

# Deliberative Communication as a Tool for the New Role of Special Educators in Inclusive Settings

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## Introduction

This study is based on the emerging new role of special educators according to the intentions of the National Swedish School System and to the intention of the new teacher education (SOU 1999:63). The function of a special education teacher (speciallärare) to a special educator (specialpedagog) has been changed from one who worked with children's needs individually to a more broader function<sup>1</sup>. In 1990 a new teacher education program started leading to the new Special Educator Diploma. The new function includes competences to work with special education questions in a supervising role, to support children's learning process, to take care of some educational questions and to support school leaders to plan the use of special education resources. The special educators and the head of the school share the responsibility to optimise the conditions for children's learning.<sup>2</sup>

## Differences or natural diversities?

In a critical analysis of the Swedish special education discourse, Haug (1998) has pointed out the focus on technical approaches to learning difficulties with no or little moral implications. Helldin (2003) also mentions that the discourse in special education has been of the technical/instrumental type. The instrumental pattern '(1) Point out, (2) Carefully define and (3) Introduce remediation and remove obstacles' has been repeated.<sup>3</sup> The Government paper, *The Renewed Teacher Program* states that special education and teaching is part of a school's and pre-school's everyday tasks. Schools and pre-schools are made responsible to make the teaching staff able to include all children and their natural diversities in learning activities in an inclusive way. The traditional view of differences as being something not normal has to be discarded and is instead seen as normal diversities in learning approaches.<sup>4</sup>

The Swedish Development Agency states in its Policy

for Development Cooperation in the Education Sector that the right to education is a human right for all, based on the intentions in The UN Convention on Children's Rights and the Salamanca Declaration. An inclusive approach is needed to ensure every child's right to education.

*"Inclusive education processes/initiatives are most likely to succeed when they are planned as part of education reform and are carried out within the ordinary education/school system"(s. 3).<sup>5</sup>*

The inclusive approach rests on the teachers' ability to collaborate across school forms and grades, to collaborate with other professions and to understand the perspectives of the different approaches to teaching used.

## The project financed by the National Agency of Education

The research presented in this paper is a continuation of the research presented at the 2004 ATEE conference by Wetso, Von Schantz and Von Ahlefeld Nisser on a school development project in special education. In 2001-2004 Dalarna University was responsible for a school development program organized as a network and partnership between Dalarna University and the local education authorities. Four different courses in special education were offered to 1500 teachers as in-service training. The courses were open to teachers in pre-school, compulsory school, upper secondary school and adult education. The different categories of teachers studied together. The form and content of the courses was based on the idea that teachers should see and meet children's diversity as an enrichment and opportunity and not as an individual problem.

The courses were planned and carried out in cooperation

with head teachers and special educators from different local education authorities and a cross-disciplinary team from Dalarna University. To be able to carry out the courses, the team of eight university teachers hand picked and built a network of 70 special educators from different local education authorities (LEA). These special educators had the role of being supervisors for the teachers taking part in the courses. They received instruction and support for their new role during the project and they had follow-up meetings with the cross-disciplinary team at Dalarna University.

Follow-up studies have shown that it has not been easy for the new special educators to get acceptance for their new role<sup>6</sup>. The common problem seems to be that in their schools they were expected to handle the children's learning according to the traditional way and avoid to enforce new ways of handling teaching approaches. The project they participated in focused on how to make use of the qualifications the new special educators had in a broader way.

One way to change the special educators' new role on a local level was tested in the project. The special educators were given supervising tasks for teachers involved in special education in-service training at Dalarna University. The roles of the different groups became more visible and clear to the participants and the difference from the traditional type of relations between the two groups appeared. In the supervising sessions the different perspectives were pointed out and a learning process started.

## The present research

The purpose of the present study is to describe what happens when special educators in school and pre-school talk about and document communicative actions. The focus is on the emerging professional role and development of communicative competence which includes an ethical and democratic dimension.

The questions asked include the following aspects:

- How is communicative action described by the special educators?
- Which are the features of a deliberative dialogue in a school's and pre-school's special education context, described by the special educators?
- Why is it necessary for special educators in pre-schools and schools to develop their communicative ability?

### Methodological perspectives

The present research is based on the theory of communicative action as developed by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1981; 1984). The deliberative dialogue is the fundament of action in the relations between different actors in a school and pre-school context. The aim is to uncover experiences and concepts of special education teachers as they develop their new role according to the concept of communicative action. The field work is carried out through action research in 2004-2006 among the special educators. Their supervising role will be described and developed and the communicative dialogue monitored.

### Participants

The study includes 15 special educators from 8 LEAs situated in the middle parts of Sweden. All of them are working in pre-schools or compulsory schools. The field work started in 2004 and will continue through 2006.

The special educators in the study meet four times a year at Dalarna University to share and reflect on their experiences, get inspiration, meet special education researchers who

give short lectures on theory and are introduced to new literature in the field. The main tasks during these meetings are to reflect on the notes of the communicative dialogues in various situations they have carried out in their schools and pre-schools. They point out and try to define the quality of the dialogues; what makes a dialogue a satisfying experience? To whom is it satisfying? The equivalent questions are asked about dialogues that are regarded as not meeting the needs of the persons involved. The special educators are interviewed by the author in their schools, individually and together with the head master.

## Habermas' theory and the deliberative dialogue

Habermas' theory of communicative action and the deliberative dialogue is crucial to this research. Deliberative dialogue represents what Habermas calls a communicative praxis.<sup>7</sup> The goal in every dialogue is to reach a consensus on norms and values through respect and tolerance for the arguments that the participants have brought forward. The deliberative dialogue is closely connected to democracy in its process and result.

The basic ideas in the deliberative democracy are:

- To frame the questions which cannot be agreed on
- Search for alternative solutions to these questions
- Agree on how decisions should be reached
- Decisions are seen as temporary solutions
- The dialogue allows different opinions to come forward<sup>8</sup>

The main characteristics of the deliberative dialogue are:

- Different views are acknowledged and examined
- Arguments are the core of the dialogue
- Tolerance and respect are observed
- Listening to other's arguments is crucial
- Consensus is an ultimate goal
- Traditional and authoritarian views are to be challenged<sup>9</sup>

The reason why I want to use the deliberative dialogue as a qualified method is my belief that special educators need tools to strengthen and develop their professional situation. According to Englund (1992) professional groups are defined as having autonomy in their field and also ethics norms and values to support their knowledge base. My action research approach is one way to fulfil the demands on the researcher stated by Svensson (2002) to support professional development in an interactive way.

Another reason for my choice of the deliberative dialogue is to present an alternative to the medical and psychological perspectives which are seen as overruling the educational ones<sup>10</sup>. The dialogue can be seen as a complement to diagnosis and the often pathological approach in special education. Methods which embrace ethical aspects and values are supposedly more functional and friendly to children and young people than a mere diagnosis which mostly avoids to state the educational choices available. A diagnosis can be one way of framing or explaining a problem but alternative explanations can be done from different perspectives and on a different level. I argue that the special educators, by using the deliberative dialogue, will be helped to find the perspectives as expressed by children, parents, teachers and other staff and it will also help them to "critically weigh different perspectives against each other"<sup>11</sup>. The "special education knowledge is of the type that gains by using several academic areas in its analysis of the field"<sup>12</sup>. A professional person with pedagogical

and special education skills is needed in order to support and represent children's and parents' points of view in the school and pre-school context in an untraditional and respectful way based on the ability to listen; a person who can weigh the roots of the problem: Is it a problem connected to the child or the system?

Helldin (2003) argues that "the goal of critical analysis is to present the 'degree of truth' with the help of the content of several different perspectives"<sup>13</sup>. Traditionally the expert in the field, usually doctors or psychologists, have had the answers and have used their position to pursue them. Diagnoses have been difficult to question by lay persons such as parents and have been seen by them as a tool of power and expertise.

My point of view is that the special educators are able to develop their competence within the area of communication as a complement to the diagnosis experts. It is a unique competence in the school and pre-school context and should be used to explore, develop and evaluate possible actions whenever a problem is stated. The deliberative dialogue could be the tool where the problem can be described, the different perspectives and solutions weighed. The special educator has to develop an expertise in communication and be viewed as a communicative facilitator. These skills are also stated as prerequisites for the special education diploma.

The special educators can also be seen as supervising the dialogues when special educators, head masters, parents and pupils meet to understand a problem. She/he is to be the one who may understand the positions taken by the participants in the dialogue, the power dimensions and the balance needed to reach an understanding of each other's perspective. The special educator should be able to translate the different positions in the dialogue, to understand that words and concepts are understood in different ways by the participants and also to relate the consequences of different actions to the persons involved.

## To validate a good argumentation

How is it possible to decide if a dialogue is successful? Using Habermas' rational argumentation could be one way of validating the success rate:

*An expression satisfies the precondition for rationality if and insofar as it embodies fallible knowledge and therewith has a relation to the objective world (that is, a relation to the facts) and is open to objective judgment (truth, goal-directed, ontological presupposition of an objective world, cognitive instrumental). (Habermas (1984),9,(1981),27)*

A statement is perceived as objective, according to Habermas, if it has the same meaning for the person who uttered it as it has for the person(s) who listened to it. We can argue that school X lacks special education resources or that pupil Max has a delayed development. We can also argue that Max needs a personal assistant in school. Habermas' opinion is that none of us can presuppose that these statements are objective and that they thus have to be problematized. This leads us to the next point.

*(The phenomenologist) ...presupposes a community of others who are deemed to be observing the same world, who are physically constituted so as to be capable of verifiable experience, who are motivated so as to speak "truthfully" of their experience, and who speak according to recognizable, shared schemes of expression (normatively regulated actions, understandable in their context, references to the norms). (Habermas, 1984, p 13)*

We can argue which norms and values lie behind an argument. They represent one way of looking at the problem. Different ways of understanding the problem have to be accepted. This is what Habermas calls communicative praxis:

*Actors are behaving rationally so long as they use predicates such as "spicy","attractive","strange","terrible","disgusting", and so forth, in such a way that other members of their lifeworlds can recognize in these descriptions their own reactions to similar situations. Anyone who is so privatistic in his attitudes and evaluations that they cannot be explained and rendered plausible by appeal to standards of evaluation is not behaving rationally (expressive self-presentation). (Habermas (1984),17,(1981),36)*

Which emotions are involved in the arguments stated? Why is the person angry? Sad? The participants have to aim at understanding each other and the different living circumstances which the arguments are based on. Habermas uses the word discourse to express the system in which a statement is made. The argumentation should be used to reach an agreement within the discourse. To me this means that the argumentation in the beginning of a dialogue will use different perspectives/discourse but further argumentation will start a process aiming to get closer to a shared discourse

## Dialogues as text

One of the methods used in my study is documentation of different communicative actions. The special educators keep diaries of communication where they describe situations in which dialogues are used. They can involve pupils, parents, teachers, head masters and so on. The dialogues are evaluated by the special educators; was the dialogue satisfying, successful or not satisfying. To whom was it satisfying? Was it a deliberative dialogue or not? What made it/didn't make it to be a deliberative dialogue?

## Conclusion

I argue that the traditional approaches in special education and its consequences for children's future must be challenged. We need to deconstruct the "truths" and critically reflect and analyse our actions. Deconstruction has an ethical dimension according to Lenz Taguchi<sup>14</sup>. If we find new truths in dialogues with children and parents or find new ways of dealing with problems we need to change the way we act. It is an ethical question and challenges our positions as experts and teachers. We need to constantly search for new and better ways to handle the obstacles. In special education the move forward has to be made in dialogue with children and their parents. The dialogue will guide us whether the things we do are successful and useful or not. In my point of view the deliberative dialogue can be one of the tools used by special educators to fulfil the goals of an inclusive approach in our schools, to make them truly schools for all children.

## Notes

1. SOU 1999:63;Byström,A. and Nilsson,A-C.(2003),Malmgren Hansen, A. (2003),Vernersson, I-L. (1995)
2. SOU 1999:63
3. Helldin, R., Lucietto, S. and Völkel, B. (2003), 12
4. SOU 1999:63
5. Sida (2003)
6. Malmgren Hansen, A. (2002)

7. Habermas, J. (1981)
8. In Jonsson, B. and Roth, K. (2003)
9. Ibid.
10. Nilholm, C. (2003)
11. Helldin, R., Lucietto, S. and Völkel, B. (2003), 16
12. ibid., 8
13. ibid., 17
14. Lenz Taguchi, H. (2005)

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