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How qualified dialogues (knowledging dialogues<sup>1</sup>) in (special) education can be described and understood.

The aim of this paper is to describe knowledging dialogues in education in general and special education in specific, and to give examples of how they can be understood.

### **Introduction**

#### **Knowledging dialogues between Maria and a special educator – a description<sup>2</sup>**

Maria was a 15 year old girl who had stopped going to her lessons. She went to school every day, but she did not join any lessons. She sat in the corridors all day long. One day in February her mother called the special educator, who was working for all pre schools and schools in the community. The reason why Maria´s mother called this special educator was that there was no person at Maria´s school whom Maria wanted to talk to about what bothered her. She did not want to talk to the psychologist or to the social welfare officer or to any of the teachers. Marias´ mother was very worried about Maria and asked the special educator to book a meeting with Maria. The special educator answered that she would do so on condition that Maria was told why her mother had called the special educator, and that Maria accepted to meet with her. The special educator and Maria met a week later at the special educator´s office located in a non school neighborhood.

Special educator: You know your mother called me a week ago, and told me that she is very worried about your non-attendance at lessons at school?

Maria: Yes.

Special educator: Please, tell me what keeps you from attending lessons?

Maria: Well, it started with the Sports lessons. I don´t like my sports teacher. I haven´t attended any sports lessons this school year.

Special educator: What has he done to make you return to his lessons?

Maria: Nothing.

Special educator: What about the other lessons? Tell me about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Another way to express what is meant: Knowledge-creating dialogues. In Swedish: Kunskapande samtal.

<sup>2</sup> The original analysis in Nisser, 1999, pp. 71-77.

Maria: Well, I like my Swedish- and Social studies' teacher but all the same, I don't go to his lessons. I like Art, but I don't go to those lessons either.

Special educator: What about Mathematics and English? Are you good at them or do you find those subjects difficult?

Maria: I've fallen behind the others, but I don't think it's difficult. I think I can manage all subjects.

Maria continues and tells her story, and she remembers when she was in the second year and it was decided that she would remain in the second grade another year. She could not understand why, as she had been studying consistently, and she had never been told that anything was wrong with her performance. She remembers that they had had to work with all letters after a scheme on the classroom wall. What she had never understood, was that she was actually progressing slower with the letters than her classmates, and that was the reason why she had to stay another year in the second class. This arrangement had made her very sad and she told the special educator that this was one of the reasons she did not want to go to school any more.

The special educator and Maria talked for over an hour, and when they finished the special educator told Maria that she would write down Maria's story and send it to her. She wanted Maria to read it and confirm whether or not her story had been registered accurately. A few days later the special educator called Maria to find out if she had got the letter and if Maria's life story was written down in accordance with what she had told the special educator. Maria accepted the contents of the letter and a new meeting was scheduled for the week after. The special educator suggested that Maria would bring her mother, which Maria agreed to. One week later they met again at the special educator's office – Maria, her mother and the special educator.

Special educator: Hi Maria, Nice to see you again! Have you thought anything about what you told me last time we met?

Maria: Oh yes! I have thought a lot, and I have come to some solutions.

Special educator: Tell me about them.

Maria: I want to go back to class. I think I can manage it, apart from the sports lessons. That I can't manage and I don't want to. Not yet. I think that the art lessons would be easiest to go back to, because I like art. And I think that I would manage to go back to the Swedish lessons and the Social studies lessons. And instead of sitting in the corridor while the others are having sports lessons I can sit in a class room working with Math' and English. I can do that on my own, if I only have someone to see if I need any help.

Special educator: Do you have anyone in mind?

Maria: I have thought about my Swedish and Social studies teacher. I like him and I think he likes me too, and if I know in which classroom he is when I'm working with my stuff I can go there if I need to.

Special educator: That's a good idea. Do you want me to talk to him or will you do it yourself?

Maria: You can talk to him first, but I will do it, as well.

Special educator: Is there anything else you want me to do, to make it easier for you?

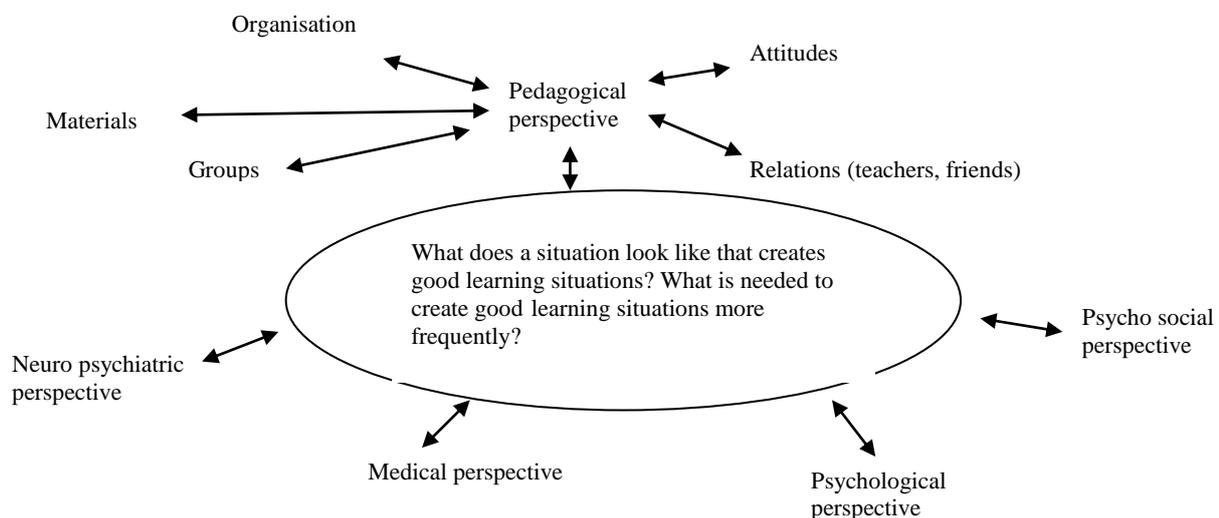
Maria: Yes. Can you tell the teachers not to say “Oh, Maria, how nice to see you” when I come back. I simply want to join classes as everyone else. I don’t want to attract any attention.

The special educator gathered all Marias’ teachers and told them what Maria wanted them to know. Marias suggested solutions were greeted - with affirmation, except for her refusal to go back to sports lessons. The teachers’ could not accept it, with the motivation that if they accepted her not joining the sports lessons that would be the same as authorizing her non-attendance. Finally this part was accepted too, and Maria became an attending school girl, like her classmates again.

Maria, her mother, her class teacher and the special educator kept meeting every third or fourth week for a whole year. The discussions were always about pedagogical issues and what had to be done to create as good as possible learning situations for Maria. Finally she also went back to the sports lessons as the class got a new teacher.

## Background

What I have described above is an example of what I call a ‘knowledging dialogue’. The context of such a dialogue is education or special education and focus lies on pedagogical issues. Pedagogical situations are discussed, which means that good learning situations are highlighted, as well as problematical situations. Important to understand is, from different perspectives, why certain situations function in a good way while others do not. By focusing on situations, problems can be understood in different ways and not only as failures or diseases connected to individual. See figure 1.



Figur 1: A situation based approach in order to understand individuals’ problems from different perspectives.

## How Can Knowledging Dialogues in Special Education Be Defined?

Knowledging dialogue is about *how* we talk (v. Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009). Language, and how we understand words, is important (Maturana, (1999). The procedure of the dialogue must be made visible, talked about and accepted by everyone (Habermas, 1995/1981). Everyone

attending the dialogue is seen as a competent person having knowledge to be produced and shared with the others (Freire, 1972). 'Knowledging' is understood as a subjective, non neutral action. Lather (1991) writes:

[Pedagogy]...denies the teacher as neutral transmitter, the student as passive, and knowledge as immutable material to impart. Instead, the concept of pedagogy focuses attention on the conditions and means through which knowledge is produced (p. 15).

In accordance with the above cited constructivist attempt, knowledging dialogues has a constructivistic leader. This means that the leader strives to understand what the Other understands. He or she strives for meaningfulness, for everyone attending the dialogue. The leader acts in a way that makes all voices important and as equal as possible. An ethical approach is important, which means a respectful conduct by the leader.

Furthermore the knowledging dialogue is about social learning processes. It's about influencing and challenging people's action, thinking and learning strategies by discussing them. It's about sharing experiences. It's about participation, about making sense of everybody and their actions. It's about empowering.

Important questions – how do we talk about (and with) children in school problems? How do we make decisions? How do we make sure everyone is in agreement?

## **Competent Participants, Ethical Approach and Meaningfulness**

In the dialogue above, the special educator strives to understand Maria by inviting her to start to give her view of why she is not attending the lessons. This is an important starting approach, as this tells Maria that she is an important person with a lot of knowledge about herself. She is constructed as a competent person. The special educator does not evaluate Maria's story as such. The story is described by Maria in a way that makes it a truthful story in Maria's mind. If her mother or her teachers would tell Maria's story they would have given other stories. How true or not true the story is, is of less importance. What is important is the special educator's respectfulness to Maria's narration. She shows this respect by sending her a letter and asking Maria to confirm if the story is correctly understood by the special educator or not. She is also respecting Maria and trusting her competences by listening to her suggestions of solutions. This also exemplifies an ethical approach. It is important to take into account the life story of a person and listen to what meaning a person gives to different situations and to different solutions. Maria had an explication to why she did not want to join the sports lessons. In her opinion the sports teacher had treated her badly. An opposite way of handling the situation would have been to tell Maria that the sports teacher did what he had to do and that it is obligatory to attend all lessons. The special educator would have told Maria what to do or even worse, threaten her with some kind of punishment if she refused to obey.

## **Social learning processes and Empowering**

Knowledging dialogues can also be about learning processes. An important approach in these kinds of dialogues is the belief that everyone can learn how to learn by influencing and challenging people's action, thinking and learning strategies, and by discussing them.

The following example is a dialogue between a special educator and Lisa, 45 years old<sup>3</sup>. She was about to begin nursing education and was very anxious to start, since she had reading- and writing difficulties. The dialogue below takes place some weeks after school had begun.

Lisa: On Monday that week, I called here to tell them I wouldn't start the nursing education.

Special educator: You had decided not to go?

Lisa: Yes. I realized I wouldn't manage. And then she says: why are you going to drop this?

Well, I think I have so much difficulty with the Swedish subject, so I cannot do it. But you can get help here, she said. Yes, but I don't think I'll manage anyway! But you must not drop this! And this was eight in the morning. Then she called me again at nine. She had talked to the headmaster. He had said that it would be a failure for the school if I didn't start.

Special educator: You started a week after, didn't you?

Lisa: The week after.

Special educator: How did you feel when you started? Where you anxious?

Lisa: Yes, I was, but at the same time it felt good! First of all, I knew I would get help and secondly because I already had met you. So I thought I'd start!

Special educator: And you have not regretted it?

Lisa: No, and I thought, I'll try one month to see how things work out.

Lisa and the special educator meet regularly to talk about Lisa's learning process. In one of the dialogues Lisa is telling the special educator about how she is getting more and more conscious about dropping endings when she writes.

Lisa: I dropping the endings when I write. I see when I write that I lose endings, or a letter. I see that it is not correctly written, but I cannot see what's wrong. Then it was the word '*byrålåda*'. I looked at it for a long time. I had spelled it with an 'o' first.

Special educator: With o instead of å? *Byrolåda*?

Lisa: It was the same thing there. The word image didn't correspond to the word. I'm getting more conscious!

Lisa is working with rhyming words and with compound words, and she tells the special educator that she has found out by herself how it works.

Lisa: Well, I'll think I have found out how the thing with rhyming words works. It was a little bit difficult before.

Special educator: What have you found out? What has happened, do you think?

Lisa: Well, you say it like a poem – you rhyme through having the same endings!

Special educator: You didn't know that before?

Lisa: No, I have never thought about it in that way before!

Special educator: Can you hear the rhyme? Verse-terse.

Lisa: It's easier for me now than before. I have understood. I manage to fix the rhymes in another way than before. When I get a column I can see the words.

Special educator: And that it's the ending that has to be the same?

Lisa: Yes, I have never thought about it before! There are a lot of things where I have a feeling, that it is... And I have a kind of image when I have to write a verse that is going to rhyme...

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<sup>3</sup> The example is taken from Nisser, 1999, pp. 52-58.

how I can fix it. I didn't manage before. I took it more out of the blue. So I really think it's good! Well, and when I begun with the compound words, I have understood it in a better way now – you take two words and then you put them together.

Lisa gives words to a strengthened self consciousness and to an increased consciousness about how to solve her reading and writing problems. She enjoys studying which is a big difference to how she felt in the beginning.

## **Knowledging Dialogues for Inclusive Education**

Ainscow & Sandill (2010) maintain that there is “empirical evidence about the relationship between school action and the participation of all students in the cultures, curricula and communities of their schools” (p. 405). Staff collaboration and joint problem-solving, which take their beginning in similar values, are some of the characteristics of inclusive school cultures. Furthermore, there is an outspoken respect for difference and an organization that strives for participation for all. Inclusive school cultures are characterized by leaders whose values are visualized through good contacts with parents and with the communities. A leadership style which encourages shared responsibility, reciprocity and shared problem solving are effective factors for inclusive schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). They write

There is evidence, too, that when schools seek to develop more collaboration ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work (p. 410).

The following example<sup>4</sup> – from a special educator's logbook - is a knowledging dialogue between a special educator, a head master, a pre-school teacher and a mother. The aim with the dialogue was to discuss a little boy's school start in context of different school forms and what would be the best solution for him. The special educator started to present herself and stated that her task was to be a dialogue partner and to lead an open discussion about the boy's needs. She asked the mother to begin to tell them about her son.

She became silent, and asked what I meant.

So I told her that I had seen him a couple of times, and that I was very interested in her picture of the son because children – and we adults – can act differently depending on where we are and with whom.

She started to talk about her son with warmth, and what problems she could see in him.

I could pose questions as: Can you describe more what happened? Can you tell what needs he has? What is to be done to meet his needs? What are you doing at home to meet his needs? What is working? What is not working? What is he good at? How can we use what he is good at to create good situations for him?

She told us about the big problems they had at home.

I asked the teachers if they could recognize the type of problems mentioned by the mother, what they did to solve them, what was working and what didn't work.

We could agree upon the boy's problems, which needs he had, what support the teachers needed and what support the parents needed.

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<sup>4</sup> The example is taken from v. Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009, pp. 219-222.

It was decided that the boy should start the first grade and that the teachers were offered supervision over time by the special educator.

As this type of problematic children (aggressive, hitting class mates and teachers) will be seen again for sure, it was important to support the teachers to be more determined. As it was, they only asked the child “why are you doing this?”

The special educator is reflecting about this dialogue and asks herself

Who has the true story? How do we understand what we see? How much do we think we see and what do we know about what the parent’s situation is like at home? We have to think that everyone is doing their best. The teachers were a little confused after this dialogue, but they said they had learnt a lot from my approach towards the mother. They had never thought of letting a parent begin to tell what a morning would look like at home, or how a dinner situation could be. Or the-going-to-bed-procedure. They said they had always told “how it should be...”

## What is needed to create possibilities for Knowledging Dialogues?

To create possibilities for knowledging dialogues it is important that there is a role in (pre-) school that emancipates from the role of teaching and focuses on knowledging procedures with an awareness of communicative and pedagogical action. Sweden has two similar, but different professions – special educators and special education teachers. The similarity is that both special educators and special education teachers are supposed to have qualifications as competent dialogue partners (*kvalificerad samtalspartner*). However, one important difference is the expressed focus, from the government, on an individual level in school for special education teachers in contrast to special educators’ broader role including organization-, group- and individual level in both pre-school and school (SFS 2007:638; SFS 2008:132). 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 distant perspectives and therefore we need special education teachers’ focusing on narrow and close perspectives while special educators use a more distant perspective.

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