

Exploring the Ideal of Dialogue by Taking into Account Both an Observed Interaction Session and the Participants' Views on the Interaction

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Abstract The focus of the article is on the ideal of using dialogue to promote contact between school and home. The aim was to explore this ideal by taking into account both an observed interaction session and how the participants perceive this interaction. The study draws on data from observation of a meeting about a pupil with special needs and his transition from lower to upper secondary school. The participants were the pupil, the mother and father, the special needs teacher, the school counsellor, the school psychology counsellor and the special needs coordinator. Additionally, interviews with the parents and the special needs coordinator have been conducted. Using sociological theory, more specifically the theory of communicative action (Habermas, in *The theory of communicative action. Reason and the rationalization of society*, 1984; in *The theory of communicative action. Lifeworld and system: a critique of functionalist reason*, 1987) as the point of departure, the observations show that the participants are having a dialogue, using arguments, negotiating common understanding and showing an orientation towards agreement. But during the interviews, it becomes apparent that at least one of the professionals might be acting strategically, that challenges may arise when participants do not present their view, that the conclusion is vague and that there are power differences between the participants. The elaboration of the participants' own views on the interaction demonstrates that the difference between acting communicatively and strategically is related to the interlocutors' attitudes and that this is not easily discerned through observation.

Keywords Dialogue · School · Home · Communicative · Strategic

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Introduction

The point of departure for this article is a case study concerning one pupil in lower secondary school and his transition to upper secondary school. More specifically, the focus is on one particular meeting between school and home in Norway where the pupil's options in upper secondary school are discussed. Dialogue is the ideal for such conversations and the purpose of this study was to explore this ideal by taking into account both the observed interaction and how the participants perceive the interaction. The article elaborates on this along two lines, first by explaining why the observed interaction session can be viewed as dialogue and next by explaining why this interaction session falls short of fulfilling the ideal of dialogue when the valuation is seen from the participants' points of view.

The professionals in school are supposed to lay the groundwork for dialogue and participation along with the parents and (often) the pupil. However, numerous studies have demonstrated that dialogue is quite frequently absent (Lidén 1997; Nordahl 2000, 2003). Studies have also elaborated on the ways in which school-home communication is constrained by race and class (Bæck 2007; Vincent 2001; Weininger and Lareau 2003). Additionally, findings from a survey completed by Cederstøm (1991) show that the teacher controls the conversation and that there is one-way communication from the teacher to the parents. It is then the teacher who holds the model power, as described by Bråten (1998). All in all, the research shows that even if teachers and parents experience power and powerlessness in different ways (Maclure and Walker 2000; Todd and Higgins 1998), most studies point to the fact that the non-professional feels powerless (Nordahl 2003; Pinkus 2005; Waggoner and Griffith 1998). However, it must also be noted that when parents describe their own role, they give conflicting signals on the roles of parents, teachers and their conversations (Xxx, 2009b).

A challenge arises if professionals dominate the meeting, first and foremost because the parents have the main responsibility for raising their child, including the educational part of the upbringing. Moreover, experts do not represent an "objective" truth, as expert knowledge from scientific results is often uncertain, partial and biased, and established truths change over time (Chalmers 1995; Stengers 1999). Theories referred to by experts are also often based on a large number of people which enable them to ignore the individual's own characteristics (Stengers 1999, p. 73). The pupil is perhaps not like the "average" pupil so that it is pivotal to discern the perspective of parents and pupils, especially when we bear in mind the diversity of pupils in inclusive schools.

Indeed, the Norwegian authorities have promoted dialogue as the ideal for conversations between the school and home since the 1990s (Report to the Storting number 29 (1994–1995)), and today dialogue continues to be upheld as the ideal (Report to the Storting number 31 (2007–2008)). The national curriculum also states that one underpinning of good cooperation is a good two-way communication (Knowledge Promotion 2006). However, there is no thorough and detailed description about how the legislative dialogue requirements should be put into practice in these texts. This is up to each teacher to determine. Professionals must continuously make decisions on how to act in every meeting between school and

home, as succinctly pointed out by Lipsky (1980, preface), “decisions of street-level bureaucrats...effectively become the public policies they carry out”. The professionals encounter the same challenge as Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000, p. 8) in their research on governance and inclusion/exclusion, one major difficulty was incorporation of unreflective categories produced in political arenas. That is, descriptions of dialogue are characterised by political rhetoric of a general nature and research has also established that teachers do not fulfil the legislative aim of dialogue. This should concern everyone who is interested in developing good schools.

One requirement for fulfilling the ideal of a good dialogue is being able to decide whether an interaction session is dialogue or not. It will be argued in this article that this cannot be decided simply through a teachers’ observation, for example; you must take into account how all the participants perceive the interaction. To examine this, an interaction session between school and home has been analysed and the findings triangulated with data from interviews with some of the participants.

Habermas’ (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action has been used to explain why an interaction session that at first glance seems like dialogue falls short of fulfilling this ideal when the participants’ views are taken into account. The next section presents the methodological approach, followed by the interaction session that is the basis for the analysis. The findings from the analysis are presented as two main points, and in closing the article, I round off with some final comments.

Methodology

My own experiences as a teacher, special needs teacher and school psychology counsellor, and my knowledge about challenges in professional conversations were the point of departure for this project, described by Aubert (1972) as problem-oriented empiricism. But the project has also been founded on basic ideas from critical theory where the assumption is that virtuality is shaped by social, political, economic and gender values crystallized over time, and where the findings are mediated with these values (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Kincheloe and McLaren 2005). This is not the focus of this project because the empirical material does not provide enough information according to which these issues could be discussed, even though, as it emerges in the case description, the family in question is not comfortable with their contact with the school. This does mean that the findings are not found to be objective and neutral; they have been accumulated in a certain context, in a certain culture and in a certain historical context.

I have used a case study approach involving observation and interviews. The pupil in the centre of the study is 15 years of age, has special education needs and is attending his last year in lower secondary school, located in an urban municipality in rural surroundings. The family lives in the countryside and is influenced by their remote surroundings; according to the special needs coordinator they are not people of many words. The mother has the main responsibility for the school contact, but finds it difficult to make demands of the school. The father is working in an industry where he is away from home several weeks and then is home for an extended leave,

claiming that he “does not follow what’s going on with the school stuff very much”. The special needs coordinator explains that it has taken a long time to get to know and feel comfortable with this family “and now I feel that I cooperate with them very well”. She further states that the pupil has changed tremendously while attending secondary school, from never being able to express what he wanted, to the situation today, where he has enormous self-awareness and takes care of things himself. As part of the transition from secondary to upper secondary school, the school is arranging a meeting where the overall purpose is to discuss and, if possible, determine the school and education program the pupil should apply for in upper secondary school, taking his special needs into account. The participants are the pupil, the mother, the father, and the professionals involved in this transition, all having different roles in this process. The special needs coordinator has the main responsibility for the structure of available choices within special education at the school and in this particular meeting is functioning as the moderator. The pupil’s special needs teacher is also present, having the most thorough knowledge of him as they interact in the classroom on a daily basis. The school counsellor’s job is to support the family in the process of finding a suitable upper secondary education programme and training. The school psychology counsellor is also participating and will, if the parents approve, make an expert assessment based on the pupil’s school situation today and his special needs. The assessment will also make recommendations for special needs education in upper secondary school.

This case study is part of a larger study designed around 17 observed conversations where ten interviews with parents and 11 interviews with teachers are included (see Xxx 2009a for further details).

In the first phase, all observations were thoroughly studied and, considering the purpose of the study, to illuminate how dialogue might be carried out in the contact between school and home, one interaction session was selected from the observations because it illustrated a process progressing towards common understanding and agreement. Three participants were interviewed after this meeting: the special needs coordinator and the pupil’s mother and father (together). The specific interaction session was also chosen on the strength of the participants’ utterances during the interviews, giving reason to question the analyses of the observation, that is, the assumption that the observed interaction session fulfils vital dialogue requirements. Thus, the interaction session was purposefully sampled, as described by Patton (2002). Additionally, this particular meeting was one of four very similar observed meetings in the larger project at the same school, also noted by the special needs coordinator during the interview. The meeting also represents a typical contact between these parents and the school, the mother explaining that it was “as it usually is”. Note also that she is, in general terms, talking positively about their contact with the school. The interviews were conducted separately between the parents and the special needs coordinator and took place immediately after the observed conversation. All the empirical findings presented in this study are based on audio-taped and transcribed text. The interview-guide was semi-structured with open-ended questions about the conversation in order to bring the informants’ own descriptions to light. But questions were also asked within the

frame of Habermas' theoretical framework and descriptions of dialogue in order to grasp vital aspects of dialogue during the interview.

Ethical issues must be addressed in a study based on observation and interviews. As being the object of observation might be perceived as degrading and labelling a young person as having special needs, this calls for special caution. Ethical guidelines (NESH 2006) have been followed throughout the research process. Note also that all identifying information has been changed to guarantee anonymity.

Analytical Approach

The data analysis relies on multiple sources (observation and interviews) that have been triangulated. The starting point was the observations. The interaction session was approached analytically through "recontextualization" (Danermark et al. 2002), meaning to observe, describe, interpret and explain something within the frame of a new context. In this particular study, this means that the selected interaction session has been studied in depth and characteristics of dialogue have been identified by logically applying some of Habermas' (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action. Sequences of text, about the interaction session, were then collated from the interviews, still with the purpose of the study in mind, and these expanded the understanding of the interaction. Based on the triangulation of observation and interviews, the findings are presented as "Why is it dialogue?" and "Why is it not dialogue?" Initially, this might seem like it produces inconsistent findings, but inconsistency through triangulation can occur and also be illuminating, as different data are sensitive to different real-world nuances and offer the opportunity for deeper insight (Patton 2002, p. 248). This certainly is the case in this study, the first step being based on observation and the second on observation and interviews. Together this methodological combination offers a deeper insight into dialogues in professional settings.

There is a great deal more taking place in the parent-teacher meeting than this study can illuminate, but by means of the theory of communicative action, we can acquire a deeper understanding of *one* of its social mechanisms, namely dialogue. Note, this is merely one possible way of understanding dialogue, namely dialogue comprehended as communicative action where the participants are oriented towards reaching mutual understanding and agreement. This may open for criticism, the same phenomenon can "always be recontextualized in different ways without it being possible to say that one of these is more true than the other" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 92). On the other hand, a recontextualization can be examined with regard to its degree of validity (Danermark et al. 2002). This study is regarded as having high validity because Habermas' theoretical framework is well acknowledged, although the theory has also come under a certain degree of criticism. For example, Habermas connects rationality to the growth of modern society while a typical feature of current society is heterogeneity. Furthermore, Habermas' theory is extremely complex and comprehensive; thus, for the purpose of this paper, only particular areas of his work have been used, more precisely aspects of the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984, 1987), even though Habermas has developed his ideas further (for example when it comes to discourse ethics

(Habermas 1990) and deliberation (Habermas 1996)). This has been done because it is the theory of communicative action that most thoroughly explains the characteristics of dialogue. The validity is also strengthened by the fact that the theory seems relevant from a practical point of view, a judgment based on the author's experience professional within the field of education and as a parent. Furthermore, a relevant objection is to ask why it is not sufficient—or even better—for teachers who are supposed to practise dialogue to study Habermas' original theory. The answer is found in Habermas' theory itself; being a grand theory (Bryman 2012) with a high level of abstraction, it is not always easy to see its practical use. Consequently, it seems advantageous to suggest a practical use.

Findings and Discussion

We enter the meeting in question when the participants are discussing whether the goal in upper secondary school should be to obtain a vocational craft certificate or not. This has to do with the pupil's overall achievement in school and the participants must participate in a second round to reach agreement on his performance in mathematics:

The school counsellor: If he wants to sit for a craft or journeyman's certificate exam it will take many years.

The special needs teacher: For the craft certificate, it takes—if I'm not wrong—it will first be 2 years with a lot of theory and some practical work and then there'll be 2 years as an apprentice afterwards—isn't that right? And then there's the craft certificate examination at the end. This is the way to obtain a craft certificate. The thing about this type of a certificate is that he has to pass all the theory. There's a lot of theory. Even if a pupil can manage the practical aspects really well, that is not enough to get a craft certificate. You have to pass all the mathematics and Norwegian studies and everything. So then there's the question of whether the pupil should try this or choose to go slowly from the start and take less of the subjects. OK, it's OK, in mathematics for example, we choose some things we can do a lot with, but we won't take all the things a person aiming for a craft certificate will need. This is an option.

The mother: Yes, he would have been discouraged...

The special needs teacher: What do you think, yourself? About mathematics, like? What do you think about this subject now?

The pupil: Yes, well, the extra classes I have now, that's OK. I'm doing OK in mathematics, like.

The special needs teacher: Yes, because you get the type of assignments that you can manage, don't you? Think about what we talked about a bit earlier today. You're in a group in mathematics. And then we were struggling during the period you were together with the whole class. What was it you said in the classroom about mathematics?

The pupil: I really don't belong there, I think I said. They have no work I can do in there and stuff like that.

The special needs teacher: Then you felt that this mathematics wasn't for you anymore.

The pupil: No, then I have no work to do, like.

The special needs teacher: Because working at the same level as the rest of the pupils in your class is a bit difficult?

The pupil: No, I don't understand any of it.

The special needs teacher: Because we have talked about just this earlier today, and it was actually you who reminded me that the meeting was today, because I had been told that it was on Tuesday, so we discussed it a bit today, and we have reviewed your schedule—and it was this thing with mathematics—how difficult, or what did you think about it? And you were quite clear that it was too difficult for you in the class as a whole, and in a group it was OK.

The pupil: This mathematics there—I don't understand anything.

The special needs coordinator: Then it must be extremely boring to sit there, isn't it? We're probably thinking X.—Then we're in full agreement that the boy should apply 1 month before the others—you apply before 1 February—this means that when the others say that the deadline for application is 1 March, then you must say it isn't for me, not for me. You must apply one month before the others if you are to get assistance—then we have to do that.

The pupil: So they will have time to prepare more and stuff?

The special needs coordinator: Yes, those who are going to help you need time to help you. That's correct.

The school psychology counsellor: Everyone who needs assistance in the entire county—all those applications must be in 1 month before the other applications. Then what I do is write a letter about this assistance, and you get it too, of course, and then it's attached to the application.

The conclusion of this session is that the participants, including the pupil, reach a common understanding and also agree that he still needs special education in upper secondary school. Let us now take a closer look and see why this interaction might be interpreted as dialogue.

Why is it Dialogue?

The interaction session illustrates how the special needs teacher initiates a dialogue about mathematics. She presents her interpretation of the pupil's school situation and in this way she is implicitly making validity claims (elaborated on below). The participants might agree or disagree with the special needs teacher's presentation. If she is acting communicatively, she should allow the pupil, the parents and the other participants to criticise her description of the situation so that she can alter her interpretation if need be. But as illustrated in the interaction session, the mother seems to totally agree with the special needs teacher's description of her son's performance in mathematics (The mother, however, tailed off in her first utterance and was interrupted and in this sense the special needs teacher does not fulfil the ideal of dialogue where one vital aspect is that the interlocutors respect each other).

The special needs teacher then addresses the pupil in such a way that he will respond to her utterance and present his view on how he perceives his performance in mathematics. When the pupil answers that “I’m doing OK in mathematics”, a disagreement arises between the special needs teacher and the pupil. Consequently, a further deliberation on the issue in question is required. The special needs teacher then elaborates on the pupil’s achievements by first offering more information, referring for example to the fact that he is given adapted exercises. The pupil does not present any counter arguments and from his next response it seems that the pupil and the special needs teacher reach a common understanding on the issue in question. But the special needs teacher continues to elaborate on the topic by confronting the pupil with his earlier experience with mathematics in class, with the pupil confirming once again that he agrees with the special needs teacher’s view. This procedure is repeated another two times and is closed when the pupil states: “This mathematics there—I don’t understand anything”.

It certainly appears as if the special needs teacher and the pupil have reached agreement after the special needs teacher’s first elaboration about the pupil’s performance in mathematics, but a prerequisite for dialogue as communicative action is that the result of the ensuing discussions must not be vague; all the participants in the meeting must know exactly what they are agreeing to, as in this case involving the pupil’s performance in mathematics. This might be one reason why the special needs teacher repeatedly elaborates on the pupil’s performance; she wants to be assured that it is perfectly clear that he agrees that he cannot manage the same exercises as the rest of the class.

The elaboration about mathematics is initiated by the special needs teacher. Of course, the pupil, the parents and the other participants also may present their interpretation of the school situation (implicitly making validity requirements), perhaps doing this so they can alter their interpretation should the other interlocutors have another interpretation of the pupil’s learning situation. These processes will act as conditions for the ability of the participants to arrive at a mutual understanding as well as agree upon a common “definition” of the pupil’s learning situation. It must, however, be noted that common understanding is created through the common conviction of the interlocutors. This is a prerequisite for dialogue. To a certain degree, pressure can be applied by an outsider; however, if the agreement is clearly influenced by an outside person, there is no dialogue. In the interaction session above, there are no clues to suggest that a person outside the meeting has enforced his opinion on the participants and in this sense the interaction session is a dialogue. On the other hand, the interaction session perfectly illustrates how the interaction is constrained by external factors, the regulations for upper secondary school, for example, and that this certainly threatens an open dialogue.

The interaction session above has been considered according to a modern worldview based on rationality, in accordance with Habermas’ (1984) framework. This means that the pupil, the parents and the school representatives must negotiate the *truth* about such matters as the pupil’s standing within mathematics, for example. This is not what might be called an “objective” truth, but it is what the interlocutors agree upon and what seems reasonable to others not taking part in the meeting. The participants must also reach agreement on the *right* norms, in

accordance with the principle of universalism (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1990). They must also act *truthfully*, giving their authentic comprehension of how they evaluate the pupil's performance in mathematics. Indeed, the participants' presentation of views that fulfil validity claims (true, right and truthful), and the speaker's duty to grant them is a driving force in the interaction; it forms the basis for the function of language as an action-coordinating power (Habermas 1984). Through negotiations the pupil and the special needs teacher are able to confirm either that they understand the pupil's performance in mathematics in the same way or that they perceive things differently. This is a *procedural rationality* during which, for example, the special needs teacher shows her rationality (or lack thereof) in the way she argues (giving reasons for and being able to justify expressions), exposes herself to criticism and is open to arguments from the pupil, the parents and the other professionals. As noted above, the special needs teacher presents several arguments in order to reach agreement about the pupils' performance in mathematics. She acts communicatively by preserving her goals to the degree that they are accepted by the other interlocutors (quite naturally, the same principle applies to the pupil, parent and the other professionals). However, with the exception of the pupil's first utterance, the special needs teachers' standpoint is not met by counter arguments from the other participants.

Why is it not Dialogue?

As argued above, the big picture when it comes to the interaction session is that it appears to be an example of dialogue and communicative action. However, information that emerges during the interviews with the special needs coordinator and the parents make it reasonable to question, or at least problematize, this observation. So, let us first take a closer look at the interview with the special needs coordinator. She says this about the meeting from which the interaction session has been taken:

And I don't know if you noticed ... because there are some points that are really, really important, and if we can't manage those fully, then I must ensure that we do. And it's about partial competence, for example. This is where it's by far the most important, most important, that we agree about this bit. When we have managed that ... then we're so close to the goal that the other things are more cosmetic in comparison.

It is apparent in the excerpt that the special needs coordinator has one main purpose with the meeting, namely to ensure that the other participants agree with her that the pupil's goal in upper secondary school should be to pursue partial competence and not a full craft certificate. She expresses this very strongly, which is why it seems pertinent to speculate that she might be acting strategically rather than communicatively. She is then concerned about influencing the pupil's and parents' points of view without attempting to coordinate the different viewpoints. The efficiency of her actions is assessed according to how she succeeds, the rationality being linked to what *effect* her arguments have on the other participants' opinions. Obviously, all the participants might take the same attitude, with an aim to attaining

success for their own goal and not being open to coordinate their viewpoints with the other interlocutors. We can only imagine how such a meeting would proceed.

The coordinator also describes the means that that she, together with the other professionals, has selected to satisfy their main goal: the pupil should aim for partial competence and not a full craft certificate:

We're quite well equipped at these meetings if there should be disagreement. We bring documentation which we then would use to turn the conversation around.

Thus, should the parents and the pupil disagree with the professionals, they are prepared to use documentation to argue and support their view. It was, however, not necessary to use this documentation as the meeting did not diverge from what they had agreed beforehand. This might be interpreted as supporting the observation that they are acting strategically. A person acting strategically is focused on reaching a specific result or goal, selecting means appropriate for the situation (Habermas 1984). A closer look into the interaction session makes it reasonable to speculate that the other professionals are cooperating in this strategy, acting strategically: Firstly, the special needs teacher elaborates on the pupil's performance in mathematics in order to arrive at a common understanding and agreement. Then, when both the mother and the pupil agree on his need for help, the coordinator immediately takes the role of the moderator and summarises the discussion. Finally, the school psychology counsellor takes the floor when the pupil's need for extra help is established and confirms the statements of the previous speakers.

According to the parents, they knew little about the pupil's options in upper secondary school when they came to the meeting, and when asked if they know more afterwards, they answer:

The mother: Not really. I do know it's there and there. That's like the only thing. Basically I don't, really.

The father: Well, I don't quite know what to say. I know what upper secondary school is.

The mother adds *"He'll get help regardless which school he goes to. That's what we were told."* The absence of the professional's view is further displayed when the parents expressed that they did want the school to explain *"a little bit more concretely which type of schools he should attend"*. From the parental perspective, the conclusion of the meeting also seems vague. For example, the parents did not mention partial competence once during the interview, even if this, from the coordinator's point of view, is the most important theme to agree on. It must, however, be noted that the coordinator did include partial competence in a summary in another part of the meeting. In a dialogue all information, opinions and arguments are supposed to emerge and all interlocutors know exactly what they have agreed on. However, the interview with the parents reveals that this might not be the case in this particular setting.

Bearing this in mind, the parents were asked if they had considered asking for the school's view on the matter during the meeting and the mother answers: *"No, I couldn't really say there and then..."* and the father adds: *"You might say that one*

should've had a bit more dialogue with the teacher eventually and heard what he thinks." In other words, they wanted the view of the professionals, but did not ask for it. Moreover, even if the parents claim that they expressed their own view during the meeting, they say:

The father: "I have some problems [speaking] when there are people around me".

The mother: But I couldn't have stood up [and spoken], really. None of us can, but when one sits like this and talks, then it's OK.

These utterances might explain why the parents did not ask for the school's view, reminding us about the asymmetry and power differences in such meetings in general and this meeting in particular.

These findings point to the importance of the professionals arguing, presenting documentation and stating their professional opinions in dialogues with pupils and parents. However, this contrasts with the coordinator's view; as the excerpt above shows, she is only prepared to present documentation "to turn the conversation", as she puts it if the parents disagree with her. That is, only if the parents disagree with her she is ready to use the documentation to argue for her view. During the interview she is confronted with this approach and says:

I'm probably more like, if we agree with them, then we just say Yes! Let's do it. But I will be thinking more about this.

It certainly seems that the special needs coordinator's current approach, from the parental perspective, impacts the dialogue negatively. The professionals had documentation but did not present it during the meeting. The parents wanted to get the school's view, but did not. However, as further demonstrated in her utterance, the coordinator is open to change when it comes to her choice of strategy.

Final Remarks

The purpose of this study was to explore the ideal of dialogue by taking into account both an observed interaction session and how the participants perceived the interaction. The observed interaction session demonstrates the ideal of dialogue put into practice. The pupil, parents and professionals use arguments and negotiate a common understanding of his performance in mathematics, with an orientation towards agreement. However, the interviews show that when the interaction session is seen from the participants' point of view, they fall short of fulfilling the ideal of dialogue. The findings disclose that at least one of the professionals, and possibly more, acts strategically and not communicatively, having one overriding goal for the meeting. Moreover, the findings reveal challenges that rise when participants in dialogues do not present their view, when conclusions are vague and when power differences impact interaction. Finally, the triangulation of methods demonstrates that the difference between acting communicatively and strategically is in this particular session related to the interlocutors' attitude and not easily uncovered through observation. For example, it is not easy to reveal strategic action and how

the participants' experience asymmetry and the distribution of power without directly asking the participants for their views.

In the sections “[Why is it dialogue](#)” and “[Why is it not dialogue](#)”, respectively, communicative and strategic action are demonstrated. The findings illustrate that insight into strategic action complements competence in how to fulfil the ideal of dialogue, pointing to essential qualities of interaction that contrast with dialogue. Indeed, these are the only interaction options; you either act communicatively or strategically (Habermas 1984). Knowledge of this distinction might make the professionals capable of deliberately choosing an (appropriate) type of action during the meeting. The assumption is that the professionals will both be able to undertake reflection-in-action (Schön 1983), reflecting on how he/she is acting and changing the action orientation ad hoc during the meeting, if necessary; and reflect-on-action (Schön 1983) after the meeting. The professionals might to a greater extent choose to act communicatively and fulfil the legislative dialogue requirements for meetings between school and home. Nonetheless, it must be noted that even if professionals possess such knowledge, this does not guarantee that they automatically can or will reorient themselves towards dialogue.

It is important to mention that in a dialogue both the content and the dynamic is impacted by each person's lifeworld, as described in Habermas' (1987) theory. The structural components of the lifeworld, i.e. culture, society and the individual, act both as effective restrictions and resources. For example, the discussion of the pupil's future school possibilities actualises parts of the teacher's (and the other professionals), pupil's and parents' lifeworlds which they must orient themselves towards and attempt to master. The discussion is influenced by their experiences, development and abilities and, as emphasised by Barnes (2002), participating in dialogue requires communicative and cognitive competence. Moreover, individual abilities are interconnected with the culture of which they are a part. This may mean that there are conflicting lifeworlds that challenge the dynamic in the meeting, especially in today's society, which is, as noted by Turner (1990), heterogeneous, pluralistic and full of many cultural differences. However, it might then be useful to note that Habermas has developed his theory further through the intriguing treatment of weak communicative action, which states that the participants are not supposed to arrive at an agreement, but rather *achieve a common understanding*. This notion is contrary to strong communicative action, where the participants arrive at an agreement on the basis of communicative action (Habermas 1998). Weak communicative action would appear to be an important description of some of the discussions that occur between the teacher, pupil and parents.

Without question, it is easy to blame the individual teacher when he/she falls short of fulfilling the dialogue requirement outlined in the policy documents, as we have seen in this study. The results in this study cannot, of course, be generalized; being a case study with few participants. But it is important to take into account that absence of dialogue is pointed to also by other researchers. For example, the current society is described as performative where professionals requires to organise themselves as a response to evaluations (Ball 2003) and professional partnerships is considered in danger of being reduced to tactics rather than promoting communicative action (Harris 2005). Another question is whether the ideal of dialogue is

utopia. Some researchers argue that asymmetry is an intrinsic feature of dialogue, referring to inequities due to various background conditions, distribution of knowledge and differences in social position (Linell and Luckmann 1991). Additionally, research has also found that teachers and parents do not consider dialogue to be an exclusive ideal for the contact between school and home (Xxx, 2010, 2009).

The present project, illuminating how dialogue might be carried out in the contact between school and home, is the latest in a series of several research efforts that contribute theoretical and practical knowledge to assist in a democratization of such contact. For example, Harris (2005) claims that we need to conceptualize professional partnerships as *learning* partnerships where collaboration provides an opportunity to resist instrumental action and promote democratic practice and participation. However, the discourse on partnerships emphasises cooperation and trust while concealing the complex struggle for power that actually takes place in the partnerships (Cardini 2006). Thus, it is also necessary to focus on practical measures. The school head, teachers and parents need to invest a great deal of effort in the process if parent participation is to be achieved; parental involvement has to be worked on (Dom and Verhoeven 2006). For example, it has been documented that the power relationship between parents and professionals was changed by building on strengths within the community and professionals who valued, listened to and acted on parental points of view (Bagley and Ackerly 2006).

This project is intended as a contribution to a learning process so that teachers might oppose the overriding trend that information—and not dialogue—dominates the contact between school and home. Knowledge of the theory of communicative action may illuminate how a dialogue might be carried out and guide teachers to making *conscious* choices about how to act. Participants either act communicatively or strategically and one main outcome of this study is to point to the importance of being aware of this distinction, a very powerful distinction in a meeting between school and home.

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