Special educators as highly qualified dialogue partners in preschool and school.

Introduction

This text is about special education in preschools and schools and about developing democratic communication. Traditionally special education has often focused on individuals as bearers of problems (Haug, 1998). This has not always been positive for either special education or the individuals being focused on. According to Björck-Åkesson & Nilholm (red, 2007) and researchers in Pedagogisk forskning (2007), special education should be about appreciating diversity and the right of participation for all. In this text I have focused on the question of the availability of preschools and schools regardless of students’ disabilities.

Background

Earlier research in special education has shown a lack of critical analysis of the communication processes used during discussions about students facing school related problems (Hjörne, 2004; Backlund, 2007). Although parents and students are ostensibly part of the decision-making they often have the feeling of not genuinely being a part of it. My research has shown that special educators with deep communicative and pedagogical competencies can create participation for all by leading dialogues in a democratic way (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009).

In 1991 Sweden changed its education of special educators, with the aim of broadening the role of special educators from the individual level to include the group- and organizational levels (SFS 2007:638). Research has shown that the ‘new’ role of special educators still struggles with its professionalization which means that there is an uncertainty what their roles and responsibilities are (Bladini, 2004; Sahlin, 2004; Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009). This can result negatively in situations where communication is unclear. It is important for the outcome of a dialogue what responsibility special educators have or take in an act of communication (ibid.).

In my opinion the question of responsibility is of great importance according to the fact that the Swedish government in 2008 initiated a restart of the education of special education teachers with the aim to work especially on an individual level (SFS 2008:132). This means that since 2010, there are two different but similar special education professions in Sweden. The similarity is that both special educators and special education teachers shall have competencies as qualified dialogue partners (kvalificerad samtalspartner). One important difference however is the expressed focus from the government on an individual level in school for special education teachers in contrast to special educators’ broadened role including organization-, group- and individual level in both preschool and school (SFS 2007:638; SFS 2008:132). How can two professions cooperate...
and complement each other in a way that will gain the right of participation in education for all? In my opinion it is a question about having competencies in what it means to start out from a communicative perspective and about taking different responsibilities for two different professions.

The importance of a communicative perspective in qualified communication

In order to understand why it is important to have deep competencies in communication it is relevant to start with some questions. These questions focus on what we mean when we talk about democratic communication in preschool and school. In my opinion, teachers, principals and other professionals in (pre)schools, truly want parents and their children to participate in important decision making concerning the need of special education. But what is a democratic communication? Does it mean that all participants are sitting around a table in the same room? Does it mean that all are listening to the same information? Does it mean that everyone is discussing until everybody is understanding and sympathetic? Does it mean that everyone agrees and finally comes to a consensus?

To start out from a communicative perspective means to focus on the question HOW, not what. How do we talk about children in need of special education? How do we make decisions? How do we know everybody truly agrees in the decision making? (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009).

Theoretical approach

My way of arguing about communicative perspectives is based on the idea of the deliberative dialogue (Englund, 2004, 2007). The core of the idea of the deliberative dialogue is Habermas’ theory of argumentation (Habermas 1995/1981). The main idea of deliberation in (pre)school contexts is to ask what the disagreements are, what the alternatives are and what procedures are necessary in order to come to a decision (Roth, 2003, 2004; Englund 2003, 2004, 2007). The characteristics of deliberative dialogues are that different perspectives are made visible, everyone has the right to argue and state their opinion and everyone agrees to listen to one another. It means tolerance and that everyone strives to agreement (ibid).

Democracy is very important in a deliberative dialogue. The deliberative dialogue in a school context can, according to Roth (2003), be named qualified communication. These kinds of communication are about everyone’s right to communicate in the same conditions where no voice has more value than anyone else’s. It is also about the right to confrontation and the right to have a deviating opinion; it is about giving space for conflicting perspectives (Englund, 2003, 2004).

The conditions for a communicative action, according to Habermas (1995/1981), are that the three validity claims – truth, normative rightness and truthfulness – are fulfilled. The process of argumentation, where everyone has the intent to fulfill the validity claims, is important. An agreement or consensus of the outcome is not the most important aspect in communicative action. What is important is consensus about the procedure: how can we make sure that everyone will tell the truth, that everyone will speak in an understandable way and that everyone feels free to speak out? The claims of validity are of great importance in the context of (pre)schools as places of decision-making. However, is it possible to fulfill the validity claims in these environments? How comfortable do parents feel being truthful and open in a situation involving authority figures? Is it possible for every parent or child to argue their point of view in an understandable way? According to Sivertun (2006), Habermas’ theory of argumentation has a weakness due to its reasoning that the ideal should be a communication free of domination. He argues that special education is, in reality, always dominated by authorities and that this must be considered in decision-making.
A study about what communication says

In Ahlefeld Nisser (2009) a study about communication, and especially how communication processes were described by special educators, is reported. The aim was to describe the conditions that create possibilities for deliberative communication between special educators, parents, students and colleagues in (pre)school. The overarching aim was to contribute to a more distinct description of special educators’ field of knowledge. From the perspective of professionalization (Berg, 1999) it is important to make clear the function and role of the special educator.

Research approach

A social constructionist approach was used and the project was based in the field of action research.

One important approach, used throughout the study and in the analysis, is the attitude that values uniqueness of experience when reading texts or narratives (Spivak, 1976; Lather, 1991; Davies, 2000; Lenz Taguchi, 2000, 2004). Every person who has read a book or told a story has been influenced by their life experiences. We can never understand things exactly as anyone else. The world is always understood and constructed from different perspectives and there is no ‘truth’ about how to see the world. This does not deny the existence of particular things, such as disabilities or learning difficulties, but looks instead at how these things are understood by individuals.

The idea of deliberative dialogue was central for the project, and a discursive approach was also of importance.

Methods

Network

One important part of the study involved network meetings including 15 special educators working in preschools and/or in compulsory schools, from eight communities situated in the middle parts of Sweden. The meetings began in June 2004 and concluded in November 2006 and the special educators met four times a year – 11 times in total – at the University College of Dalarna. They shared and reflected on their experiences, met special education researchers who delivered short lectures on theory, and were also introduced to new literature in the field. The main task during the meetings was to reflect on the notes of the communicative dialogues.

Logbooks

The special educators described acts of communication between themselves, parents, students and colleagues in the (pre)schools in which they worked. The descriptions were recorded by the special educators in logbooks and were been perceived by the special educators as ‘good’, ‘less good’ or ‘interesting’ dialogues.

Interviews

Special educators were interviewed in their places of work, individually and together with their principals, totaling 25 interviews. Each interview was 60 to 90 minutes long.

Web based discussion

The special educators also expressed their opinions on a web based groupware called Learnloop.
Analysis
The dialogues described by special educators in logbooks were the main object for analysis. Furthermore, the communications from the meetings, interviews and discussions on Learnloop created the context in which the dialogues have been read in relation to.

Results
It can be concluded that the dialogues seen as ‘bad’ or ‘less good’ by the special educators were strategic and for school ‘successful’ attitudes. The dialogues seen as ‘good’ by the special educators revealed deliberative attitudes despite also being strategic. Strategy can therefore be seen as a critical condition because it can either result in, or be an obstacle for, deliberative dialogues. Other so called critical conditions have been formulated in terms of:
1. cooperation
2. the relationship between the special educator and principal
3. the special educator as autonomous
4. consensus
5. lack of confidence
6. the special educator as facilitator
7. procedures of knowledge.
Of these conditions, the first, second, third and fourth, have shown both possibilities and obstacles for deliberative dialogues. The fifth condition has shown obstacles and the sixth and seventh possibilities to create deliberative dialogues.
As a result of the analysis it must be said that a precondition for deliberative dialogues in (pre)schools is to start out from a communicative perspective. This means that:
1. some theoretical conditions have been made apparent
2. knowledge about these conditions have been shown to be crucial for using an aware communicative perspective in a speech act
3. an aware communicative perspective is revealed through the procedures of knowledge.
   These procedures were understood by and made evident to me as a result of the network meeting discussions.
The focus has been on dialogues and the role of special educators and one important condition for creating deliberative dialogues is the role of the facilitator. A facilitator can be the link between professionals, parents, children and other authorities in order to assist collaboration. A special educator as facilitator, a communicative perspective and procedures of knowledge are found to be crucial for collaboration using a deliberative attitude in (pre)schools (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009).

Discussion
As I have shown above in the result section, it is important to have knowledge about communication that is both theoretical and pragmatic. Moreover, to create possibilities for deliberative dialogues it is important that there is a role in (pre)school that emancipates from the role of teaching and instead focuses on knowledging procedures with an awareness of communicative and pedagogical action.

Critical conditions
One critical condition for creating possibilities for deliberative dialogue is strategy (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009). A communicative action cannot, according to Habermas, include strategic actions. My study has shown different kinds of strategies and that it is important whether dialogues have shown manipulative ‘successfulness’ for the (pre)school or more understandable and deliberative attitudes. Dialogues relating to ‘successfulness’ for (pre)schools have shown strategies about content, while dialogues for understanding have shown strategies about procedures. It has been revealed that a strategic action is often understood as being necessary in a context of (pre)school.
What is of importance is how professionals in (pre)school handle the question of strategy. One mode of strategic action is special educators talking to other professionals before meeting the parents. These meetings between professionals can be about the content, what will or will not be spoken about, who will talk and in which order. If pre meetings also would include special educators talking with parents and children this would serve to equalize the structure of power and domination. What the analysis has made visible is that strategy can be handled in a communicative and non manipulative way but this relies on a deep knowledge about communication perspectives and possibilities for using this knowledge (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009).

It has been shown that a special educator as facilitator provides possibilities for creating deliberative dialogues in (pre)schools (ibid.). Facilitators are obliged to cooperate with other professionals on different levels, and with parents and children. Ahlefeld Nisser (2009) has shown that special educators being able to describe their own roles and knowledge in an understandable way also create possibilities for deliberative dialogues.

Moreover Ahlefeld Nisser (2009) has shown that organising special educators is important for them to be able to act in a professional way and to engineer deliberative dialogues on different levels. This does not mean that a particular kind of organisation is more convenient than another for the matter of deliberation. But in considering the crucial condition about the relationship between special educators and principals I argue that one way to create possibilities for deliberative dialogues is to organise special educators and principals in a non-hierarchical way.

**How can special educators and special education teachers cooperate?**

As mentioned earlier in this text both special educators and special education teachers shall have competencies as qualified dialogue partners (*kvalificerad samtalspartner*). Special education teachers are specialized on reading- and writing- or mathematic development and they shall basically work on an individual level in preschool classes, in school and in adult education (SFS 2008:132). The function of special educators is broadened as they are qualified to work in preschool, preschool classes, leisure centres, schools and adult education on an organizational-, group- and individual level. Their specialisation should be, according to Ahlefeld Nisser (2009), deep competencies in communication and how to communicate in a deliberate way on different levels. This means that the two professions, special educators and special education teachers, have to communicate their uniqueness and differences. In my opinion, and according to SFS 2008:132, special education teachers’ work focuses on narrow and close perspectives while special educators, according to Ahlefeld Nisser (2009), use a more distance perspective. I argue that if their different functions are understood from perspectives of nearness and/or distance the two professions can complement each other in a way that could benefit children in need of special education. Activities in preschool and school need to be looked upon from both close and distance perspectives and therefore we need special educators as facilitators and special education teachers as teachers.

**Final point**

When professionals, parents and children meet to discuss barriers and possibilities for learning it is important to provide room for different perspectives. By starting out with the communicative perspective, as it is defined in Ahlefeld Nisser (2009) and in this text, different perspectives can be given equal weight. Today there is often a lack of pedagogical professionals in (pre)schools who can act as a link between authorities, organisations, different professionals and parents, and who have the authority to pose challenging pedagogical questions. This can be changed if the role of special educators is, instead of teacher, defined as communicative special educators working with dialogues on different levels.
References


