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Can collaborative consultation, based on communicative theory, promote an inclusive school culture?

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This article contributes to furthering our knowledge of how collaborative consultation, based on communicative theory, can make teachers' learning from, and with, each other an inclusive process, and thus promote an inclusive school culture. The aim is to study special education professionals' experiences of, and reflections on, leading collaborative consultations. The data consists of critical reflection (collaborative meta-consultation) in groups of special education professionals (consultants) and one researcher. The focus of the collaborative meta-consultations was on the consultations that the consultants held with groups of teachers. The data has been analysed using qualitative content analysis. Besides identifying some basic conditions, certain strategies and approaches have also been identified to make collaborative consultation an inclusive process. Collaborative consultation can promote an inclusive school culture if the concept of inclusion embraces how professionals collaboratively examine their practice, strategies, and values.

Introduction

Swedish government directions and *A school for all*

Sweden has cited collaborative learning among teachers as a way to promote students' reading, writing, mathematics, and science skills. As a result, education in professional group consultations has become an important element in improving teachers' abilities to learn from, and with, each other (Government directions U2011/2229/G, U2013/7215/S). Swedish policy documents greatly stress the importance of learning and emphasise evidence-based practices in education. In addition, education should respect diversity and offer equal opportunities to all children (Public Law 2010:800). *A school for all* (in Swedish, *En skola för alla*) has been a vision in Sweden since the 1946 School Commission, and thus inclusive approaches have been supported ever since (SOU 1948:27). The increased focus on collaborative learning among teachers must be understood in relation to the government's directive to strengthen education's scientific foundations. It raises the question of how to implement collaborative learning in such a way that it will lead to more sustainable evidence-based practices in education.

Levinsson (2011), for example, has investigated the possibilities and obstacles to strengthening the scientific basis by asking the following question: Should evidence for, or against, effects in education be explored and delivered by 'experts' to teachers, or should teachers collaboratively explore and analyse their own practice? Is it possible to link expert-driven approaches to participant-driven approaches, as Levinsson (2011) maintained? How, in that case, should such linkages be implemented? According to Fritzell (2009), communicative starting points — which deliberately take individuals' perceptions about evidence-based practice into account and allow teachers to critically

examine their own understanding and practice — can be a link that unites different traditions and perspectives and thus strengthens the scientific basis in education.

The data used in this study has its origin in a research and development project focusing on collaborative learning among teachers. More specifically, the data are recordings and field notes from *collaborative meta-consultations* [1] (CMC) that a researcher recurrently held with special education professionals (consultants) regarding their consultations with small groups of teachers.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this article is to study special education professionals' (henceforth, 'consultants') experiences of, and reflections on, leading collaborative learning among teachers (henceforth, 'collaborative consultation'). More specifically, the following research questions are explored:

1. What strategies and approaches can be identified in the reflections of the consultants that, in the light of communicative theory, could be seen as useful to promoting an inclusive school culture?
2. What do consultants express about the impact of being part of a CMC team on their leadership?

The CMCs were built on the premise of a collaborative ideal that traces its origins to Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981, 1995) and Freire's pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 1972). This article aims to furthering our knowledge of how collaborative consultation, based on communicative theory, can make teachers' learning from, and with, each other an inclusive process, and thus promote an inclusive school culture.

Theoretical starting points

Paulo Freire's (1972) pedagogy of liberation, which emphasises dialogical approaches in education and critical thinking, and Jürgen Habermas' (1981, 1995) theory of communicative action have been helpful in understanding what should be considered when it comes to collaborative learning in an educational setting. Freire's theory includes an aspect of empowerment, which means considering everyone as a competent person possessing knowledge to be produced and shared with others, and showing respect for everyone's opinions, experiences, and interpretations. Habermas' theory emphasises the procedures and norms of communication where the ideal is a communication free of domination. It points out everyone's right to state their opinions and values based on their experience and knowledge and everyone's willingness to speak in an understandable way. It also maintains that everyone should feel free to say what they intend to say without withholding anything. This is what Habermas calls the three validity claims (Habermas 1981, 1995). There is a pedagogical dimension to the theory because it stresses the questions of what, how, and why. Professionals who come together in order to reflect

upon their practice and who are aware of the three validity claims — truth, normative rightness, and truthfulness (in the original German, *Wahrheit, Richtigkeit und legitim, Wahrhaftigkeit*) — are enabled to discuss how to fulfil them (von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009).

I will now highlight three concepts crucial to the study: (1) collaborative consultation; (2) evidence-based practice; and (3) an inclusive school culture. They are intended to be understood in relation to the Swedish governments' focus on (a) collaborative learning among teachers, (b) ways to strengthen the scientific foundation in education, and (c) the vision of *A school for all*.

Collaborative consultation

Collaborative learning among teachers can be understood in terms of collaborative consultation (Sundqvist, von Ahlefeld Nisser & Ström, 2014). Since collaborative consultation is a complex activity with different approaches and strategies (Conoley & Conoley, 2010; Sundqvist et al., 2014; Tysinger, Tysinger & Diamanduros, 2009), there is no singular understanding of how collaborative consultation in a school setting should be implemented (Sundqvist et al., 2014). According to Sundqvist et al. (2014), the consultant has often been a school psychologist or a mental health professional providing advice to teachers. However, consultation between education professionals has become increasingly common since the 1990s, especially consultation between special education professionals and teachers. There are different types of consultation models, each based on a different perspective. In the existing research, the characteristic approaches are defined either as expert-driven, participant-driven, or "as a continuum where both expert-driven and participant-driven approaches can be used" (Sundqvist et al., 2014, p. 3.). An expert-driven approach is associated with the consultant giving advice to the consultee, while the participant-driven approach is associated with the consultant posing questions in a way that helps the consultee to clarify his/her perspective. Collaborative consultation can be understood in light of both perspectives.

The concept of communities of practice can also be helpful in understanding what collaborative learning is about. From this perspective, as well as from the communicative perspective used in this article, learning is understood as a social process (Wenger, 2000). However, in order to understand how collaborative learning among teachers can be performed in the most inclusive way possible, the concept of collaborative consultation, which takes its point of departure from communicative theory, is used. The concept includes the following features: deliberate, reflective dialogues, professional exchange, and shared sense making (Sundqvist et al., 2014).

Evidence-based practice

The movement for evidence-based practice started in medicine in the early 1990s (Hammersley, 2001). It is based on the idea that research is linear, rational and objective. According to Hammersley, the linear and rational model does not fit all professional activities. In fact, he maintains that it can be something of a misleading concept when it

comes to activities involving multiple goals or actions that can have multiple consequences. The nature of educational practice is different from that of medicine. Education is not as technical and subjected to objective assessments as medicine (Hammersley, 2001). Phrases such as 'best practice' (Levinsson, 2011, p.243), or 'what works' (Hammersley, 2001, p.4), which, from an evidence-based practice perspective, are seen as the proper focus of research, are problematic when used in the field of education "because it necessarily relies on multiple values, tacit judgement, local knowledge, and skill" (Hammersley, 2001, p.4).

Moreover, there is a gap between theory and the reality of a teacher's daily activities (Cordingley, 2008; Korthagen, 2007). Therefore, research has to allow for critical, professional reflection and assessment among teachers (cf. McArdle & Coutts, 2010; Mraz, Kissel, Algozzine, Babb & Foxworth, 2011; Ng & Tan, 2009). Individuals' perceptions must be taken into account because research that allegedly proves 'what works' in the classroom can be perceived differently by different teachers (e.g., Korthagen, 2007; Zepke & Leach, 2002). Despite the fact that the idea of evidence-based practice is highly prioritised in political agendas, both in Sweden and worldwide (e.g., Levinsson, 2011; Cordingley, 2008; Korthagen, 2007; Timperley, 2010), the emphasis on collaborative learning among teachers reveals that the ideas of participation, communication, and relation are also highly ranked. This makes it interesting to relate the concept of collaborative consultation to what Zollers, Ramanathan, and Yu (1999) refer to as an "inclusive school culture" (p. 157).

An inclusive school culture

The concept of inclusive education has been emphasised and supported both nationally and internationally (Public Law 2010:800; UNESCO, 1994), but even though there is agreement when it comes to a theoretical definition (UNESCO, 2009), there are differences when defined in practice (e.g., Ainscow, Howes, Farrell & Frankham, 2003; Göransson, Nilholm & Karlsson, 2011; Vislie, 2003; Zollers et al., 1999). Inclusive education is often understood as placing students in need of special support in mainstream schools (Göransson et al., 2011). However, there is research showing how schools have managed to create an inclusive school culture by adopting strategies on the basis of values and attitudes instead of external educational models (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Hargreaves, 2004; Zollers et al., 1999). This article refers to this broader formulation of inclusiveness with respect to ethnic, religious, gender, first language and other differences (e.g., Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). According to Zollers et al. (1999), an important feature of an inclusive school culture is a leadership driven by values such as participatory democracy, team building, and collaborative decision making. Inclusion becomes "a way of thinking" (p. 172) because of its emphasis on empowerment, respect, and democracy. This term includes "an inclusive leader, a broad vision of school community and shared language and values" (Zollers, p. 157). It can be linked closely to collaborative consultation, where guidelines such as democracy, communication, openness, respect, and participation are required (cf. Sundqvist et al., 2014). The Swedish school system is renowned for its vision of creating an inclusive school for all (OECD,

2011). Different approaches and models have been supported; one such example is the government's intention, since the early 1990s, to create special education professionals who can implement the idea of inclusive education in practice through their role as consultants.

Special education professionals in Sweden

The term 'special education professionals' is used in the article because the Swedish school system has two different, yet similar, professions: special educators (in Swedish, *specialpedagoger*) and special teachers (in Swedish, *speciallärare*). The special education program and the special teacher program comprise 90 credits at the postgraduate level and are both open to preschool teachers and school teachers with at least three years of teaching experience (SFS 2011:185). Special educators are trained to work in both preschools and schools, while special teachers are trained to work in schools. According to the Swedish Statute for Special Educators and Special Teachers (SFS 2011:185), both types of professionals are supposed to work directly with individuals and are also required to function as consultants to personnel, such as teachers, principals, and other stakeholders. Despite these similarities, there are some important differences in terms of what they are trained to focus on. For example, special teachers are taught to focus on individual-based teaching, while special educators are taught to focus more on organisational and environmental obstacles (Göransson, Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2015). There are no legal restrictions to the form of employment for special educators and special teachers. Special teachers are mostly employed by a principal, whereas special educators can be employed either by principals or by directors of the school board (von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2014). Moreover, there are no legal regulations regarding special educators' and special teachers' roles and functions. Ultimately, it is up to the school board or the principals to decide why, how, and when to use special education professionals (Lindqvist, 2013; von Ahlefeld Nisser, 2014).

Method

Consultants' experiences of, and reflections on, leading collaborative consultations were central to the study. Therefore, qualitative methods, such as recordings and field notes from the CMCs, were used to collect the data. A qualitative approach, which in this study is based on the thinking of Habermas (1981, 1995) and Freire (1972), allows the researcher to pose questions on the basis of the participants' experiences and understandings (cf. Quinn Patton, 2002).

Setting

The data used in this study consists of recordings and field notes from the CMCs (Figure 1, 3b) that a researcher held with consultants regarding their consultation with groups of teachers. The CMCs were part of a research and development project that was conducted over two years (2013-2015) in a municipality in Sweden. The overall aim was to increase preschool and grade 1 teachers' knowledge in reading and writing instruction by placing

an emphasis on inclusiveness. Another objective was to reinforce the role of special education professionals as consultants. The project was designed with three components; (1) lectures, (2) assignments and (3) collaborative consultation (Figure 1). The lectures consisted of basic literacy instruction, such as language structures, linguistic awareness, decoding, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. Each lecture was followed by assignments on each topic that teachers had to complete with their students. Additionally, each assignment was followed by collaborative consultations (3a) between groups of teachers and a consultant on what the teachers had discovered by doing the assignments. It was clearly stated that one of the project's purposes was for teachers and consultants to learn from, and with, each other. Therefore, to extend and intensify the consultants' professional development in collaborative consultation, the project provided critical reflections in the CMCs (3b) placing a special focus on the consultants' leadership. Thus, in accordance with the purpose of this article, data from the CMCs are the sources used in this article.
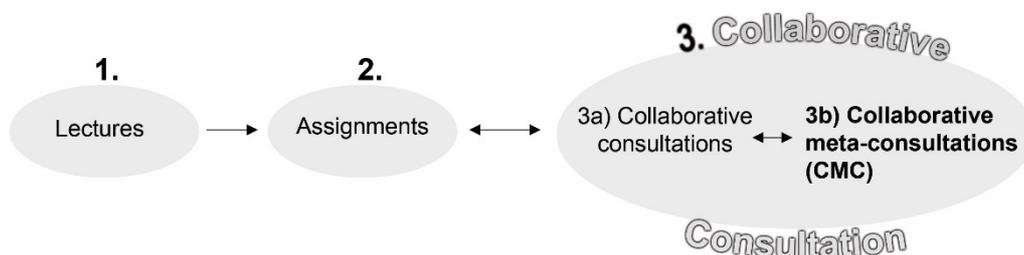

Figure 1: The design of the research and development project.
This article is based solely on analyses of the CMCs (3b).

Participants and data collection

A total of twelve special education professionals, including nine females and three males, were selected by the directors of the school board in a municipality in Sweden to function as consultants. The consultants consisted of nine special educators and three special teachers. They all worked in Swedish elementary schools in the same municipality and they were between 37 and 63 years of age. Besides their function as consultants in the research project, their day-to-day practice consisted of working with students, making assessments, producing individual education plans (IEPs), and supporting staff.

This municipality was chosen because it made contact with the local university to ask for help in increasing teachers' knowledge in reading and writing instruction with a focus on inclusiveness. The project was created in collaboration with the directors of the school board and two researchers. The Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines were followed. Before the project started, the teachers and consultants were informed about the purpose of the research project and they agreed in writing to participate. As the project was also a part of the municipality's school development program, they were clearly informed that the results would also be used for school development, but in a way that

would guarantee confidentiality for the participants. The CMCs between the researcher and the consultants were held eight times over a period of two years. In order to create the best possible atmosphere for the implementation of the CMCs, the twelve special education professionals were divided into two groups. One group met from 10.00 to 12.00 a.m., while the other group met from 1.00 to 3.00 p.m. Each CMC with each group lasted for two hours. A total of 32 hours of CMCs were thus recorded, and the data has been transcribed and analysed.

Procedure

Methodologically the CMCs followed the approach of an informal, open-ended and conversational interview. Since the idea was that the CMC would provide a model for the consultations between consultants and teachers, it was important to create an atmosphere that encouraged participants to listen to each other, show their respect for different opinions and understandings, and develop a trustful attitude. This was important because of the project's emphasis on inclusiveness. Therefore, a starting point was joint communication in the CMC groups.

Implementation of the CMCs

The implementation of the CMCs was influenced by Habermas' theory of communicative action, such that an agreement about the procedure and an intention to fulfil the validity claims were important guidelines. Thus, the first step was to make the procedure of the consultation transparent, talked about, and accepted by everyone (Habermas, 1995, 1981). This meant clarifying the time frames and the purpose of the consultation. Secondly, experiences were shared, discussed, and analysed. The focus of the CMCs was on clearly defined pedagogical issues that emanated from questions related to *how*, *what* and *why*. In order to take the validity claims into consideration, everyone had the right to describe their experiences without being questioned if they were right or wrong (first validity claim: 'truth'). The experiences were open to be deliberately discussed and analysed. Listening to each other and having a respectful attitude toward everybody and their lived experiences were therefore important (cf. Freire, 1972). It was also important to speak intelligibly and use language and terminology that could be understood by everybody participating in the CMC (second validity claim: 'normative rightness'). Finally, it was important to create an atmosphere of trust, where everyone dared to say what they had intended to say (third validity claim: 'truthfulness'). Each CMC was led by the same researcher, who had a certain responsibility to provide opportunities for the participants to fulfill the validity claims.

The analysis

The CMCs were the unit of analysis and have been analysed using qualitative content analysis. There are different descriptions because of the various focuses of the methods (cf. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Krippendorff, 1989; Quinn Patton, 2002). As each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used in this study is unique as well. The

aim and the research questions have guided the researcher throughout the process of analysis. The following steps were taken:

1. After each CMC, the audio-recorded data was compared with the field notes. This was done in order to get a sense of the whole. Some patterns, such as possibilities and obstacles to lead consultations in an inclusive way, emerged as early as in this first step.
2. The data were partly transcribed. The guidelines for the transcription were the patterns outlined in the first step.
3. Data that were considered important were written down chronologically in meaning units, and sorted into content areas (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). For example: A question of time; the gap between research and teachers' practice; procedures and strategies.
4. The meaning units were read through several times in order to make sense of the content areas in relation to the research questions.
5. The next step consisted of sorting the meaning units into themes (Quinn Patton, 2002). The following themes emerged: Identified basic conditions; knowing how, knowing why - strategies and approaches; the aspect of attending the CMCs.
6. The last step consisted of a general description of what a *group* of people, in this study the consultants, have experienced concerning their ability to lead a group of teachers in an inclusive way, as well as their experiences of being part of a meta-consultation team.

Results

This article studies consultants' experiences of, and reflections on, leading collaborative consultations, thereby providing more insights on how collaborative consultation, based on communicative theory, can contribute to inclusion and thus promote an inclusive school culture. Consequently, the next section consists of descriptions of the CMCs, with a special focus on the role of consultants, their increased awareness about themselves in this role, and how leadership in situations of pedagogical consultation could be understood in relation to an inclusive school culture. The quotations used refer to the consultants as a group because they have "reasonably stable meanings for a specific group of people" (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 404). Due to the guaranteed confidentiality and the importance of showing what had emerged as generally important results for the group as a whole, quotations from the consultants have been referred to as CMC 1, 2, and so on, depending on the CMC from which the expressions were collected.

Basic conditions identified

After analysing consultants' reflections on leading collaborative consultations in relation to their ability to promote an inclusive school culture, some basic conditions have been identified that seem to be crucial in supporting inclusiveness. Even though these conditions, to some extent, can be understood as out of the consultants' control (and therefore go beyond their role as consultants), they have to be mentioned because of their impact on their ability to function as consultants. Time has to be allocated, collaborative

consultation needs to be led by a consultant, and the consultant must have a mandate to lead the consultation. Finally, the discussions in the CMCs reveal the importance of having clearly stated pedagogical purposes in consultations of this kind. It is not enough that teachers are ordered to critically examine their practice without also focusing on a specific pedagogical issue.

Time has to be allocated
A recurrent theme that emerged in the CMCs was consultants' experiences of teachers' different opportunities to participate in the consultations. This was surprising because the schools were located in the same municipality and the project had been planned in cooperation with the directors of the school board. In one of the schools, it was actually impossible to implement the consultations during the second year of the project. Some of the problems described revolved around external circumstances, such as teachers not having enough time to meet, having to stand in for each other, and having to work in the leisure centre when personnel were missing, even though the consultation was scheduled. Other consultants shared opposing views on teachers who were given all necessary opportunities to participate. These varied possibilities and obstacles to lead consultations can be understood in terms of inclusion and exclusion. It became obvious that principals not allocating enough time for teachers to attend the scheduled consultations contributed to a kind of exclusion. Consequently, opportunities to recurrently engage in collaborative consultation can thus emerge as a strategy in promoting an inclusive school culture.

The importance of consultants
The consultants considered their role as consultants to be important and meaningful. A recurring theme was consultants' experiences of teachers excluding themselves from the consultations by saying that they had not done the assignments, or that they had no experiences to share, but then later saying how valuable it had been to participate in the consultation. The consultants maintained that they contributed to keeping teachers in the project: "If we hadn't been there in the beginning and got them going, they may perhaps have implemented the assignments, but then these wouldn't have led to anything" (CMC 8). They emphasised that it is "… important that there is a consultant who can pull different strings to help the conversation move forward, because otherwise it would be easy to get stuck on the tips level" (CMC 4).

Another conclusion the consultants agreed upon was that they contributed to helping teachers begin to engage in the conversation during the CMC: "The first consultation was tremendously important to help them get started" (CMC 8). The consultants maintained that they contributed to making sure that everybody had the same opportunity to speak. Additionally, they contributed to ensuring that the discussion remained on topic: "Otherwise, it's easy to get off track" (CMC 7). Consultants expressed that they were challenged to pose questions that encouraged teachers to discuss changes they would like to implement in their classrooms: "How do you intend to go on with what you have discovered?" (CMC 5). "How do you think you'll be able to use this knowledge?" (CMC 7). Without these types of challenging questions, there would have been a risk that the reporting of completed assignments may have remained on a descriptive level.

Knowing how, knowing why: Strategies and approaches

An important approach demonstrated in the CMCs was to encourage the consultants to express whatever was important to them with regard to their role. Thus, sharing experiences and making sense of everybody and their actions became important because of the project's emphasis on empowerment — which meant seeing everybody as a competent person (cf. Freire, 1972).

Bridging the gap
The first CMC revealed a gap between the theory that had been presented in the lectures and teachers' practices. The consultants' descriptions of their first consultations with small groups of teachers described teachers as giving voice to an insecurity regarding how to fulfil the first assignments; frustration about not knowing if they were doing 'the right things' (CMC 1), teachers calling for more guidelines, and a polite attitude — free from challenging questions — toward each other. Consultants described teachers as being unfamiliar with this kind of consultation, where they should scrutinise their own practice together with a consultant in a structured way. The uncertainty regarding their role as consultants and how to handle teachers who felt uncomfortable in the situation of consultation was highlighted: "The first consultation with the group was not a good consultation" (CMC 2). Already the first CMC gave the consultants new ideas of how to include and encourage the teachers to participate more actively. Consultants provided examples of teachers becoming increasingly courageous both when expressing their own understanding, and critically reflecting on, and even expressing concerns regarding, some of the assignments. The importance of influencing and challenging the actions of the consultants, including their thinking and learning strategies, by discussing them deliberately became more and more obvious. Thus, possibilities of bridging the gap through collaborative consultation — and thus nurturing greater inclusiveness — became apparent as the project progressed.

Openness about procedures
Consultants' reflections showed an awareness of *how* to lead consultations in the best way possible. Their reflections also demonstrated that they tried to put their knowledge into action: "We started to talk about the procedure in the dialogue, and that we would start with everyone in turn. We talked about our intentions with this dialogue" (CMC 2). This strategy — to start with an openness of intentions and procedures — was a strategy used in the CMCs. A strategy used at the end of every CMC session was to allow everyone to take a final turn to speak. This was also a strategy consultants used with the teachers. It was obvious how the CMCs influenced the consultants when it came to how they led their groups. Consultants described their concerns regarding how to encourage everybody to participate. As this was an unfamiliar situation for most teachers, it was important to think of strategies that really took everybody into account.

Daring not to know
Besides the strategy described above to begin every CMC with openness about the procedure, another strategy constituted a participant-driven approach that was based on the consultants' experiences and the questions these experiences led to. This meant that

the researcher never knew what the issues would be, except that they had to be related to the role as a consultant. As a consultant, it is thus important to 'dare not to know.' Being a consultant was experienced as being something other than a teacher: "I haven't understood my role as being a teacher. I have understood it as being a consultant. I shall not teach them so much [in reading and writing instruction]" (CMC 7). Even though a participant-driven approach was important to start with, consultants gave voice to the importance of striking a balance between an expert-driven approach and a participant-driven approach: "How much are we supposed to give of our competencies in writing and reading? It is a question of balance. The trick is how to give the question back to them" (CMC 3).

Daring to be truthful

An important part of inclusiveness, understood from the perspective of communicative theory, is to encourage everyone to say whatever they want to say, which Habermas (1981, 1995) refers to as '*Wahrhaftigkeit*' [truthfulness]. This implies that participants dared to be truthful, and in this project, it implies promoting an atmosphere in the CMCs that invite as much truthfulness as possible. It is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible, to guarantee that this validity claim can be fulfilled. However, feedback from the CMCs can be understood in terms of truthfulness because they dared to express their thoughts. For example, not all consultations between consultants and teachers were described as 'good' consultations. On the contrary, from the perspective of the consultants, some were described as total failures: "It was a disaster!" (CMC 5) When saying so in a team of professional consultants, and with a researcher present, this admission implies a feeling of safety and acceptance.

Reciprocity in learning

Reciprocity in learning from, and with, each other was often mentioned as something that occurred and can be understood in terms of promoting an inclusive atmosphere. In order to make evidence-based research more available and thus more inclusive, the consultants maintained the importance of understanding the research vocabulary. Some of the terms used in the lectures and in the assignments that followed were considered difficult by both consultants and teachers. Consultants provided examples of mutual learning by examining the meaning of the words used in one of the assignments together: "We used the words. We learned together" (CMC 3). It was important to share this experience of having difficulties in understanding. "It's important to talk about it in a casual way like we are doing now" (CMC 3). Inclusion can thus be understood in terms of how we use language and how we understand words.

The aspect of attending the CMCs

Consultants' reflections on their leadership revealed that attending the CMCs contributed to their awareness of how to lead consultations in the most inclusive way possible, and what changes they had to make in their efforts to empower the teachers.

> It is when sitting in this group [CMC] that questions occur that I should have posed to the teacher group. I need more time to develop myself as a consultant. In the beginning, your

focus is so much on yourself being a professional consultant so you don't dare to relax and listen to what is really happening. (CMC 5)

The joint communication in the CMCs encouraged the consultants to think about how to develop their role as consultants. "I have to challenge myself in order to challenge the teachers" (CMC 7). The consultants maintained that the CMCs forced them to reflect on what kinds of questions they had to pose to the teachers in order to challenge them and make them reflect more critically. In order to steer a discussion to be more analytical from the start, one of the consultants reflected on what s/he might do differently in the future.

If I'm going to have these sorts of collaborative consultations next year, I'll say, "It's great that you've made notes but now we'll put those aside and start to discuss what you remember that you've worked with! From describing the assignment to discussing it, what new insights has this given you? What have you discovered?" (CMC 8)

It became evident that sharing and analysing experiences led to new questions and considerations concerning how to lead consultations in an inclusive way.

You need a professional consultant to make the consultation work. If the professional consultant can develop his/her ability to ask questions by participating in the CMCs, they have a given role. I keep thinking how I would have done… that's how I could have posed the question! (CMC 8)

In summary, results from the project indicate that consultants, who are aware of what it means to lead consultations from communicative perspectives (i.e., include an openness about intentions and procedures, an awareness of how we talk and use language, how we give everyone the right to state their opinions and values, and that everyone is seen as a competent person) can contribute to creating an inclusive school culture. Nevertheless, certain basic conditions — such as allocated time, consultants with a mandate to lead consultations, and clearly stated pedagogical purposes — reveal some crucial elements of how a project that emphasises collaborative learning and inclusiveness is communicated and implemented.

Discussion

Both the theoretical and the methodological approaches took their points of departure from a communicative perspective influenced by Habermas' theory of communication and Freire's pedagogy of liberation. This perspective was used because of its inclusive dimension as it strives to give everyone the opportunity to engage in joint communication in a deliberate way (e.g., Frizell, 2009). After having analysed the consultants' experiences of, and reflections on, leading collaborative consultations the research project's different, and in some sense contradictory, perspectives became evident (Figure 2). The lectures – as described in the *Setting* section of this article – which had presented evidence-based elements regarding the facilitation of teaching reading and writing, were, from the teachers' perspective, initially considered to be explored and delivered from an expert to them as teachers. This top-down delivery seemed to be perceived as rational and objective, because of the teachers' concerns over having done, or not having done, 'the right things' (CMC 1) when doing the assignments with their students. Hence, a gap

between the research and a teacher's daily activities became obvious (cf. Cordingley, 2008; Korthagen, 2007).

As early as 2001, Hammersley stated that it was not sufficient that researchers pointed out 'what works' (p. 4). A research perspective on what constitutes good practice has to be combined with a teacher perspective on good practice, because "knowledge is not a sufficient determinant of good practice, in education or in any other field. One reason for this is that it cannot determine what the ends of good practice should be" (Hammersley, 2001, p. 3). Furthermore, the effectiveness of 'what works' not only has to do with "what is done but also … how it is done and when" (Hammersley, 2001, p. 3). However, even though research on what facilitates reading instruction had been presented in the lectures, and even though the teachers had carried out assignments on each topic with their students, the consultants' feedback from the collaborative consultations with teachers revealed varied comprehension. The comprehension varied both from a teacher perspective and from a consultant perspective. This is not a surprising result. Knowledge is understood in relation to prior knowledge and experiences as well as beliefs and values, and the complexity of a classroom practice is well known (e.g., Cordingley, 2008).

The standpoint of this article has been to understand collaborative learning among teachers in terms of collaborative consultation. The analysis has shown that collaborative consultation, which takes its point of departure from communicative theory, offers opportunities to unite different interpretations of evidence-based research with different understandings of experienced practice, and can thus contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice. Moreover, because of its inclusive and democratic dimensions, communicative theory is useful in the field of collaborative learning among teachers as it can contribute to an inclusive school culture. Figure 2 illustrates how a bridging between different perspectives, as well as the relation to an inclusive school culture, can be understood.
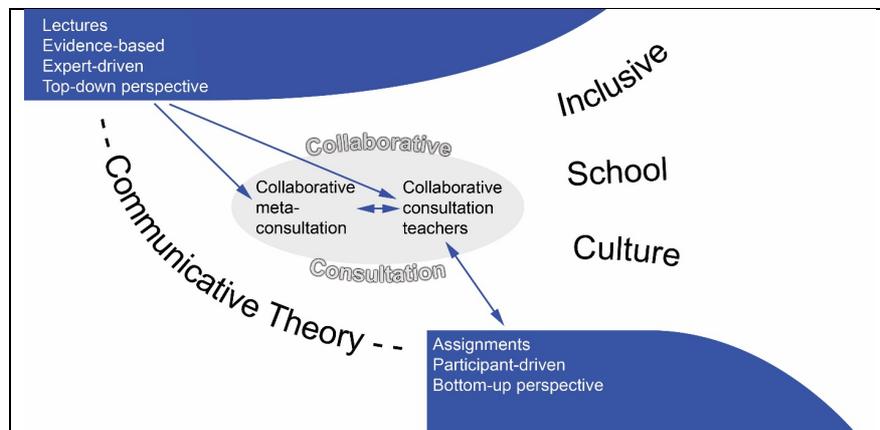

Figure 2: Collaborative consultation, based on communicative theory, offers opportunities to unite different perspectives. It can contribute to teachers' learning, from and with each other, in an inclusive way and can thus promote an inclusive school culture.

According to OECD (2016), students benefit from teachers who collaboratively reflect on their teaching practice, and who teach in a more inclusive manner. This study has, in the light of communicative theory, identified what the strategies and approaches might be to carry out collaborative consultation in an inclusive way. These findings might also be helpful for teachers who want to teach more inclusively. Consequently, there are several reasons for considering using communicative theory in relation to collaborative consultation. One reason is that the increased focus on collaborative learning among teachers, both in Sweden and worldwide, is considered as a way of promoting students' skills in e.g. mathematics and science (Government direction, (U2011/2229/G); Goodnough & Murphy, 2017; Gutierez, 2015). Another reason is the still ongoing, and even amplified, search for the 'best practice' and 'what works' (Levinsson, 2011). Levinsson's article reveals that there are beliefs rooted in political perspectives in Sweden that 'experts' delivering evidence-based research to teachers will change teacher practice and improve learning outcomes.

On the other hand, politicians in Sweden also stress collaborative consultation in order to improve learning outcomes. If the intentions are to change teacher practice and improve learning outcomes through collaborative consultation, there is a need to further understand the concept of such consultation, including how it can contribute to sustainable evidence-based practice in education. An awareness of what it means to build collaborative consultation on the premise of communicative theory provides teachers with the ability to learn from, and with, each other in an inclusive way. Sustainable changes in education requires inclusion on all levels in schools (cf. Zoller et al., 1999; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). This means transparency through deliberate communication — between politicians and directors of the school board, between directors of the school board and principals, between principals and teachers, and between teachers and students/parents — about what it means when politicians and school leaders are talking about the importance of teachers collaboratively examining their practice. If this is not understood, including why it should be done and how it should be done, these consultations will, at worst, be a waste of time, and no changes will occur. If the concept of inclusion is broadened and deepened, and used to build on a holistic understanding that encompasses how we communicate and how we make sure everyone is in agreement, collaborative consultation amongst teachers can lead to sustainable changes over time.

Suggestions for future research

The project was initiated because the municipality wanted improvements to be made in students' learning outcomes, which had declined. Further research has to be done concerning the question of how collaborative consultation between teachers influences students' learning and their learning outcomes by extension. Additionally, there is a need to further investigate whether collaborative consultation leads to sustainable changes in teacher practice.

Collaborative consultation where teachers scrutinise their own practice together with a consultant is a rather new phenomenon in Sweden. Therefore, there is a need to further understand what additional skills consultants require in order to empower teachers in

these kinds of pedagogical consultations. There is a need to investigate whether consultants require knowledge not only in how to lead consultations in an inclusive way, but also if they require skills in specific subjects such as reading and writing instruction.

Conclusion

There are pedagogical possibilities in Habermas' theory — and more specifically the three validity claims, i.e., truth, normative rightness, and truthfulness. These claims help to identify what makes collaborative consultation a democratic and inclusive process, and they recognise awareness about ethical values and attitudes. An awareness of what it means to lead collaborative consultation on the basis of communicative theory provides teachers with the ability to learn from, and with, each other in an inclusive way.

It can be concluded that collaborative consultation can promote an inclusive school culture if actions, thinking and learning strategies can be challenged and discussed deliberately and in the most inclusive way possible. Thus, the concept of inclusion is broadened if the term is related to communicative theory. This means that an inclusive school culture is revealed in *how* we collaboratively interpret situations, express thoughts and criticism, discuss learning strategies and problems, and propose justification for actions.

Endnote

1. Meta: "a prefix added to the name of a subject and designating another subject that analyzes the original one but at a more abstract, higher level."
   http://www.dictionary.com/browse/meta-

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