göthlin. While Göthlin continues to support SFS's work frequently, she is no longer present full time in the school. She is in demand as a speaker, certified NVC trainer, and consultant in both Scandinavia and throughout the world. The day-to-day administration of the school is cared for by her long-time colleague Kiki Nilsson, a full time teacher and former school principal, and Martin Söderström, the school's current principal, both of whose skills and understanding of Nonviolent Communication is well-grounded.

b) Roger Sanders, from the United States, studied at the University of Edinburgh and received degrees from Baylor University in Liberal Arts and Law. He teaches business law and organisations at Austin College in Texas, USA and serves as a lawyer and certified mediator. When his NVC training began in 1999, he was deeply influenced by Widstrand both as a trainer and role model in business-related decision making. Interest in how organisations may be structured to tilt toward compassionate functioning led Sanders to SFS's recent open house. He is a former President of the Board of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC).

Annex iv

Slide presentation and brief text notes to accompany the slides on Skarpnäck Free School

To insure greater clarity, the oral presentation has been shortened and modified for written presentation here.



1. Skarpnäck Free School – established 1998

Skarpnäck Free School (SFS) 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 were already losing their desire to attend school and to learn. These parents wanted a different kind of school for their children - one based on respectful, compassionate interactions and the democratic principles outlined in our national curriculum; a place where their children could be more active in their learning and free to express themselves.



2. Our wish for students to keep the joy of learning along the years in school.

One of the dreams when starting this school was that we would like to see our students as eager and motivated to learn when they leave school after nine years, as they were their first day in school. We find it sad and unacceptable that children lose their connection with their natural curiosity to explore and learn, and their spirit with the time they spend in school. Therefore we support our students to work from inner motivation, we include them in planning content and methods as much as possible and support their different learning styles and individual pace of learning.



3. Shared vision at Skarpnäck

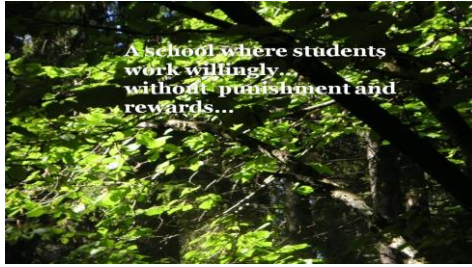
We aimed at building a school community with children, parents and teachers so that together we could:

- create a school for meaningful learning
- manifest the democratic values in our national curriculum
- provide active learning in school, society and nature
- have focus on food and environment
- have Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as our main guidance and inspiration



4. What comes in the way of learning?

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 and we schedule longer lessons, 1-2 hours, to serve engagement and focus. We also have longer breaks so children get space to engage in their playing and benefit more from the daylight in all seasons. It was a real challenge to be free to find out and create what we really wanted, with so many aspects and different views to consider and discuss, including national curricula and school law. We have been persistent in keeping from school traditions when it is not serving our vision, preferring to find ways to manage the chaos of not knowing.



5. A school where students work willingly...without punishment and rewards

I believe that what interferes most with joyful learning is the demanding “should” and “have to” attitude built on punishment and rewards that traditionally have been ingrained in schools. So from the very beginning we were clear that we wanted to use Nonviolent Communication (NVC) language and principles to support a paradigm shift and create a place for engaged and meaningful learning, where everyone learns how to relate to authorities differently.

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 for that day. Time for free play, integration, leisure and relaxation is acknowledged. This policy of “homework by choice” stirred some fear amongst parents in the beginning. Now we are content to find in evaluations that our students learn more than the average in subjects without having routine homework.



6. When you feel safe and accepted as you are, it's easy to learn and to be open to co-operate with others

We started 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 and simple wisdom: Needs for safety, acceptance and inclusion are essential for learning.

When feeling stressed, the brain is not ready for learning.

Therefore we emphasise building partnership relations and agree to create a supportive learning environment built on participation and co-operation together with the students.



7. A giraffe school?

We did not set out to formally teach children NVC. 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.

Although, if what we mean by a "giraffe" school is... a mutually-respectful, life-serving learning community, where students, teachers, parents and staff learn 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 where 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.

8. At Skarpnäck Free School

Limited size maximum 100 students

Organisation co-operative participation
shared responsibility, sense of ownership, "we"
shared vision
meetings based on needs

Inner and outer atmosphere

personal and respectful, open attitude
partnership relations
a place to be and to learn

Teachers' competence and engagement

common attitude based on NVC values
skills in subjects AND conflict resolution

Ongoing evaluation

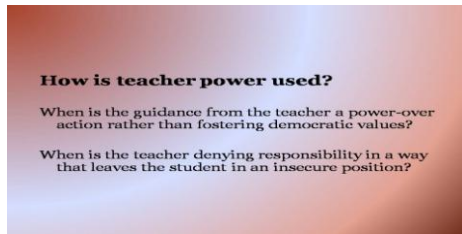
dialogue about how we succeed or not
flexibility in our use of resources

SFS began in the autumn of 1998 with twenty-four children, aged 6-9, and four teachers.

Ten years later, we have eighty students, aged 6-15, and nine teachers.

We set up the school as a co-operative 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 when we started - 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. The last years, as the school has grown, we have had a principal because it is serving us with ease and structure.



9. How is teacher power used?

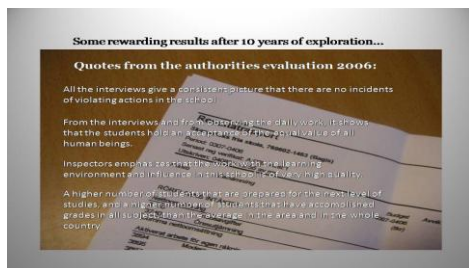
When is the guidance from the teacher a power-over action rather than fostering democratic values?

When is the teacher denying responsibility in a way that leaves the student in an insecure position?

As violence in schools is increasing, many teachers are struggling with how to use their power as an authority. They are longing to be treated with respect and the “old times” when students automatically listened to teachers is no longer there. So the question of how to be a powerful authority as a teacher without using a “power-over” attitude and language becomes very essential. NVC has the clearest answer I have found to build this competency. The teachers at SFS have explored this over the years and created a real atmosphere of “power with” - together with the students.



10. Genuine cooperation is inspired when participants trust that their own needs and values will be respected



11. Quotes from the education authority’s evaluation 2006:

“All the interviews give a consistent picture that there are no incidents of violating actions in the school.

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.

Inspectors emphasised that the work with the learning environment and influence in this school is of very high quality.

The numbers for students who are prepared for the next level of studies, and for students that have accomplished grades in all subjects, are higher than the average in the area and in the whole country.”



12. We have prioritized:

- To have more teachers and smaller groups
- To move from “power over” dynamics to “power with” dynamics



13. Leadership in the classroom

Cooperative authority – caring for individuals, self and the group

Focus on skill building – stimulate inner motivation

Clear objectives – understandable and verbalized

Make rules together with students – create a serving learning environment together

Competence to handle conflicts

Stand up for values; make clear STOPS to what is not acceptable



14. Parents are part of the leadership team, the administration and the maintenance of the

school

Parents are included in the school to share responsibility and co-operate, to support the need of building safety and security for their children, 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, giving us more choice to use our financial resources to hire more teachers.



15. We integrate social skills in all our learning activities

If you know something you can teach it to others – we are all teachers and learners

Students need to be invited to a mutual process around their own learning and being at school. They need a learning environment where they experience that they both receive and give something.



16. Everybody has special needs

At SFS all children are integrated in our regular classes. We welcome differences and see them as resources. It provides for all of us a way to learn tolerance and mutuality. The structure of the work is there to support the group. The length of the lessons and the content has to change with the group. We have a flexible organization that can change over time with the development of the group.



17. To be included and able to influence what affects you is an important value in NVC – this is *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. 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 generally their need for attention, to be seen and supported is met.



18. Celebration of differences – to be heard and seen in one's uniqueness

Quote from a parent:

“My children grow in self-esteem every day. I saw them feeling well from being seen and recognised. 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 benefits from these conditions. Two years ago I watched a football match where 6-year olds as well as 14-year olds were participating and the most fascinating thing 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 used to playing soccer played with a group that were more experienced with easier rules.”



19. NVC gives you skills to be you together with others

We spend time outdoors where it is easy to find space for everybody to be – and bring that inner spaciousness with us back in to the school environment



20. You learn to be responsible if you are encouraged to listen to your feelings, express yourself and evaluate yourself – and are received seriously.



21. Teachers are models for how to deal with conflicts and how to live democratic values in daily situations.



22. How we look at and deal with conflicts

Conflicts are seen as opportunities for learning - learn about yourself and others

Receive expressed feelings and reactions seriously

Immediate reactions – or intervention – from teachers

Listen with empathy to all parties

Support students to use respectful words in their reactions

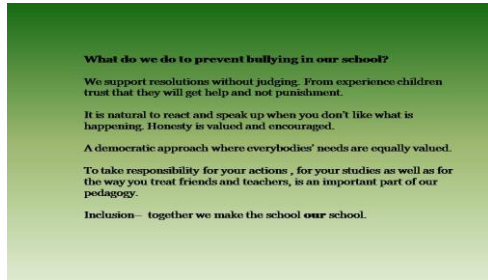
Support students to find actions that work for everybody



23. Listen, listen, listen ...an experience of connection and understanding

We practice listening which develops the trust that we can manage difficult dialogues.

We frequently see our students taking time out when there are disagreements. They take turns to listen to each other to understand. If they do not find a way, they ask teachers for support.



24. What do we do to prevent bullying in our school?

We support resolutions without judging. From experience, children trust that they will get support, not punishment.

It is natural to act and speak up when you don't like what is happening. Honesty is valued and encouraged.

A democratic approach is when everybody's needs are equally valued.

To take responsibility for your actions, for your studies as well as for the way you treat friends and teachers, is an important part of our pedagogy.

Inclusion - together we make the school **our** school.



25. Our struggles?

- To be powerful authorities without using "power over" dynamics
- The balance between needs – students' and teachers'
- The balance between individuals' needs and care for the group
- To engage parents
- To get the flow of information going in our school community – and integrate new people

It is an ongoing balancing act for the teachers to handle the dilemma of the students' autonomy and responsibility for their learning and the teacher's responsibility towards the students to support their long-term development and skill building.

26. NVC training at Skarpnäck Free School

Intro for new members every year – from 2 hours up to 1 day

Teacher group:

1 or 2 days in the beginning of the school year

A half day every month

Individual choice of workshops

Individual NVC counseling

Individual choice of NVC books and material

Parents:

Monthly practice group

Open invitation to participate in NVC workshops arranged at school

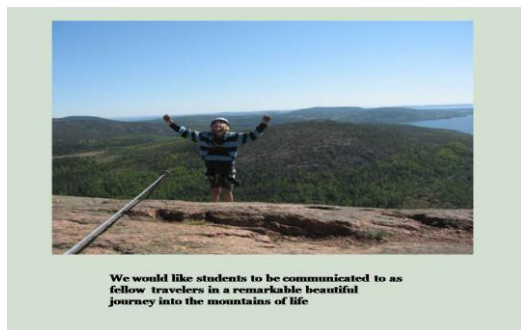
Students:

Learn NVC mainly from the way teachers connect with them and model NVC



27. In trust we walk together

This is a photo from one of the outings a class of 9-10 year old students made. They studied geography and the idea to visit a mountain in the North of Sweden came from one of the students. Teachers and parents together arranged the journey and all the students climbed the mountain. A true challenge where they were dependent on each other to be able to make it to the top and they all thrived from this experience.



28. We would like to communicate with students as fellow travelers in a remarkable beautiful journey into the mountains of life...

Annex v - Footnotes

¹ □ Skarpnäck Free School or Skarpnäcks Fria Skola is located in the Skarpnäck suburb just outside Stockholm. Most, but not all, students live in the neighborhood.

² The school has always had an open door policy for parents and has received many visitors throughout the years. April 10, 2008 marked the first announced, all-day 'open house' for which a formal presentation was prepared, guests were invited, volunteer student guides led tours, and former students and present parents of students were available for answering questions.

³ Analogy to organic life is the subject of many writings loosely gathered under various banners, from William Blake's poetry to dead-serious science. It might be instructive to see the Skarpnäck Free School experiment in organic terms. See, for example, Benyus, Janine M, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, Harper Perennial, New York, N.Y., 1997, and particularly Chapter 4 ("How Will We Make Things? Fitting Form to Function: Weaving Fibers Like a Spider") and Chapter 7 ("How Will We Conduct Business? Closing the Loops in Commerce: Running a Business Like a Redwood Forrest"). Since at least the 1970's, scientific theory under the heading of 'general systems theory', first popularized by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, has followed the Taoist notion of universal process flowing through all things, from atoms to cosmos, and everything in between, including educational systems. See Bertalanffy, Ludwig von, *General System Theory*, George Braziller, New York, N.Y., 1968. See also Weinberg, Gerald M., *An Introduction to General Systems Thinking*, Dorset House Publishing, New York, N.Y., 1975; Laszlo, Ervin, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for our Time*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, N.J., 1996; Capra, Fritjof, *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, Anchor Books, New York, N.Y., 2002. We hope the organic analogy assists our understanding of how the energy reflected in this process can be recreated elsewhere or perhaps on a larger scale.

⁴ This term is loosely descriptive of the variety of educational efforts reflected in the thicket of modern educational experience. There are many other hopeful educational approaches of great value to students and parents in various other venues, including excellent examples of traditional education. Thus, the focus on the SFS approach here is not intended to exalt it over others, but rather to lift up its sometimes unique and effective nature for consideration along with other approaches. For a more detailed understanding of the theories underlying it, please read 'Shared Fundamental Democratic Values by Means of Education', an article by Niclas Ronnstrom published in the book *Connecting Policy and Practice*, published by Kompf/Denicolo, 2005. The SFS experience can here be seen and understood within a conceptual educational context first identified by the American educational philosopher, John Dewey.

⁵ The National School Authority (SNSA) conducts inspections which each last two to three days approximately every three years to analyze thoroughly school performance in reference to the national curriculum and Swedish educational law. The report is built on concrete observations during daily work in the school, with interviews from students, teachers, parents and school leadership. Both learning objectives and democratic values are in focus in the SNSA's report.

What is reproduced in the annexe are summary conclusions drawn from the original Authority report entitled "*Utbildningsinspektion i den fristående grundskolan Skarpnäcks Fria Skola, Dnr 54-2006:1664.*" The report is available only in Swedish and you find selected quotes translated from the official SNSA report in the annexe "**A brief summary of SNSA's report**", which provide examples of the qualities of the learning environment SFS created.

⁶ The term 'Nonviolent Communication' or 'NVC', subject to a claimed trademark, was coined by the founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Marshall Rosenberg, PhD. It is more fully explained in a number of the Center's publications, including Rosenberg's foundational *Nonviolent Communication – A Language of Life*, Second Edition, Puddledancer Press, Encinitas, California, 2003.

⁷ The parents' spirit was not only to embark on an NVC-oriented path, but also to

avoid the well trodden path of dominant society thinking. Although speaking of standard industrial thinking, the authors of *Cradle to Cradle* highlighted similar concerns about the infrastructure of the beaten path being “powered by brutish and artificial sources of energy” which “attempts to work by its own rules ... contrary to those of nature.” McDonough, William, and Braungart, Michael, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York, N.Y., 2002, p. 17. The parents wanted to give a more natural learning process a chance to guide their children’s educational experience.

⁸ In the Swedish educational system, the money which would ordinarily be available per student if attending a typical state school would simply follow a student entering SFS. This is a form of per capita funding similar to funding for government-approved ‘charter’ schools in the United States and elsewhere.

⁹ It is worth noting that, to the authors’ knowledge, NVC has functioned well as a guiding principle when planted in other particular organizations (governmental, educational, reformatory, or business). However, it has never survived within such organizational frameworks for a decade or more as it has at SFS. So, although lovingly presented and planted in the Cleveland, Ohio school system, it gradually died out after some years. The same could be said of NVC plantings in Volvo, Ford, the Swedish prison system, the Washington state prison system, the Texas prison system, the Jerusalem police, and other institutional plantings. The singular, long lasting success of SFS heightens interest in how it was accomplished and whether it might be replicated.

¹⁰ Dr. Rosenberg has repeatedly urged that the term means far more than just communicating without violence. Rosenberg has struggled, after 40 years of teaching this language, to find words that adequately describe the processes of communication. In some sense NVC is limiting and misleading about the kind of communication Rosenberg envisioned: that which opens space, releases energy, and encourages life-supporting connection in ways that produce collateral benefits in education, business, and personal circumstances. It was the promise of this energy that the parents wanted to douse their children in *while* learning traditional subjects taught in traditional schools. In short, they wanted to see if their children could learn at a level of traditional excellence while being ensconced in an untraditional level of consciousness, ethics, and energy, described and directed by the national curriculum, but fostered by Nonviolent Communication.

¹¹ Restricted SFS budgetary information may be released by SFS upon serious inquiry reflecting appropriate need.

¹² After vigorous debate between and among parents centered on whether the meals ought to be vegetarian or non-vegetarian, they decided to start up with presenting a mainly vegetarian menu including some additional choices of meat and fish for students who preferred that. This was just another example of the democratic processes and decisions that the parents modeled for their children and for the staff of SFS. It became another link to the spirit of openness that the parents sought for their students in the SFS experience.

¹³ Their records, subject to Swedish administrative control and controlling law, are available for inspection by contacting Skolverket, Stockholm, Sweden. A note of caution, however: the records are only set forth in the Swedish language. Thus, while summary comments drawn from the 2006 Swedish governmental evaluation of the Skarpnäck Free School are referenced here, and

while a copy of that evaluation is available on request, the actual report will need to be translated for the non-Swedish speaker.

¹⁴ They learned a new perspective from the old wisdom of Matthew 6:34: “...do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.” Was it ever!

¹⁵ Although the SFS students might be thought exceptional and unique in a number of ways, contrasting their potential with that of students in a typical state school reflects that the SFS student body was not the cream of the academic crop. Sometimes it was far from it. In general, the entering test scores were within normal ranges. But their accomplishment was exceptional in comparison to their Swedish peers, particularly considering that the SFS student body encompassed those who might be considered needing extra resources by some standards. SFS has routinely accepted students struggling in other schools, physically and emotionally. Some of those have flowered in remarkable ways personally while becoming main-streamed socially. One student with the potentially socially crippling Asperger’s syndrome was the lead singer in a SFS rock and roll band which, coincidentally, was performing in the school’s little theater in the afternoon of the open house. Several other students and faculty watched the evidence of this young man’s personal transformation in his singing the lyrics of confidence and success.

¹⁶ To make the point perhaps a little more explosively and less congruently than those trained in Nonviolent Communication might like, science author Bill Bryson reports that “...if you are an average sized adult, you will contain within your modest frame no less than 7×10^{18} joules of potential energy – enough to explode with the force of thirty very large hydrogen bombs, assuming you knew how to liberate it and really wished to make a point. Everything has this kind of energy trapped within it. We’re just not very good at getting it out.” Bryson, Bill, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Broadway Books, New York, N.Y., 2003, p. 122. Obviously the parents wanted to get that energy out, though presumably less explosively than Bryson describes.

¹⁷ As noted above, encasing the entire experience in space-opening, energy-releasing attitude is critical. Expecting oranges from an oak tree or roses from weeds isn’t any wiser than expecting Frankenstein to dance the ‘Nutcracker Suite’. With due respect to science and the legend of Frankenstein, the schools administrative ‘head’ needed to match the teacher and student ‘body’. The SFS school board consists of parents and teacher representatives. Parents’ innovative and trusting attitude played a major role when starting the school and the extended cooperation and shared ownership seems to avoid falling into the old pattern of “us and them” separation.

¹⁸ Bryson, Bill, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Broadway Books, New York, N.Y., 2003, p. 172.

¹⁹ Attributed to Vaclav Havel by Capra on his opening page. See, Capra, Fritjof, *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, Anchor Books, New York, N.Y., 2002.

²⁰ Probably not everyone is able to attempt the full-scale SFS experience. Perhaps it is a lack of resources or training or opportunity. But wherever it is, whatever it is, Göthlin and her colleagues offer not only this recollection, but also the possibility of consulting in the particular circumstance the reader may face, or simply to gain an understanding of the Nonviolent

Communication which fueled interest in the SFS experience initially. Part of considering the SFS experience might realistically mean that a fully transplanted garden might have to await richer times, and in the meantime, one blossom in the craggy edge of one cliff might be all the universe offers. If there is only one class or one teacher or one student, incremental change may be all that is possible. Göthlin, Widstrand, and others can also offer guidance in that respect.

²¹ See Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, Mass., 2000.

²² Schneer, Cecil J., ed. *Toward a History of Geology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969, p. 288.

²³ The experience of those who have experienced Skarpnäck first-hand as students is contained in the Annex. Students have written about their school as a part of their English lessons.

²⁴ One of the things that the authors may also need to learn is the way in which orchids grow. According to one volunteer editor of this work, Ms. Dianne Ruyffelaere, with one exception orchids grow in a plant medium, not in soil or potting soil. Apparently one species is reported to grow in soil. So, while orchid metaphors may have been used throughout, it may be just a little mixed up! But, the authors are confident the reader will get the point. Ms. Ruyffelaere founded and for 17 years has directed Keiki's Corner, a school in Berkeley, California dedicated to creating a compassionate, play-based learning environment for toddlers. Her interest in Skarpnäck is abiding.

Annex vi

Commentary by Marianne Göthlin

I feel really grateful to Roger Sanders, for him taking the effort to come all the way from Texas to visit "my" school.

The day after the open visit day we met again and Roger Sanders handed over his draft of notes for this report. From the way he expressed his impression of the school I felt moved to tears, so deeply seen and understood in our vision and persistent work to implement NVC, and I asked for permission to use his words and share with others. It is in this report!

I am also very grateful to Towe Widstrand who has encouraged and supported me and the work at SFS over the years, particularly from a perspective of sustainability and from her understanding of NVC values.

All three of us have interest in how to sustain NVC in organizations and I hope that this report on one example can bring inspiration and ideas to others.

And of course the main actors to make this rewarding school example possible are all the teachers, parents and students and their daily work and actions,

carrying the vision and dream along step by step. My biggest gratitude for all that past and present work from an empathic attitude that contributes to sustainability and development of our school.

For comments or questions about this report and Skarpnäck Free school, you are welcome to contact Marianne Göthlin at marianne@cnavc.se