

# It colours everything we do - how Solution Focus makes a difference in the Swedish school “Karstorpskolan Norra”

A conversation with Principal Cornelia Malm, with Kati Hankovszky and Orsi Szabó

## Introduced by Tara Gretton

Whether you work in schools or not, reading this interview will fill your heart and mind with joy, hope and possibilities! Also, I presuppose you will deeply respect Karstorpskolan Norra’s State School Principal, Cornelia Malm!

How wonderful for a leader to tell her colleagues when she first joins the school, “I don’t want to change things here. You are the professionals. I will immerse myself in meetings and conversations to figure out what is important to you here”.

In this interview, Cornelia, and the wonderful interviewers Kati and Orsi, amplify a beautiful story of how a new school Principal “mainly listened” and how, from that, they ‘witnessed’ the wonderful ‘effects’ of SF throughout the school and the wider school community. Cornelia shares with us how ‘SF is now built into the system. How it ‘colours’ everything they do.

This is a beautiful story of a leader “putting aside their map and listening” to what was already working and being so inspired by what they saw and experienced that they didn’t need to change anything.

Enjoy!

## The Conversation

Karstorpskolan Norra is a Swedish state-funded school with 65 educators and 450 students between the ages of six and twelve. They started working with Solution Focus (SF) seven years ago. In the following paragraphs, you can be inspired by the surprising observations of Principal Cornelia Malm, who joined Karstorpskolan Norra with more than 12 years of experience as a school leader in three different schools.

**Interviewer: You joined Karstorpskolan Norra a year after the launch of the SF programme. What were your first impressions of SF and the way the school worked?**

SF was very new to me, but I liked it immediately. It was simple, and it fits the way I like to work. Curiosity and having useful conversations are things I truly believe in. But with my professional experience as a principal, I had my map and an itinerary on how to manage a new school. I always thought it was my job to plan and organise everything. However, I chose to start differently this time: I put my map aside and listened.

I told my colleagues: 'I don't want to change things here. You are the professionals. I will immerse myself in meetings and conversations to determine what is important to you here.'

For almost a year, I mainly listened. Of course, I fulfilled my responsibilities if there were any problems, but I didn't start to organise the school.

I liked SF but didn't expect the effects I witnessed in the following months.

**Interviewer: Sounds good! What were some of those?**

Based on what I learned previously, I expected the typical problems in the first weeks. Organising teacher work schedules for breaks (which is always a problem), dealing with angry parents, and students who cause trouble or engage in fights. As a new principal, teachers expect you to solve these issues with students and parents directly. It is your responsibility, after all; you are the principal.

I was always very uncomfortable with these tasks, such as sitting with a child and telling them to behave or creating break schedules. Interestingly, not a single teacher came to me like that in this school. Since they worked with SF, they told me: 'Cornelia, I have a problem, and I also have kind of a solution.' So, I always asked: 'Yes, and what is that?' They told me their ideas, their solutions and asked, 'Can I do this?'

This was really shocking for me. No one expected me to solve those issues. Furthermore, I realised this behaviour was prevalent in every conversation in the school. My colleagues always had the solutions or were very close to it. They needed a yes or no, and I always said, 'Yes, do it!' even before I was fully trained in SF.

**Interviewer: How did you do that?**

I truly enjoy saying "yes" to my colleagues and witnessing them owning their profession. They are brave, confident, and great in their roles. It's easy to say yes because they are professionals trained in SF, and after all, what could go wrong? We can always adjust if needed. I trust them fully, so why say no?

Even if I have a better solution for something, I still support my colleagues' ideas. For instance, if a colleague wants students to self-correct their test in class, I might not think it's the best solution for the students, but I still say, "Okay, go try it, and let's talk about your experiences and what worked after that!"

If I focus on people trying to do things well instead of how they might do things wrong, they will always find good ways and solutions. Sometimes they learn; sometimes, I learn. This supposition colours everything we do.

**Interviewer: What are some more signs of this SF colouring?**

We begin each term by refreshing SF to reinforce it as the foundation of how we work. We also use SF principles as mantras: "Be curious!" "Always assume good about each other!" "If you're nervous, ask more questions - maybe if you're nervous, you haven't asked enough." "If things don't work, don't do them!" "If something works, do more of it!" We tell each other these sentences all the time.

SF is ingrained at every level and in every part of the organisation - we strive to live this way.

For example, we start the first meeting of the term - and basically every meeting - by collecting our needs and important topics for discussion. (Before that I created long lists of items to discuss). Of course, I have items to add, but the agenda is co-created, with everyone adding what is important for them for the term to be successful. This is a small but meaningful example showing how SF gives a voice to all the members in the school.

**Interviewer: And what else?**

The meetings with parents now look the same. Previously, I used to have much anxiety before these meetings. I felt responsible for preparing a long list of items to discuss and providing solutions. However, my responsibility remains to provide the best education for every child. The difference now is that I don't have a long list of solutions. Instead, I ask the parents and take them seriously as resourceful agents who want to create their own solutions.

Furthermore, we place great emphasis on giving parents positive feedback. We don't nag them or challenge them. We always try to reinforce how well they do their job as parents. In every letter I write, whether a summer or winter newsletter or during the COVID-19 pandemic, I highlight how amazing they are and how much they help and support us.

If some parents are not doing what they are supposed to, such as not sending their child with fruits as a snack, we ask, "How can I help?" This is natural to us.

**Interviewer: What happens if this doesn't work?**

This approach is always effective. We often discuss the challenges of parenthood, and those of us who have children can relate to the exhaustion that comes with it. However, we can only imagine the extra work involved when we consider the added responsibilities of parenting a child with extra needs. E.g., If parents tell us they are tired, we empathise with them by acknowledging their efforts. "I can only imagine how tired you must be".

I begin every meeting by giving parents recognition and positive feedback, even if this is the first time I have met them. I tell them how great their kids are and how good parents they are. I try to be specific about the child in my remarks. Sometimes, parents may be upset at the start of a meeting, but we offer them empathy, and appreciation, and collaborate to find solutions. This approach has always been effective.

**Interviewer: Really, always?**

If it doesn't work, it means we forgot something. After one or two years in Karstorpskolan, there was a unique family that we really struggled with. No matter how much I tried, the boy wasn't coming to school. I felt like I had fallen into a hole. The parents weren't listening, and I had no more questions. I was just very tired. So I called our consultant, Gaby, who taught us SF before. I told her I had had enough and needed her to talk to the parents; no matter how much it costs, just make the boy come to school. Funnily enough, she started asking me

questions, and after three or four of them, I felt like I knew what to do. I thanked her and hung up.

My solution was to discuss my feelings with the family. I admitted that I had forgotten to ask them how I could help and what they thought our next step should be. And my new approach worked. We have really been able to move forward since then. We still have problems, but we have the parents with us, which is important.

**Interviewer: What are some formal and informal ways to prevent these “falling in the hole” experiences and reinforce the principles and behaviours you wish to see in the school?**

SF is now built into the system. It colours everything we do. It influences how we organise and facilitate meetings and talk to each other, the parents, and the children. Every aspect of our work is grounded in Solution Focus.

Regarding formal education: in 2015, the process started with a three-day training on SF foundations for all the teachers. Newcomers still receive this training, followed by monthly group sessions tutored by a consultant. These sessions provide space for participants to learn from their own experiences (such as tough parent meetings or difficult conversations with students). The sessions are led in an SF way, shifting the focus from what is not working to what is already working.

We also have ongoing education in three groups: the management, special education teachers, and the security team. (You might call the last group the “bullying prevention team”, but they work with Sue Young’s method involving every child, not just those directly affected by bullying.) We regularly meet a consultant to help us learn and grow according to our own goals. This is a way of keeping our batteries full and ensuring we can give our best when interacting with the children and the parents.

**Interviewer: You mentioned you hadn’t expected what effect SF might have on the school. What were the most difficult situations the team solved?**

The most difficult times were in 2020, some months after COVID hit. That was the time when we had a learning study - a research project that involved 15 members of the staff and two PhD students from the university. My colleagues were researching their ways of teaching and collaboration: filming how they worked, rewatching, analysing, and ideating about alternatives. So, imagine this with COVID...

One of these would be more than enough, so I thought the whole thing would burst very soon. I was afraid of the moment when they would tell me they had “had enough”, were tired, and wanted to stop. It would have been totally reasonable. Everyone was very tired during that time.

But my colleagues were amazing: they figured out how to do everything smoothly - again, building and using their own solutions. The problem was that we had so many colleagues on sick leave, they couldn't allocate time properly for the research project. I asked what their ideas

were. They wanted to know if we could allocate one day when they could be away and do the project work when most of the colleagues were back. Again, of course, I said yes! Then we discussed how to manage the whole process, and they succeeded.

**Interviewer: Wow! How did you all do this?**

It's also about kindness and bravery. COVID brought big changes to our school, yet not one teacher complained or refused to do something that wasn't their job but considered to be important. We always had each other's back, and worked hard to succeed, even when it meant working more.

Teachers say we value having each other around here, and newcomers have reported feeling they have never been taken care of this well before. Conflicts and problems still arise, but we assume good intentions and offer help when needed, going the extra mile if necessary.

**Interviewer: If teachers have this feeling, children might get the hang too. What are some signs of that?**

Every year, the state conducts some quality assessment surveys in schools. I am not a big fan of them since, sometimes, it feels like we are telling children how to feel with quantitative questions about stress, bullying, or headaches. However, there is a question of whether they influence the things happening around them and if they have a grown-up to help them if they have problems. Our school's numbers are different from all other schools regarding these items. What we have noticed is that our children are really good at communicating their needs. These numbers show that our children feel they can be a part of the decisions made about education. They feel, just like our teachers feel, that they truly have a voice.

**Training process in Karstorpskolan Norra:**

*(As provided by the school's external SF consultant, Gaby Wallström)*

1. Basic training on SF principles (2+1 day)

- for the principals/leaders
- for the teacher

The training heavily relies on practice and group work to let participants have hands-on experience with SF. The time between the two sessions is also utilized in the sessions as time for practising or doing SF.

2. Weekly group coaching sessions (2 hours / week for 1-1,5 years)

- for the principals
- for teachers

The sessions focus on 'what is better' and 'what is your next step' and work with practical, everyday situations the participants face.

3. Leaders and teachers have the opportunity to talk to an external SF consultant if needed.