

Paper Presentation at The European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Berlin, Germany, 13-16 September 2011

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How the function of being a qualified dialogue partner is described and understood by special educational needs coordinators, special teachers, and principals.

Introduction

Definition of SENCO and Special Teacher¹.

This text is concerned with the function of being a qualified dialogue partner² for the two different occupational groups of special educators in the Swedish educational system - special educational needs coordinators –SENCOs³ and special teachers⁴. The Swedish statute for SENCOs and special teachers (SFS 2007:638; SFS 2011:186) declares that special teachers shall demonstrate ability to be qualified dialogue partners and advisors in matters relating to e.g. language, writing and reading development, or mathematics development. SENCOs shall demonstrate in-depth ability to be qualified dialogue partners and advisors in matters relating to pedagogical issues to colleagues, parents, and other stakeholders. Neither the concept ‘qualified dialogue partner’, nor the stress on the word ‘in-depth’ has been defined by the government.

The aim of this ongoing research is to understand and describe how the function of the qualified dialogue partner in special needs education develops when the two professions, SENCOs and special teachers, encounter the realities of pedagogical practice. How do they handle their role as qualified dialogue partners? How do SENCOs cooperate with special teachers? How do the preschool/school principals perceive the similarities and differences between the two professions?

A Definition of Special Needs Education

To be a qualified dialogue partner means, I maintain, that special needs education must be understood from a communicative perspective. This means a focus on *how* we talk about (and with) children having school problems, where questions as how we talk about and with children with school problems, how we make decisions, how we make sure everyone agrees are of great importance (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009; Ahlefeld Nisser, 2010; Ahlefeld Nisser 2011a).

In Ahlefeld Nisser (2011a), I have argued why I find it important to understand pupils’ school problems as problems with a basis in situations. I define special needs education as *communication about pedagogy that creates optimum conditions for learning for the individual*: an activity in which pedagogical situations are discussed, which means that good learning situations, as well as problematic situations, are highlighted. 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 the individual. See Fig. 1.

¹ In earlier texts I have used special educator for the Swedish title *specialpedagog* (in this text SENCO) and special education teacher for the Swedish *speciallärare* (in this text special teacher). In accordance with Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist & Wetso (2011) I use the words SENCOs, special teachers and, when I refer to both these groups, ‘special educators’.

² In Swedish *kvälificerad samtalspartner*.

³ In Swedish *specialpedagoger*; verbatim translation: special pedagogues.

⁴ In Swedish *speciallärare*.

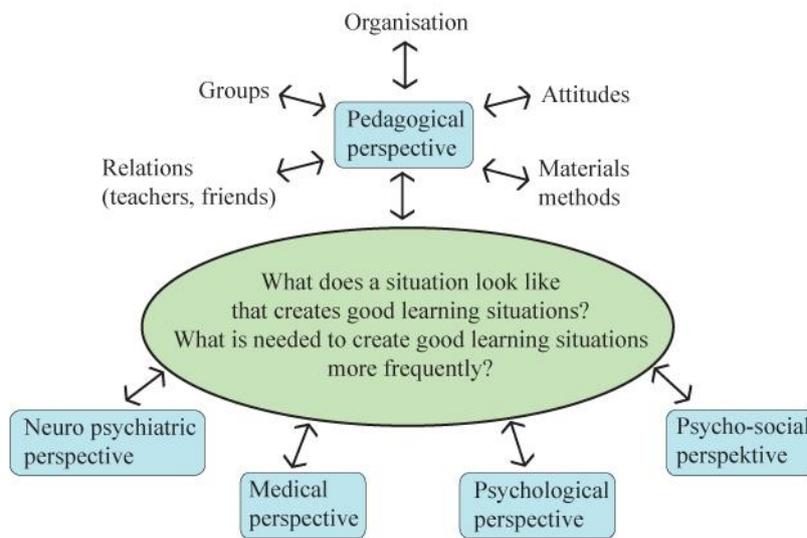


Fig 1: A situation based approach in order to understand individuals' problems from different perspectives.

Definition of Knowledgeing Dialogues

In Ahlefeldt Nisser (2011a) I have described knowledgeing dialogues in (special) education. In this part I make a brief description. The overarching perspective is that of social constructionism and knowledgeing dialogues begin with a communicative perspective since the focus lies on how we talk (Ahlefeldt Nisser, 2009). Language, and how we understand words, is important (Maturana, 1999), and the procedure of the dialogue must be made visible, talked about and accepted by everyone (Habermas, 1995/1981). Consequently, everyone attending the dialogue is seen as a competent person having knowledge to be shared with the others (Freire, 1972). This means that knowledgeing is understood as a subjective, non neutral action. Lather (1991) declares that “[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).

The context for knowledgeing dialogues is education, or special needs education, and focus lies on pedagogical issues. This means that pedagogical activities are discussed and understood from communicative perspectives. In accordance with the above cited constructivist attempt, knowledgeing dialogues has a constructivist leader. This means that the leader is responsible to make the procedure of the dialogue visible to and accepted by everyone, that he or she strives to comprehend what the others understand and seeks to create meaning, for everyone attending the dialogue. Thus the leader acts in a way that makes all voices important and as equal as possible. Also, an ethical approach is important, which means a respectful conduct by the leader. Furthermore the knowledgeing dialogue is about social learning processes. It concerns influencing and challenging people’s action, ways of thinking and learning strategies by discussing them. Knowledgeing dialogues are about sharing experiences, participation, and making sense of everybody and their actions. It is about empowering.

The Inclusive Philosophy

Education is a human and a democratic right (United Nations, 2007) and should be based on values such as equality and non-discrimination. Furthermore, the importance of education needs to be acknowledged by parents and children, it should be compulsory and free (Westling Allodi, 2007). The Swedish education system has been characterized by an inclusive philosophy, which means that compulsory as well as higher education shall meet requirements such as inclusion, participation, equality and democracy. In special needs education the inclusive philosophy was made visible through the shift from special teachers to SENCOs in education in 1990. This change was a result of the government’s ambition to establish more inclusive practices. This entailed a change from understanding the causes of school problems in terms of

individual shortcomings, to a wider and broadened understanding of school problems. In accordance SENCOs were educated to be supervisors (UHÄ, 1990-06-27). The idea was to abolish the segregating form of training as organization, as education should hence focus more on supervision than on teaching. However, Heimdahl Mattson & Malmgren Hansen (2009) maintain, the Swedish rhetoric of inclusive education for all was not made visible in practice. Organizational differentiated solutions, common to several schools, were created which meant that students can be forced to change schools. A report from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) - *What Influences the Results in the Swedish Schools?*⁵ - observes that Swedish research results show a negative correlation between special needs education support and students' academic performance and that this negative correlation may be directed to functionally differentiated solutions (p. 26). Nevertheless, two studies (Lindqvist, Gunilla; Nilholm, Claes; Almqvist, Lena and Wetso; Gun-Marie, 2011, and Lindqvist, Gunilla & Nilholm, Claes, 2011) show that difficulties in schools are often considered to be caused primarily by individual shortcomings and that it is most important to place children in need of support in special groups. On the other hand, supervising staff, specialize in moderate qualified dialogues, is considered as rather important – even more so by SENCOs and preschool teachers, than by class teachers and subject teachers (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist, Wetso, 2011).

A restart of a profession

In 2008 the Swedish government initiated a restart for the education of special teachers with the aim to focus their work on the individual level (SFS 2008:132). This means that from 2010, there are two different but similar special needs education professions in Sweden: SENCOs and special teachers. Although both SENCOs and special teachers are required to be qualified dialogue partners there is an important difference: the government's expressed focus for special teachers is on individual-level interaction in preschool classes, schools and adult education, in contrast to the broadened role of SENCO's which includes work on organizational, group *and* individual levels at preschools, in preschool classes, at schools, leisure centres, and within adult education (SFS 2007:638; SFS 2008:132). Also, special teachers specialize in development in e.g. reading and writing or mathematics, while the function of SENCOs is broader, as they are qualified to work with all kinds of special education issues.



Fig 2: Special teachers and SENCOs in the Swedish education system

In effect, Swedish special needs education has two different but similar professions which raises the question how the two professions can cooperate and complement each other in a way that will facilitate the right to participate in education for all. From my perspective, it is a matter of professional knowledge about what it means to approach a problem from a communicative perspective, and about the different responsibilities of the two different professions. Consequently, I find great relevance in investigating how special teachers, educated after 2008, understand the commission to be a qualified dialogue partner, how they handle this professional role, and how their education prepared them for it.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data has been collected between March 2010 and May 2011, through e-mail surveys and interviews. E-mail: To begin with, an e-mail was sent in March 2010 to 12 recently graduated special teachers. They were the first to graduate in accordance with the goals of SFS 2008:132 and they had attended the same university. The questions I asked were:

- Do you have a service as special teacher? Please describe it.
- Are you specialized in developing reading and writing, or mathematics?
- In what way are you using your competence in being a qualified dialogue partner?
- In your opinion, how is your competence made visible?

⁵ In Swedish: Skolverket (2009) *Vad påverkar resultaten i svenska skola?*

Six special teachers answered. Through one of them I got the name of another special teacher who had graduated at another university.

Interviews - Focus groups: The interviews involved ten respondents: Six special teachers, three of whom had answered the e-mail, one with whom I got in contact through one of the six that had answered this e-mail, and two who will graduate in 2012. Also, two SENCOs, and two principals were interviewed in order to get a deeper understanding of the function of being a qualified dialogue partner. The interviews were arranged in focus groups since the questions I asked all focused on specific themes that promoted discussions. Furthermore, I was interested in the change of the participants understanding of the questions while listening to each other. Moreover, one of the interviews was made with only one participant. According to Bryman (2011) this is a so called focused interview, for which the person is chosen because he/she had been in situations that are of a special interest for the researcher.

1. First interview: One special teacher (ST 1), one SENCO (SENCO 1), and one principal (P1) (focus group).
2. Second interview: One special teacher (ST 2) who had been promoted to principal (focus interview).
3. Third interview: One SENCO (SENCO 3) and two prospective special teachers (ST 3a, ST 3b) (focus group).
4. Fourth interview: Two special teachers (ST 4a, ST 4b), and one principal (P 4) (focus group).

My intention was to make focus groups interview with a SENCO, a special teacher and a principal in each group. This was not easily done as it was difficult to find schools, or even communities, where they had all professions. As the education to special teacher is rather new there are still not many special teachers in the communities.

The interviews were carried out in a way that has similarities to what I have referred to as knowledging dialogues. This means that the dialogues are understood in terms of learning from each other, but nevertheless they had a distinct starting point in the issues that interested me and which were connected to the aim of my study. The questions I posed were:

1. How do you understand the commission to be a qualified dialogue partner?
2. How do you handle this role?
3. How did you experience that the education prepared you for the commission?
4. What are your reasons when you, as a principal, employ SENCOs and/or special teachers?
5. How do you look upon similarities and differences regarding to the two professions' commissions?

The findings presented below are part of an ongoing analysis.

Prepared but Keen on Learning More

My research indicates that the 'new' special teachers are well prepared for the commitment to be qualified dialogue partners.

ST 1: In my education we got a commission. We should have qualified dialogues on five occasions with one and the same group. In our turn we were supervised on these occasions. This was very good because things happened!

They are satisfied with the education they have got:

ST 2: It was very, very rewarding! Better than I thought it would be! .../ It was both theoretical how one could do, different tools how to carry through dialogues, but also about the parallel processes...What happened to me and to the group...it strengthened me to trust my own feelings. Not to question myself so much, but to trust that the feeling of what is happening in the group stands for a kind of process in the group. It stands for something and you can work from that instead of wondering if the group is sensitive or not or if I am a good dialogue leader or not.

Moreover, they express a desire to work with the tasks involved and to learn more.

ST 4: Yes, I really want to do this!

Obstacles to Fulfil the Commitment - Old Notions, Old Names and Misuse of Competence

Moreover, the findings indicate some obstacles for special teachers to fulfil their commitment of being a qualified dialogue partner: The first one relates to the notion of what a special teacher shall do. Former

special teachers (educated before 1990) often worked with individuals or small groups of children. In the beginning, SENCOs had to struggle with these expectations too, and had difficulties in introducing for example their counseling role: *They weren't interested in me as a SENCO. They wanted a special teacher* (SENCO 1). Although a lot of SENCOs still work as special teachers – individually teaching children in need of support – it has become more common that they also work with supervising teachers and personnel in teams and with organizational development (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist and Wetso., 2011). The 'new' special teachers seem to have to struggle with the old notion of what special teachers are supposed to do. The question is if the notion of what, and with whom, a special teacher should work with, would change if they were referred to as something else than 'special teachers'?

ST 4b: It is unfortunate that it is called special teacher because our work is more like the perspective of SENCOs' way of thinking and therefore it should be named SENCOs with specialization in mathematics.

When I asked the special teacher to explain how she understood the difference between the SENCOs' perspective and the perspective of special teachers she said:

ST 4b: The special teachers' way of thinking means teaching pupils individually (which might imply that the perspective she is referring to focuses on individual shortcomings of the child. My comment.)

The principal in focus group four had the same opinion:

P 4: I think there is still an old notion left and old words can fortify this notion. It is more difficult to change a commission if you have the old term.

I would argue that this reveals a shift in the way special needs education is regarded. Special needs education is not only understood as individual shortcomings of the child. It is also about development and about changing attitudes (see also Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist, Wetso., 2011; Lindqvist & Nilholm., 2011). One of the special teachers (ST 2) stated that she is a specialist, rather than special teacher in mathematics. As a specialist she sometimes held lessons in the class while the class' ordinary math teacher observed her. After the lesson the two teachers had a pedagogical discussion about the lesson. She emphasizes that *it's important to be able to talk mathematics* (ST 2).

Another obstacle relates to the misuse of competencies. The interviews also make clear that some of the work special teachers traditionally do could be done by others than special teachers or SENCOs. They actually regard some of their work as a waste of time.

SENCO 3: It is not always about tasks for special teachers. It's more about an adult watching or sitting nearby a child and this could be done by any teacher.

They claim that their pedagogical competencies are not being used. Especially their competencies in being qualified dialogue partners are sometimes not used at all.

ST 3a: Special teacher's and SENCO's competencies should be used in a way that benefits their education. And this is not done by sitting beside a child who works with some special material because this could any teacher do if they get supervision! I don't see myself stuck in a school in the future. It would be a pity, I think!

The special teacher in focus group 1 also has the experience of being more of an assistant than a specialist in Swedish subject.

ST 1: My ambition is to be in the classrooms, but instead I have noticed that I am more of an assistant because I never have the time to plan together with the class teacher. Instead I find myself rushing into the classroom once a week trying to be flexible and to adjust myself to the lesson going on./.../ I don't think my pedagogical knowledge is used the way I would like it to be.

One of the special teachers (ST 3a) made a comparison between working with individuals and with small groups with children with for example writing and reading difficulties or working with qualified dialogues with children, parents or colleagues about complicated learning situations. She had had the opportunity to follow two different SENCOs in their work. One of them was working with individuals and the other worked more "*with the whole person*" (ST3a) and with more "*difficult questions*" (ST3a) where qualified dialogues were required.

ST 3a: And I saw /name of a SENCO/ working individually with a child and that seemed to be much easier, I must say.

The question raised, whether it is 'easier' to work traditionally than with 'difficult' qualified dialogues has to be further investigated as it is not clear what is meant with 'easier' or how difficult questions are defined.

The Return to an Old Working Place and Class Teachers Mandate to Make Decisions

It is indicated that special teachers have difficulties if they return to their old working places after their degree. They tend to have difficulties to change the attitudes to, the role and organization of special education. Even if they desire to achieve this, it seems to be difficult.

ST 1: Well, my way of thinking about special education has been turned upside down. I left school as one person and came back as another who thought differently about these issues of special needs education and learning difficulties. I experienced it as hard to come back as another person because the one who came back was not known by my colleagues. They knew me as the person I was before. So there can be conflicts now and then, or I think they can be astonished about what I say sometimes (laughter) when we discuss pupils because I can feel I have altered my perspectives. On the other hand I can recognize myself in how I was before in their attitudes about pupils and about handing over the problem to the special teacher and about not feeling involved. Once you get help from a special teacher the responsibility is the special teacher's. That is the way I thought it should be before I got my education, but now I don't think that way.

Another obstacle expressed is the class teachers' mandate to decide what and with whom the special teachers shall work with. One of the special teachers, ST 1, is specialized in Swedish and wishes to observe pupils more during their Swedish lessons. *These observations could be a starting point for a qualified dialogue with the class teacher*, she said. The obstacle to do this, she claims, is the schedule which is filled with special needs education in the sense of teaching individuals or groups in need of support.

Dialogue leader: What would happen if you changed your schedule and said that at this or that time I should need to observe 'Bill' or 'Lisa' in the classroom?

ST 1: I would get into a conflict with other teachers.

In focus group 3 one of the special teachers exclaim indignantly:

ST 3b: The class teachers decide!

One of the special teachers, ST 2, got a job at a new working place. She could more easily make changes because she could argue for working in a different way and she didn't have to struggle with colleagues' opinions about her approach. She was perceived as a professional coming to the working place with 'new' eyes.

ST 2: There were these small things like the principal asking me only to introduce myself to the special groups. I didn't have to introduce myself to the capable groups with no need of special support. But I objected and said: I am here for all children! I shall work with mathematics in its whole. / ... / I didn't attend a special working team, but I circulated and met them all, talking mathematics.

In accordance with focus group 1 she also was of the opinion that these changes would not have been easily accomplished if she had returned to her old working place.

ST 2: It's more difficult to affect matters if you return to your old working place.

Lack of time and too much work with details

The interviews reveals that time is an obstacle for qualified dialogues. Teachers are not interested in dialogues because it takes time from the traditional work with the children. In three of the four interviews (1, 2 and 4) time is presented as an obstacle for qualified pedagogical dialogues. Lack of time makes teachers give priority to discussions about content and not to pedagogical issues. One principal (P 4) is talking in terms of working with 'details' and working in a 'more holistic way'. My understanding of this statement is that work with details means traditional work with children and discussions about content. A more holistic approach involves qualified dialogues about pedagogical issues and about school development.

P 4: You want a holistic approach, but you drown in details.

On the other hand, the special teacher in interview 2 (ST 2) managed to change the schools opinion about differentiated groups for pupils in mathematics. She could direct attention to current research findings and

argue for a change. She attended the classes, when they had mathematics, and used the experiences from the observations as starting points for pedagogical discussions with the math teachers, something she felt the teachers appreciated.

ST 2: Not all of them and not to the same extent, but there was openness. / ... / But there was a disagreement because teachers wished me to take pupils out of the classroom and teach them individually. It's a process (to change attitudes. My clarification).

Qualified Dialogues – an important and challenging function

The findings indicate that qualified dialogues need to be a part of the organization. *It's an important and challenging function (to be a qualified dialogue partner) (ST 2).* It must be scheduled on a regular basis, there must be a leader and the leaders must have a mandate to lead the dialogue. Furthermore, it can be concluded that special teachers, coming to a new working place, seem to have more opportunities to change their way of working, and to introduce themselves as qualified dialogue partners with an important commitment to develop their subject of expertise, than special teachers returning to their old working place have. It is also indicated that principals, with a clear notion of how special teachers shall work, have better possibilities to change attitudes. The principal in focus group 4 said:

P 4: Whose territory are you entering? Earlier you invaded their (class teachers. My clarification) planning time. When we turned it around – the one who is responsible for the time is the one who has to push, and is expected to be prepared, having an agenda and taking care of it. It is also a change in power, who the owner of the time is. This became like a symbol. It became important, but it is also an expectation when you are introduced as a special teacher. You have to have an idea – what shall we do with this hour? If you have to push you will not be a victim for others.

On the other hand, although the principal in focus group 1 expressed opinions about what she thought would be important changes - *I think we would need to discuss more about knowledge, subjects and what we do during lessons/ ... / Some teachers just shrug it off. They think, bah! so ridiculous while others can handle it in quite another way!* - the special teacher in the same focus group, ST1, said she had to work very much in a traditional way with limited opportunities to change attitudes.

Qualified Dialogues - Integrating or Excluding Working with Children?

In this paper I have made clear that Sweden has two similar, but different professions – SENCOs and special teachers. The similarity is that both SENCOs and special teachers shall have competencies as qualified dialogue partners. Still, an important difference is the expressed focus, in governmental statutes, on the individual level in school for special teachers, in contrast to SENCOs' broadened role, including organization-, group- and individual levels in both preschool and school (SFS 2007:638; SFS 2008:132). According to SFS 2008:132, special teachers' work focuses on narrow and close perspectives while SENCOs, according to Ahlefeld Nisser (2009), use a more distanced perspective. I argue that if the two professions' different functions are understood from perspectives of nearness and/or distance, they can complement each other in a way that would better benefit children in need of special education. Activities in preschool and school need to be looked upon from both close and distance perspectives. Furthermore, there is a need for work with details and for work from a more holistic approach. Therefore, I maintain, we need special teachers focusing on narrow and close perspectives while SENCOs use a more distanced perspective.

By introducing Fig. 3 I hope to clarify how the perspective of nearness and details can be fulfilled with special teachers having qualified dialogues on an individual level. A more distant and holistic approach to pedagogical issues can be fulfilled with special teachers given the mandate to lead qualified dialogues with colleagues in teams (Ahlefeld Nisser, 2009). Moreover, it seems to be important to give room and time for special teachers and SENCOs to have qualified dialogues about pedagogical issues on a regular basis. To maintain the connection between individual, group and organisational level it is also important, I argue, that SENCOs are given opportunities to have qualified dialogues with educational

leaders (ibid.). This is important in order to understand school problems in a more holistic way.

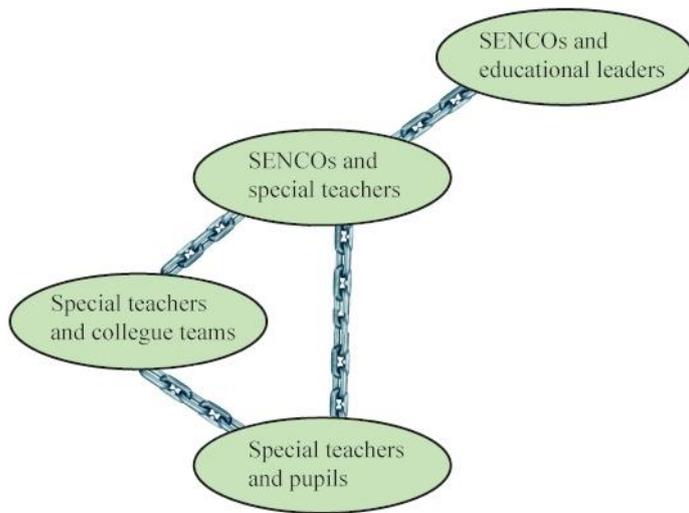


Fig. 3: A chain of dialogues where special teachers and SENCOs can complement each other in a way that could better benefit children in need of special education

Keywords: Special needs education, SENCO, special teacher, special educators, democratic dialogue.

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