

Conflict between truthfulness and tact in parent–teacher conferences

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The purpose of this article is to explore how teachers' and parents' conversations are affected by their notions about truthfulness. The study is qualitative and draws on data from observations of parent–teacher conferences about pupils with special needs in a Norwegian lower secondary school and from interviews with participants. The findings show that teachers' and parents' conversations are constrained by positive talk, decency and silence and, especially when the pupil participates, they choose a careful point of view, gloss over it, and talk about what is OK and not unpleasant. Furthermore, teachers act communicatively in a strategic way. It is concluded that teachers and parents often choose to follow conventions of tact and that this might be in conflict with truthfulness. It is further concluded that teachers and parents do not hold dialogue as an exclusive ideal.

Keywords: parental involvement; school; parent–teacher conference; truthfulness; tact

Introduction

The focus of this study is on Norwegian compulsory schools and how teachers' and parents' notions about truthfulness affect their talk about school issues for pupils with special needs. It is concentrated on the parent–teacher conferences. These conferences are mandatory and the class teacher is required to have a planned and structured conversation with the parents. The teacher is expected to explain the pupils' standing in relation to the objectives delineated in the teaching curriculum, and to outline how well the pupil works each day. The conversation should end with a summary, having as its aim the participants' agreement upon the pupil's future schoolwork. The pupil often participates and after the age of 12 he/she has the right to (Ministry of Church Education and Research 1998). The educational authorities emphasize that the parent–teacher conference should be characterized by dialogue (St.meld nr. 14 1997–98; St.meld. nr. 23 1997–98; St.meld nr. 29 1994–95). Furthermore, present national curriculum states that good cooperation is good two-way communication (*Knowledge Promotion* 2006). In special educational practises the parent–teacher conferences are approached in a variety of ways. Typically, they are longer than for other pupils often supplemented with more professionals, and the special needs teacher sometimes replaces the class teacher.

The parent–teacher conferences challenge their participants; research results show that dialogue is quite often absent (Lidén 1997; Nordahl 2000; Nordahl and Sørliie

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1996; Vestre 1995). This might, firstly, mean that the teacher, pupil and parent need knowledge and skills regarding how to accomplish dialogue. Secondly, that the possibility of accomplishing dialogue should be questioned because of the diversity among the participants, the asymmetrical relationships between teachers and parents and among adults and children, different cultures and different native languages. Several studies suggest that parents often feel powerless (Nordahl 2003; Pinkus 2005; Waggoner and Griffith 1998). However, the dichotomy of parents as powerless and professionals holding power has been questioned in other studies, reporting that the participants experience power and powerlessness in different ways (Maclure and Walker 2000; Todd and Higgins 1998). This certainly has an impact on how the teacher and the parents talk. Finally, the lack of dialogue might be an indication that the participants do not hold dialogue as the only ideal. This is the focus of the present study.

To investigate whether teachers and parents hold dialogue as the only ideal it is helpful to clarify what is meant by dialogue. This is unclear in official documents, but as parents and teachers are supposed to have dialogue and reach agreement it seems *reasonable* that the ideal for these conversations is communicative action, where the aim is to reach consensus, as described by Habermas (1984). The participants' statements are then supposed to be true, right and truthful. This study focuses on one aspect of dialogue, the claim of truthfulness. The theoretical premise is that the participants' notions about truthfulness constitute an indication of whether the participants hold dialogue as an exclusive ideal or not. This leads to the following research question: how are teachers' and parents' conversations affected by their notions of truthfulness? The study is qualitative and draws on data from observations of conversations about pupils with special needs and interviews.

Previous research

Research from the 1980s and 1990s show a positive correlation between high parent involvement and high pupil achievement (Epstein 2001; Griffith 1996; Henderson and Berla 1994), but during the last decade it has been demonstrated how social class and ethnic diversity modify this relationship (Crozier 2001; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002; Waggoner and Griffith 1998; Weininger and Lareau 2003; Westergård and Galloway 2004). The relationship between parent involvement and student achievement is not unambiguous, and, hence, research today should focus on individual interactions, as argued by Lareau and Horvat (1999). Likewise, several researchers within the field direct attention to the need to focus on the quality of interaction when parents and the teacher meet face to face (Anderson and Minke 2007; Epstein 2001; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Maclure and Walker 2000; Weininger and Lareau 2003; Westergård and Galloway 2004).

Furthermore, interaction is typically commented upon in interviews and often as part of a broader scope such as 'parent involvement' (Blue-Banning et al. 2004; Lake and Billingsley 2000; Lawson 2003; Ranson, Martin, and Vincent 2004; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Swick 2003; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002; Weininger and Lareau 2003). For instance, in an interview study, parents stressed that communication should be honest and open, with no hidden information and no 'candy-coating' of bad news. However, tact was perceived as important (Blue-Banning et al. 2004). Further, 'silence' is, in several studies, identified as a critical aspect of communication, though in different ways: some parents do not voice their

concerns about school (Ranson, Martin, and Vincent 2004; Vincent 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002; Weininger and Lareau 2003), teachers describe silence about conflicts as a barrier to parent involvement (Lawson 2003), and withholding information is identified as a factor that escalates conflicts (Lake and Billingsley 2000). Lundeby and Tøssebro (2008) interviewed parents with disabled children and found that incidences that parents were 'not being listened to' were distinguished according to different types of disagreements regarding problem defining and finding solutions for a problem. Further, professionals sometimes had roles as gate-keepers and hindered user-participation, and sometimes questions of role-definitions and who holds formal rights were constraints for parents having an active say. Parental knowledge was often treated as subordinate to professional knowledge.

Even though few scholars have analyzed conversations, there are exceptions. Based on transcribed conversations, Weininger and Lareau (2003) focus on the exchange of information and how the authority situation between teacher and parents is handled. They demonstrate how middle-class parents proved to be capable of securing tangible benefits for their children more effectively than working-class parents. Maclure and Walker (2000) examined the social organization of the conversation in parent-teacher consultations based on audio recordings. They found that teachers are awarded the right to give an uninterrupted 'diagnosis', using specialist vocabularies while down-playing parental knowledge. Furthermore, issues of power, identity, competence, and moral conduct were at stake for all involved. Parents did not necessarily want to hear unmitigated 'good news' about their children, as they say 'good news is no news'. More often than not parents would query some aspect of a good news diagnosis, raise a concern, or ask for information on some topic that had not been addressed. Especially parents of pupils in special needs classes questioned good news and drew attention to problems which, in their view, required specialist support. On occasions parents also challenged the teacher on the opposite grounds, questioning whether the teacher underestimated the child's ability. Additionally, it was found that parents were challenged via derogatory remarks concerning their children. These remarks were often presented in euphemistic terms and difficult for the parents to respond to.

Theoretical framework

The research question is answered by comparing the empirical data with concepts from theoretical frames developed by the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the sociologist Erving Goffman, and Paul Grice, philosopher and linguist. Truthfulness is essential in Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action: if teacher and parents have a dialogue, act in a *communicative* manner, they are supposed to state the truth about subjects and facts regarding the pupil's educational situation and in accordance with what they think is right with regard to the prevalent normative context, as well as being *truthful*. The latter applies, for instance, if the participants express their authentic intentions, motives, thoughts, desires, and feelings. Furthermore, if the participants do not act communicatively, they might act in a *strategic* manner, having a previously designed goal which is concerned with influencing the others' point of view without attempting to coordinate the different viewpoints. According to Goffman (1997), if the participants are not quite truthful, they might use the interaction order's resources and follow conventions of *tact* and do 'face-work' to defend his or her own face (the positive value a person demands) to protect the other's face, and might also cooperate in doing face-work if face is threatened.

Based on Grice (1975), it is assumed that principles such as truthfulness and tactfulness come forward in the logic of teachers' and parents' natural language when they talk to each other. Their talk might be evaluated towards Grice's general cooperative principle (CP): 'Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (Grice 1975, 45). Under the CP, Grice distinguishes four maxims: first the maxim of *Quantity*, stating that you should make your contribution as informative as is required and not more informative than required; second, under the maxim of *Quality*, try to make your contribution one that is true; third, the maxim of *Relation* contains 'Be relevant'; and finally, the maxim of *Manner* entails 'Be perspicuous', meaning, for example, to avoid ambiguity. As argued by Grice, there are also other maxims. In this study 'Be tactful' is added. Teachers' and parents' notions about truthfulness contribute to deciding how they manoeuvre between these maxims during their talk, which maxims are prioritized, violated, opted out, or clash. Finally, according to Grice's theory, it is reasonable to follow the CP and it might indicate a *conversational implicature* when the CP is not followed. The hearer, then, does not reply on what is said, but on the understated utterance of what is said. Shortly, the analysis in this study is guided by the following theoretical concepts: tact, truthfulness, communicative and strategic action, the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner, and conversational implicature.

Methodology

Design and sampling

The present article reports on a study of mandatory conferences between teachers and parents about pupils with special needs. The unit of analysis is their conversations. The study is qualitative, consisting of a combination of interview design and observation design and was conducted in 2006. According to the instructions from Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSSDS), informants had to be contacted through a professional and the informants were mainly recruited via special needs teachers in compulsory schools. The schools were selected to cover both city and rural municipalities and five out of the seven schools that were contacted are represented in the sample. The teachers were asked to select 'pupils with special needs' and 'typical conversations'.

The study is designed around 17 specific conversations; of these, 13 were observed. In total, 9 interviews with teachers were executed about specific conversations and, as illustrated in Appendix 1, some of the teachers were interviewed about several conversations. Additionally, two teachers were interviewed about their last conversations more in general. Ten interviews were conducted with parents about specific conversations; some with both parents (see Appendix 1). The interviews, conducted separately with teachers and parents, took place after the conversations. In six conversations and three interviews (with two parents, one mother, and one special needs teacher) notes were taken and summaries were formulated afterwards. The rest of the empirical material was audio-taped and transcribed. All the quotes in the article are from transcribed material. The researcher was present in all observed conversations, but did not participate. The study was conducted at five schools (two lower secondary and three combined primary and lower secondary) in four municipalities: one school was located in the

countryside, two in a city, and two in an urban municipality in rural surroundings. The pupils, three in the primary school section and the rest in lower secondary school, were regarded as 'typical' pupils within special education; having learning disabilities, emotional and/or social disabilities; a certain number have a specific diagnosis like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

There are ethical issues to be addressed when informants provide information through interviews and observations. Particularly, being subject to observation might be perceived as degrading (Nasjonal forskningsetisk komité for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora (NESH) 2006, point 6). Additionally, it must be taken into consideration that children and youth with special needs are involved (NESH 2006, point 9). This calls for caution, and ethical guidelines have been followed (NESH 2006). All names and identifying information have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Data analysis

The data analysis is based on all participants' notions about truthfulness as it comes forward in the interviews. The analysis especially focuses on the conversations about Roger and Robert. In Rogers's case the teacher's statements are chosen as a starting point and in Robert's case the interview with the mother is the outset. These informants' views are typical by providing insight into what it means not to be quite truthful, and are purposefully chosen to describe depth, detail and individual meaning as described by Patton (2002, 16). The presentation of data about these two conversations relies on multiple sources which have been triangulated (Patton 2002): observation and interview with teachers and mothers. Thus, these findings give insight into both how the informants talk (observation of the conversations) and how the informants talk about their talk (interviews). Some statements from interviews were not recognized in the observations, and such inconsistencies are regarded as offering opportunities for deeper insight (Patton 2002, 248) and not made an issue of.

All the data are available in text and, in order to reduce the complexity of the data, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis was used in an open coding process (NVivo 7); one of the procedures in grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Sequences of texts giving insights about 'truthfulness' were collated and, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), clustered into new superior categories as presented in the findings: 'Positive talk, decency and silence', 'A careful point of view, gloss over, and talk about what is OK and not unpleasant', and 'Acting communicatively in a strategic way'. Finally, a conclusion is drawn based on these superior categories.

Comments on the value of the study

Two conditions regarding the selection process must be commented upon. Firstly, there were barriers to establishing contact with informants and the recruitment process described previously was the third strategy that was utilized. Informants were first recruited by letters to children registered at the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (PPT) and their guardians. These children were selected by PPT. Next, informants were recruited via head teachers. The results of these strategies were only contact with, respectively, one mother and one teacher (these participated in the study). Secondly it might impact the selection process that the contact had to go via professionals and therefore was partly out of the researcher's hands. In addition,

observed conversations might also be biased in accordance with participants' perception of 'ideal' conversations. These potential limitations might affect the findings, but based on the researcher's experience from similar conversations, as a special needs teacher and educational and psychological counsellor, the sampled conversations are regarded as average; but do not include 'difficult' conversations. With this exception, the conversations are regarded as examples of typical conversations. This might serve to increase confidence in conclusions and the value of the study (Miles and Huberman 1994). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994) describe maximum variation as a sampling strategy to document diverse variation and identify important common patterns. The sample in the present study represents variety of municipalities, schools, conversations, and pupils and the data is regarded, to a certain degree, to have the capacity to fulfil this requirement.

The validity of the study is considered to be strengthened by the theoretical grounding. First, during the interviews, it was assured that vital aspects regarding the conversation were discussed and it was possible to start interpretation of the data. This makes portions of the data 'theory-loaded' (Hanson 2002). However, in order to allow the informants to provide their own descriptions, the interviews started with an open-ended question about how the informant perceived the conversation and the answers and initiatives were also followed up by open questions. Next, the theory was also vital in the analysis and interpretation of the data. At this stage, it is vital to be aware that what we bring to the data makes us sensitive to their meaning, and also the importance of not forcing explanations on the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 47).

Findings

The findings about 'truthfulness' are based on observed conversations about pupils with special needs as well as on interviews with teachers and parents. The category 'truthfulness' is constituted by three partly interdependent sub-categories presented later. But first, some participants' statements about the main-category 'truthfulness' are presented. Several parents emphasized truthfulness and would have liked a straightforward conversation, like Eva's mother (Eva is 15 years-old and has learning disabilities):

I am not shy either, you see. It's no use. I used to be, but when you know you are going to speak for the kids and keep going, you simply can't be shy and embarrassed and go on hiding, you see. I am very frank about things, maybe too much, but I prefer to speak out and get it over with.

Other parents made similar claims. But there was also John's father, whose son had learning disabilities. He felt that parents should not be quite so sincere during meetings, especially when the pupil participates:

We do hold back a little, we do. It is not right to criticise a lot when he [the pupil] is here. There's a limit, I feel. Several parents claim that criticism must be expressed in a diplomatic way or a decent way.

For both the pupil and teacher's sake they did not want to criticize and they also held back some things. Some of the parents said that this was due to their own personality.

Only one teacher claimed always to be truthful. Additionally, one teacher said that he considered it to be ethically correct to be sincere, but then presented his

reservations. A similar view was expressed by several of the teachers. These were therefore not considered as holding truthfulness as an ideal. Thus, the typical teacher in this study was not quite truthful and adjusted the conversation in certain ways in order to take care of the pupil and parents and to maintain a good cooperation. He or she focused on positive issues, concealed things, postponed things, or became psychological. As one teacher said: 'I always try to be honest, but I don't tell everything'. Another felt that it takes courage to be truthful: 'if you want to be truthful, you need a bit of guts'. To sum up, the majority of the teachers and parents claimed that they were not quite truthful in all situations, while some of the parents and only one teacher claimed to be truthful at all times.

Positive talk, decency and silence

Focus on what is positive about the pupils' school situation has been valued within education and special education during recent decades. A number of teachers in the present study focused on what is positive, like this teacher who related a conversation about Roger, 9 years-old, who has an ADHD diagnosis (quotations from observation and interviews):

- (1) I don't always say what is bad . . . I try to focus on what they fix. And yet, the very
- (2) obvious things I tell them, of course. In meetings I say: You know that and that and
- (3) that. And what you don't know, I choose to be silent about. If there are really huge
- (4) problems of concentration, of course, if it's really that obvious – then the parents will
- (5) wonder if I . . . I can tell the parents, though, if I tell them in a decent way. And they will
- (6) accept.

The teacher argued that she did not always say what was bad, but tried to focus on what the pupil fixed (line (1)), and this was also observed in the transcripts of the conversation about Roger when she asked the pupil 'What are you very, very, very good at?' Then she told the boy and his mother what he could do. Her utterances therefore fulfilled the maxim of Quality, what she said was true, but if the teacher solely focused on what the pupil fixed and was silent about the problems, she was not presenting the whole picture of the pupil's school situation. Thus she violated the maxim of Quantity: from the mother's perspective, the teacher's utterances might not be as informative as required; Roger's mother stated, in the interview, that she came to talk about the 'hitting and bullying and things like that'.

However, when the teacher, in the interview, was asked about what impact it had on the conversation not to address the problems, she said:

- (7) That's the point. Of course, I have to be negative sometimes. But when there is too
- (8) much negativity, I try not to mention all of it, just to prevent bad feelings. Still, I know
- (9) it can be a problem. They think they know a whole lot, and when they start secondary

- (10) school, the circumstances are sort of different . . . Marks. No, I should not be
 (11) negative . . . Just think about what kind of a day they will have if everything
 is
 (12) negative. I can't fix that, but there has to be some kind of balance . . . Still,
 they
 (13) have to put up with some bad things, right? They shouldn't see the world
 through
 (14) rose-colored glasses. The parents know it's not like that, anyway . . . If there
 are bad
 (15) feelings, I try to focus on what I think is important, and it's me choosing the
 points to
 (16) make. If everything is negative – or most of it – it can't be very nice to go
 back home if
 (17) your kid has been slaughtered. Certain things must be told, though. And I
 pick the
 (18) most important – what I want to be changed, perhaps. Yes, it has to be that
 way. I do
 (19) wish for a change, things we are going to stress a bit more.

As illustrated, on the one side the teacher did not want to mention all problems in order to prevent bad feelings (line (8)). That is, she did not fulfil the maxim of Quantity in order to fulfil the maxim 'Be tactful'. But she was aware that her statements then were not quite true: the pupil and parents should not see the world through rose-coloured glasses (lines (13), (14)). She violated the maxim of Quality and during the interview she referred to this dilemma several times. She described constantly having to face possible clashes between the maxim of Quantity (what is required information), Be tactful (show considerations), and Quality (a realistic picture of the pupil's school situation).

When the teacher talked about the problems she chose what was most important (line (15)), what should be changed (line (18)), and things that should be stressed more (line (19)). But she also chose to talk about problems if they are so obvious (line (4)) that the parents would wonder (lines (4), (5)) if they are not spoken of. During the conversation with the mother and the pupil, the teacher commented on several tasks that the pupil could not do and her statement in the interview: 'what you don't know I choose to be silent about' (line (3)) could not be recognized in the transcripts of the conversation. For instance, she asked what the pupil considered difficult. However, this might be what she described in the interview as huge problems (lines (3), (4)) told in a decent way (line (5)). How this typically is done is illustrated by this excerpt from the transcripts of the conversation when the teacher addressed Roger's mother: 'If he gets exercises, then he is incredibly good at sitting down and getting to work if he can manage them'. Firstly, it was said in a positive way (incredibly good); secondly, the problems were implicit (if he can manage them); thirdly, the comments about problems often came in a mixture of what the pupil could and could not do (good at sitting down to work, if he can manage the tasks); and finally, the positive came first in the sentence and the problems at the end, often starting with 'but/if'. The utterance illustrates that to speak in a decent way and to fulfil the maxim 'Be tactful', challenges the maxim 'Be perspicuous' because the positive becomes foreground and Roger's difficulties background.

Several of the teachers that were interviewed suggested that focusing on the positive might give parents a misrepresented picture of the pupil. For example, one special needs teacher in lower secondary school told about the process she had been through with the parents, during three years, in order to reach what she considered a realistic view of Robert, John, Eva and Georg's learning disabilities:

- (20) It has been a long road. They come from primary school where they have been
- (21) making progress, all the time – and then the distance from the others is suddenly
- (22) very great – but they have not been told this – or maybe they didn't have the
- (23) strength to hear it. We have also been through the discussion of marks – why do we
- (24) have them? – Where does your child fall on the scale? But I feel that we still agree
- (25) about what the child knows. We agree about the limitations.

This teacher described that these parents after primary school did not have a realistic picture of the pupil's school situation (lines (20), (21)). She suggested that the reason was either that their primary school teachers placed unilateral focus on the pupil's progress (line (21)) or that the parents did not have the strength to hear about their disabilities (lines (22), (23)). Thus, either the maxim of Quantity or the maxim of 'Be perspicuous' is violated, or both. As illustrated, marks (lines (23), (24)) are a factor that made participants talk both about what the child knew and about the limitations (lines (24), (25)); and thus fulfil the maxim of Quantity and 'Be perspicuous'. Similarly, Roger's teacher, a primary-school teacher not using marks, suggested that marks made the circumstances different in primary and lower secondary school (line (10)).

A careful point of view, gloss over it, and talk about what is OK and not unpleasant

The following section is focused on how pupil participation might influence conversations between school and home. Even if pupil participation is common the reaction of Erik's mother might be typically: 'Gosh, is it possible, somehow?'. Erik is 14 years-old and has emotional difficulties and his mother said this about his participation: 'You must be completely honest, you must not beat about the bush; you must, sort of, stick to the point'. However, several teachers and parents claimed that pupil participation influenced the conversation, and Robert's mother represents a typical view. Robert, aged 15, who had learning disabilities, participated but left just before the conversation came to a close. His mother commented upon a conversation about choosing subjects for Robert in upper secondary school and said the following about how pupil participation impacted the conversation (quotations from observation and interviews):

- (1) ...you gloss over it a bit – you talk about what is ok and not unpleasant – yeah, it's a
- (2) little bit of that, I guess... you don't want him to be hurt, you know. You choose a
- (3) careful point of view. Still, it's quite clear that something happens, because if I had

- (4) been there alone, it would have been straight to the point and blah, blah, blah. And
- (5) then we go.

As illustrated, the mother stated that when the pupil participated she, first, chose a careful point of view (lines (2), (3)); second, she glossed over (line (1)); and third, talked about what was OK and not unpleasant (line (1)). Possible examples on how this came forward during the conversation are presented later.

What was termed by the mother as ‘a careful point of view’ meant to meta-communicate. This was demonstrated when the special needs teacher addressed Robert during the conversation: ‘We know a little about how you learn and what you struggle with’. This was a general statement that challenged the maxim ‘Be perspicuous’ (but note also that the participants had discussed Robert’s school situation several times and held implicit knowledge). Another example of ‘a careful point of view’ is that you point towards, but not give the complete answer. This is illustrated by the class teacher’s response when Robert asked, ‘what about getting marks?’:

- (6) You don’t need to bother too much about having such and such marks to get in. We
- (7) have discussed that; you are not required to think about marks. As long as you apply
- (8) before the others, then the marks don’t matter.

The reason that the marks did not matter was that Robert had preferential rights because of his learning disabilities, but the class teacher referred to the time of application (line (7), (8)) and the maxim ‘Be relevant’ was opted out of in favour of the maxim ‘Be tactful’.

How the participants glossed over it (line (1)) is observed when the school psychologist asked whether the pupil thought math was fun or dull. Similarly, the special needs teacher asked him the following:

- (9) [Special needs teacher]: But what is the aim going to be? Are you a guy who loves
- (10) sitting down learning what’s in your books?
- (11) [Robert]: No
- (12) [Special needs teacher]: No, that is not what you like. Then I think – all the theory
- (13) that they have put into upper secondary school – it’s not been put in for your sake.

The professionals talked about what Robert liked to do (lines (9), (12)) instead of what he could do. This fulfilled the maxim ‘Be tactful’, but clashed with the maxim ‘Be perspicuous’. One may also speculate whether the teacher in lines (9) to (13), instead of talking flat out, used a conversational implicature. The teacher asked if the pupil loved learning what was in his books (lines (9), (10)) and the pupil replied on the conventional meaning of the words (line (11)). The implicated message to the mother was then to focus on what the pupil could not do and was achieved by the mother’s assumption that the teacher was respectful and that the maxim ‘Be perspicuous’ was opted out of in order to fulfil the maxim ‘Be polite’. The pupil

might not have grasped this (which was the intention). This interpretation is supported by the special needs teacher's statements during the interview:

- (14) ...because there are some points which are terribly, terribly, important, and if we
- (15) do not reach our goal here, then I have to assure that we do. And this is, among
- (16) other things, partially completed certificate of competence [del-kompetanse]. It is this
- (17) point that it is mostly, mostly important to agree upon. When this goal is achieved –
- (18) then we have reached so close to the goal that then the other [issues] are more
- (19) cosmetic.

The teacher argued that the overall goal of the conversation was that the parents accept that the pupil only was expected only to complete partially the school certificate (lines (14) to (19)); that is, do not aim towards the pupil taking a full exam at upper secondary school. As the teacher argued, the rest is cosmetics (line (18), (19)), and this makes the assumption of the implicature plausible.

Another example that the participants focused on what is OK and not unpleasant is found in this excerpt from the transcripts of the conversation. The mother said this after the pupil had been allowed to leave:

- (20) ...So, that's what it's all about. By all means, Robert must – we certainly have to
- (21) listen to his wishes too – but we really know after what we have gone through at the
- (22) rehabilitation centre that Robert is a child who needs support from his family for
- (23) many years to come, not least when he finishes upper secondary school.

With the pupil present the mother did not talk about Robert's need for support for many years (lines (22), (23)). With the pupil absent, the mother spoke more directly and to a larger degree, fulfilling the maxim 'Be perspicuous' (lines (20) to (23)). The quotation ((20) to (23)) contrasts with the statements referred to previously imbued with meta-communication, talking about what Robert liked to do, what was fun, and not giving relevant answers. In the interview the special needs teacher commented upon the alteration of the conversation when Robert left in this way: 'Admittedly, that is the style we normally would have as adults'.

Finally, the majority of the informants stated, during the interview, that pupil participation influenced the content of the conversation. This is a summary of issues that the teachers and the parents did not wish to discuss when the pupil was present: specific family affairs; accommodation to school subjects; death; diagnoses; teasing and anxiety in relation to other pupils; motivation; problems with alcohol and drugs; circumstances that make the pupil mad or uncommunicative; personal abilities; extreme obesity; self-destructive behaviour; conflict matters; if things are getting tricky at home.

Silence about these themes gives reason to question whether the information that was provided during the conversation with the pupil present was always as informative as required. If not, this violates the maxim of Quantity in the manner

that all relevant information did not come forward during the discussion. This was supposedly done to *protect the pupil* as one teacher put it and, thus, the maxim of Quantity was opted out of in order to fulfil the maxim 'Be tactful'.

Acting communicatively in a strategic way

When the teacher and the parents disagreed, at times, although the teacher seemed to act communicatively, he/she may have had another agenda. This is illustrated in the interview with Roger's special needs teacher/class teacher:

- (1) I try to say a few words before I meet them halfway. I take them seriously – like the
- (2) incidence of the ball. I don't know if I dare say it out loud – I know and observe quite
- (3) a few things, but the information does not always go home with the parents. So I meet
- (4) them halfway again and tell them I am ready for new observations, if you see... I can't
- (5) just say 'No'. He does not go through things like that at school. If they perceive it like
- (6) that, I am ready to meet them halfway, then we make a deal about what to do and agree
- (7) about the circumstances and what to do next...

The teacher and the mother perceived Roger's actions differently (lines (2), (3)), and the incident about the ball (lines (1), (2)) illustrates how this impacted their talk. In the conversation Roger told that some other pupils took his ball, and when the teacher confronted him by saying 'Come on – look at me, are you telling the truth now', he still kept to his story, and received support from his mother. The transcript of the conversation shows how the teacher acted communicatively by confirming her understanding of the mother's worries: 'There's a conflict there which we aren't really getting at, and that's not okay. He is not being okay'. Secondly, she suggested that she might be wrong, 'I certainly don't see everything', while at the same time elaborating on her view: 'But today it was like: "They were stupid, they were stupid?"' at once, without there being an episode. He was just cross because he wanted the ball for himself'. And finally, when the mother once again was backing her son, the teacher reassured her that she took the mother's worries seriously: 'He has a little tendency to not always see what he does himself, and yet he sees very well what others do. But we are working with it – you know that we are'. When the teacher failed to make the mother understand her perspective ('it does not always go home with the parents', as she put it in the interview) she tried to reach consensus by suggesting that she should observe the boy during breaks (line (8)) and that afterwards they should coordinate their viewpoints (lines (14), (15)):

- (8) [Teacher]: ...but I can be more outside during the breaks?
- (9) [Mother]: But if serious bullying starts up... you obviously cannot let everything go
- (10) and just believe that it will sort itself out.
- (11) [Teacher]: But we can arrange it so that I can be more outside during the breaks

- (12) [Mother]: . . . And deal with it if you see something
- (13) [Teacher]: I remain in the background. I don't interfere in order to help him – just
- (14) observe him. Then we can have regular contact, and perhaps we might coordinate
- (15) a little regarding what he says and what I observe. Do we agree?

The teacher's suggestion to coordinate what the boy said and what the teacher observed might be regarded as communicative action. However, the teacher's long-term goal was to 'Make the parents understand what I want', as she explained in the interview. The teacher might then be regarded to have acted strategically in order to influence the mother's point of view. Thus, it might be stated that the teacher was acting communicatively in a strategic way. By not giving all information she opted out of the maxim of Quantity for a period of time.

Similarly, several teachers described in the interviews that they postponed offering their own view, here exemplified by Maria's class teacher after a conversation with her father. It was Maria's first year at lower secondary school. She had learning disabilities, and the teacher felt that Maria should receive special education in a group in a separate classroom. However, the teacher also considered the fact that the father needed time to get used to this idea (lines (17) to (19)), and then chose to act communicatively in a strategic way as illustrated in this quotation from the interview:

- (16) Then I think; well, we have to keep on for a while. We have to get to know each
- (17) other a little, but next time you have to be somewhat sharper. . . They will have to
- (18) get it in small doses, it seems like the father already understands some of it, but
- (19) there are still miles to go.

However, when Roger's teacher acted strategically and opted out of being truthful, this was weighted against the importance of communicative action. This excerpt illustrates how she counterbalanced communicative and strategic action:

- (20) Making the parents commit themselves to what I want. I can stop also. I know I
- (21) want it this or that way, but if the parents reject our discussions of what we can
- do, I
- (22) am willing to throw in the towel for awhile to see if it gets any better. . . Yes, I feel
- it is
- (23) important that we have a dialogue for the child's sake. I don't just follow my own
- (24) chosen path, even if I believe in what I do. . . I achieve what I want then, anyway. It
- (25) just takes a little more time. It sounds a bit flippant. . . but it is important to include
- (26) the parents. I can't do everything the parents want me to, right. I can't, but in

- (27) certain areas I can try. When it comes to assignments, to take one example – if they
- (28) think there are too many assignments, I can try to reduce them.

As illustrated, the teacher argued explicitly for the importance of dialogue (line (23)), she was willing to throw in the towel (line (22)), and stop asserting her own view (line (20)) and thus act communicatively. Whether she chose to act strategically or communicatively depended on what the teacher and mother were discussing. For example, when she was commenting on assignments (line (27)) she was ready to negotiate a common understanding and coordinate her standing with the mother. When it came to the incident about the ball, however, she had an opinion beforehand, was oriented towards her own goal, and was not concerned to reach understanding in that specific conversation – even if mutual understanding was her long-term goal. She used time to reach consensus (line (25)). However, the teacher's statement that she achieves what she wants anyway (line (24)), illustrates that her arguments to some extent were dominated by strategic action.

What caused the teacher's strategic action was the disagreement with the mother about how to perceive the incident about the ball (lines (1) to (3)). However, a study of the transcripts of the conversation and the interview with the mother indicates that the teacher's and mother's views were not separated by a chasm: when the teacher asked the mother if the bullying was real, she first answered yes, but then suggested a perspective similar to the teacher, 'In any case, he is afraid'; and later she described how Roger would stay at home after the vacation, claiming to be 'sick'. Further in the interview, without the teacher present, the mother described difficulties getting out of the boy what happened at school, and how his sister told what happened and confirmed that he had lied. She claimed that the boy said one thing at school and something else at home, and when the mother talked to the teacher ('that's the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle') she described how she appreciated that the teacher told her about incidents at school 'because, obviously, the children do not always say things as they really are'. Consequently, the data show that the possibility of reaching consensus, the teachers' goal, was present if the teacher had fulfilled the validity claim of truthfulness.

Discussion

The findings of the present study show that *how* you discuss a pupil's school situation involves values and that ethical concerns are part of the discussion of the pupils' school situation, in particular, the way the situation is discussed. The typical informant in this study awarded preference to what they regarded as morally *right*, following conventions of tact by finding 'a phrasing that is inoffensive and not indelicate in the circumstances' (Goffman 1997, 171). To a certain degree they set aside the validity claim *truthful* and thus their perception of what was *true*. This constrained the conversation, but in a manner regarded as a 'resource' because teachers and parents cooperated in doing face-work and slightly glossed over the truth in order to maintain the pupil's dignity. The typical informant seemed to have good, unselfish reasons to follow the norm 'tact' while others seemed to have good reasons to be truthful. Thus, neither might be right as a general instruction of practice. This enhances the importance of professional judgement. As argued by Habermas (1996, 108) oppositions between interests require a rational balancing of competing value

orientations and interest positions, and the validity of arguments is dependent on the logic of the question at issue in each case. Anyhow, in everyday life people must act and actions should be well reasoned. Grice's CP contributes to clarify how it affects the conversation, what you gain and opt out of, when you choose not to be quite truthful. For example, when the teachers focused on positive talk about the pupil's school situation, all they said was true and in this sense fulfilled the maxim of Quality, but the teachers' statements might not have been as informative as required from a parental perspective. The parents might not have grasped the whole picture of the pupil's school situation and the maxim of Quantity was thus violated. The maxims further illustrate how teacher and parent's conversation constantly faced possible clashes between the maxim of Quantity (what is required information), 'Be tactful' (a wish to take care of the pupil), and the maxim of Quality (a realistic picture of the pupil's school situation). In addition, the findings show that when preference is given to tact, you opt out of being perspicuous. For example, teachers talked about what was fun or dull instead of what the pupil could do.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that some of the teachers in the study, based on a professional judgement, gave preference to acting strategically and not to fulfilling the validity claim of truthfulness. Agreement was therefore not the goal for that specific conversation, as prescribed in the school legislation, even if it was the teachers' goal in the long-run. When teachers act 'communicatively in a strategic manner' their acts might be characterized as concealed, conscious strategic action; what Habermas (1984) calls manipulation. The teachers seemed to justify their actions with solid reasons, and referring to this as 'manipulation' gives too negative connotations. Maria's teacher wished, for example, to show consideration; but it seemed rather alien that this was done by strategic as well as communicative action. In any case the teacher should avoid acting in a paternalistic way. As a whole, the findings suggest that teachers sometimes act communicatively in a strategic manner and that teachers and parents consider it right that tactfulness sometimes replace truthfulness. Consequently, teachers and parents oppose a normative application of Habermas's theory. It might be right to approximate the ideal of dialogue, as it is described by Chambers (1996), in conversations between school and home; although it must not be ignored that approximation of dialogue might also be convenient for the participants. The theory of communicative action might then be used descriptively and analytically, guiding the participants in how to approximate the dialogue.

The findings give some indications under which circumstances truthfulness and tactfulness respectively are spoken: marks is a factor that enhances the likelihood that teachers are truthful and makes the circumstances in primary and secondary school different. However, the typical participant in this study claimed not to be quite truthful in all situations even if they were teachers and parents in lower secondary school, where marks are given. Furthermore, pupil participation reduces the probability that the participants' conversation is truthful. Thus, the pupil's legislative right to participate after reaching the age of 12 can be questioned from this perspective. Finally, the findings show that when teachers disagree with the parents the possibility that they are truthful is reduced.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and the previous discussion, it is concluded that the participants' notions about truthfulness imply that their conversations often follow

conventions of tact. Furthermore, there seemed to be a conflict between truthfulness and tact because they chose to be tactful instead of being truthful. Consequently, the teachers and parents did not hold dialogue, as described in the theory of communicative action, as an exclusive ideal.

The informants in this study provided depth, detail, and meaning on an individual, personal level regarding truthfulness in conversations about pupils with special needs. The purpose was not generalization from the sample to the population. However, the conflict between truthfulness and tact is challenging and should be elaborated to a greater degree in order to permit generalizations. Indeed, the results should be challenged in future research because the normative assumptions that dialogue is the ideal, while strategic action is considered as being unethical, seem to be underlying premises in professional conversations and are not frequently discussed.

Practical implications

It seems vital that teachers and parents are aware that when their conversations are imbued with tactfulness this might get in the way of attaining an agreed, realistic view of the pupil's school situation; especially when the pupil participates. One consequence is that teachers and parents sometimes should talk without the pupil present. In addition, when teachers act communicatively in a strategic way it is vital that in order to prevent misconduct of power, they are conscious of the very powerful distinction between strategic and communicative action. When the typical informant in this study does not hold dialogue, understood as communicative action, as the sole ideal, this calls for a discussion among teachers, parents, and legislators as to whether dialogue, as described in laws and regulations, is desirable as the only ideal for conversations between teachers and parents.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. An overview of conversations, participants, observations, and interviews.

Conversations	Participants	Observations and interviews
1. About Tom	Special needs teacher 1 (f), class teacher (m), assistant (f), school psychologist (m) mother, and father.	Observation (s), interview with the special needs teacher (t) and a joint interview with the parents(s).
2. About Rita	Special needs teacher 2 (f), mother, and pupil.	Observation, interview with the teacher, and interview with the mother (all s).
3. About Roger	Special needs teacher/class teacher 3 (f), mother, and pupil.	Observation, interview with the teacher and interview with the mother (all t).
4. About Robert	Special needs teacher 4 (f), class teacher (f), advisor (m), school psychologist (f), mother, and pupil.	Observation, interview with the special needs teacher (about the conversations 4-7), and interview with the mother (all t).
5. About John	Special needs teacher 4 (f), class teacher (f), advisor (m), school psychologist (f), mother, father, and pupil.	Observation, interview with the special needs teacher (about the conversations 4-7), and a joint interview with the parents (all t).
6. About Eva	Special needs teacher 4 (f), class teacher (f), school psychologist (f), mother, and pupil.	Observation, interview with the special needs teacher (about the conversations 4-7) and interview with the mother (all t).
7. About Georg	Special needs teacher 4 (f), class teacher (f), advisor (m), school psychologist (f), mother, father and pupil.	Observation, interview with the special needs teacher (about the conversations 4-7) and a joint interview with the parents (all t).
8. About Maria	Class teacher 5 (f), special needs teacher 6 (f), father, and the pupil.	Observation (s) and joint interview with the two teachers about the conversations 8-11 (t).
9. About Hannah	Class teacher 5 (f), special needs teacher 6 (f), mother, and father.	Observation (s) and joint interview with the two teachers about the conversations 8-11 (t).
10. About Sarah	Class teacher 5 (f), special needs teacher 6 (f), mother, father, and the pupil.	Observation (s) and joint interview with the two teachers about the conversations 8-11 (t).
11. About Norah	Class teacher 5 (f), special needs teacher 6 (f), mother, and the pupil.	Observation (s) and joint interview with the two teachers about the conversations 8-11 (t).
12. About Anne	Special needs teacher 7 (f), special needs teacher 8 (m) and mother.	Observation, joint interview with the two teachers (about conversations 12-13) and interview with the mother (all t).
13. About Ruth	Special needs teacher 7 (f), special needs teacher 8 (m), mother, and father.	Observation, joint interview with the teachers (about conversations 12-13), and joint interview with the parents (all t).
14. About Eric	Class teacher (m), mother, and pupil.	Interview with the mother (t).

Appendix 1 (*Continued*)

Conversations	Participants	Observations and interviews
15. About Per	Special needs teacher/class teacher 9 (f) and mother.	One interview with the teacher about conversations 15–17 (t).
16. About Marcus	Special needs teacher/class teacher 9 (f) and father.	One interview with the teacher about conversations 15–17 (t).
17. About Noah	Special needs teacher/class teacher 9 (f) and mother.	One interview with the teacher about conversations 15–17 (t).
About last conversations		Interview with special needs teacher (t).
About last conversations		Interview with special needs teacher (t).

Notes: Each of the interviewed teachers has been given an identifying number in Appendix 1 and, as illustrated; some of the teachers have been interviewed about several conversations; t, audio-taped and transcribed; s, noted and made summaries; f, female; m, male; the first three pupils in the table are in the primary school section and the rest are in lower secondary school.