

# Dialogue and reconciliation

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## Introduction

In our 6 week teaching practice at Ålholm School in Valby, we taught both a 5th and a 6th grade. In the classes we taught them the subjects history, English, Danish, History and Christianity. Since, we had most lessons in 5. Class, we have chosen to use the class as the focus point.

Ålholm School is a relatively small school where many different nationalities are represented. The school's aim is an approach to greater interdisciplinary, closer cooperation, increased pupil provision and closer home-school cooperation. Furthermore the school sees it as their task to integrate the bilingual pupils, while maintaining an equal educational facility for all pupils.

5. Class is a class with 27 pupils, consisting of 14 girls and 13 boys, of which 10 are bilingual. The pupils' academic level in the class is utterly varied. In addition to that there are also a handful of pupils with reading difficulties, and the class is divided in many groups. Also the class is a diverse class, in terms of ethnicity, habitus, culture and social capital.

During our teaching practice, we were often disturbed by the lack of dialogue between the children and the increasing conflicts in and outside the classroom. We tried different approaches to solve the conflict between the pupils. The approaches we tried were inspired by the theoretical background we received from our Didactics of dialogue and reconciliation module. During the processes we realized how challenging conflict management is, and therefore we choose to highlight this issue in our assignment.

**Research question:** *How can we as teachers use dialogue, reconciliation, inclusion and acknowledgment in a diverse classroom?*

## Method

Our method and our approaches are based upon our experiences from our teaching practice. In addition to that our aim was to “test” our theoretical knowledge in practice. Due to the time length of our teaching practice (6 weeks), we found it difficult to try out all our “hypothesizes”. Therefore we choose to practice the relationship-competence<sup>1</sup>, with an emphasis on inclusion and acknowledgement.

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<sup>1</sup> In Danish “relationskompetencen”, which is 1 of the 3 competences to work on, while teaching.

## Dialogue

*“Dialogue is a special form of communication, in which participants seek to actively create greater mutual understanding and deeper insight”<sup>2</sup>*

Dialogue is very important to overcome prejudices, understand other people’s perspective and to expand our horizon. It is necessary to use dialogue in a modern globalized world as we live in today, because we have to communicate and cooperate across borders, cultures, religions and different political views. Participants in a dialogue are open, listen and ask questions, so the goal in dialogue is not winning the argument or reaching agreement, but is it to exchange and explore different and new possibilities. There are four important principles in dialogue: Trust, openness, honesty and Equality.

It is much easier to be open and express opposing point of views when there is trust between the persons in the dialogue. In relation to that, you have to show openness by being honest about what you represent and open to what the other part suggest.

Being who you are, both in your words and the way you are, is being honest, which leads to trust and openness. In dialogue everybody is equal regardless of status, gender and ethnic background. One can say that the four principles are dependent on each other when creating a dialogue<sup>3</sup>.

### Dialogue in the classroom – how?

Creating a learning environment where pupils are actively participating in the given tasks’ is one of the most important goals and greatest challenges. Unfortunately many pupils are afraid of sounding stupid or making mistakes, which leads to their non-participation in class. This is where dialogue is extremely important. As mentioned before, you have to cover the four principles to have a successful dialogue, so as a teacher one has to provide trust, openness, honesty and equality in the classroom.

To create a dialogue the teacher has to take the pupils seriously, even when the pupils don’t know the answers, or if the pupils ask “wrong” questions. The teacher should guide and help the pupils, by using scaffolding and asking leading questions. It is the teacher’s role to make sure everyone feel safe and comfortable in asking questions and participating in class.

Many new and modern methods have adopted dialogue as an important part in the learning

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<sup>2</sup> The Dialogue Handbook

<sup>3</sup> The Dialogue Handbook

process. One of those methods and the most used one is cooperative learning. In cooperative learning there are different tasks and techniques for the pupils, which ensure everyone is actively participating. One of those techniques is the “Mix/pair/share”. This technique does not only build community in class, but it also allows that everyone is actively participating. Some pupils may be more comfortable talking to each other rather than talking in front of the whole class. Another way to include dialogue in the classroom is by doing group discussion. In this way, everyone is comfortable sharing their thoughts because they are in small groups. Debates are off course also a good way to include dialogue, because there are not right and wrong answers. The most important thing is the teacher’s role in class. By being acknowledging and by using scaffolding the teacher can provide an environment for the pupils, where they can feel free and comfortable to go in a dialogue.

### **Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken fellowship between two parties. The need for reconciliation is most important when the grief and pain is deep. To reconcile you need to forgive the other person for what he or she might have done in the past. Forgiveness is a choice, it is the human’s ability to let go of what has happened. Forgiveness is about accepting, despite everything that has happened to one, even if you have negative feelings attached to it. To forgive is something one should do for their own sake, when it holds onto the past and the negative things that have happened. The negative emotions can be anything from anger, hate, revenge and bitterness; these feelings will only drain one's life energy and joy.

### **Reconciliation in the classroom - how?**

Forgiveness and reconciliation can also be used in a classroom, especially in the diverse classroom, where we meet a lot of different pupils with different interests and due to the differences there may also develop a lot of conflicts in the classroom. Based on our personal experience in the teaching practice, we saw a diverse classroom where all the pupils did not exactly agree with each other despite their differences. On a daily basis in our teaching practice, we encountered a lot of conflicts between the pupils. These conflicts effected the teaching environment, and made it more complex to teach and for the pupils to actually learn. This is why it was important for us to create a classroom community where all pupils could not only work together, but it was also intended to

improve their relationship outside the classroom. It was a challenge but it taught us a lot about reconciliation.

Our goal was to get pupils closer together that is why we used a method to accomplish this goal. There were especially conflicts between the girls in the class. So, we all sat with the girls where they were to share their feelings and tell everyone what had been hurting them. A lot of the girls were sad because, of what they felt the dominant group had done to the classroom community. The other girls did not dare to get into their group, as the dominant group was not welcoming at all. That is why we found it necessary to help the girls to reconcile because they already at an early age had prejudices against each other, this also led to exclusion, and most of the girls found themselves being alone and not being able to socialize with each other.

At the meeting, we used Desmond Tutu and his daughter's approach on how to forgive. Desmond Tutu and Mpfo Tutu have written a book about forgiveness. The book is called *The Book of Forgiving*, Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho; explain the four-step process of forgiving. Desmond Tutu was also the chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Mpfo Tutu recently had a presentation about their book. In the presentation about forgiveness it was said that if you don't forgive you are in danger of going into a cycle of danger, violence and revenge. According to Desmond Tutu and Mpfo Tutu, there are four steps in forgiving someone. 1. Tell the story, of how you've been hurt, as fully as you can, to a community that will listen to you. 2. To name the hurt. Naming the hurt means putting word on what happened. 3. Grand forgiveness, you will be able to accept that the past has happened, you can't undo it and it's done. 4. Start a new relationship, because the relationship will never be the same, or release the relationship if it is unhealthy and unsafe to be in the relationship.

By using this type of method at the meeting, the girls were able to tell what had happened and what they felt, and then put the past behind and try to start a new beginning. This method helped the girls improving their relationship. The girls from dominant group even told the whole class that they did not realize that the other girls were so friendly. This also excluded the prejudices that there may have been in the beginning. Also written in the text by Bhikhu Parekh 'A Commitment to Cultural Pluralism' *"It is therefore vitally important in a multicultural society to resolve conflicts in a just and humane manner and prevent a future accumulation of painful memories. As for the*

*inherited memories of the past, every society, especially a multicultural society, needs to find ways of pacifying the tormented consciousness, of its erstwhile victims, making the past bearable for all, and paving the way for intercommunal reconciliation.* “ This quote from the text, also tells us that it is important to solve the problems because this may result in painful memories.

## **Recognition**

At our teaching practice school we had a diverse group of pupils. Their differences could consist of their reading level, athletic ability, cultural background, personality, religious beliefs, and the list goes on. It is important to embrace the diversity and make positive use of it. Teachers should value diversity and they need to model this attitude to their pupils. When people value diversity, they recognize and respect the fact that people are different and that these differences is generally a good thing.

It was important for us in our group, to establish a recognition learning environment at our teaching practice school, because recognition is an important factor, as it can benefit the pupils learning and development. Recognition also leads to acknowledging the diverse group of pupils with different backgrounds.

The concept of recognition can be deepened by looking closely at two basic concepts: equality and reciprocity. The concept of recognition is rooted in the principle of mutual equality between people. According to Schibbye, equality is to show respect for the other's experience and perspective she calls it a "subject-subject" relationship<sup>4</sup>. However, it is important to distinguish between equity and equality. Complementary relationships as teacher-pupil, is unequal but can be practiced equally. This means that teachers and pupils are not equal, but that both have equal right to their own experience and view.

As a teacher, you can create recognition through openness/responsiveness, understanding and through confirmation. To be open, implies that the teacher is ready to let the pupil's experiences or thoughts influence the situation for a while. By asking open questions to the pupils, the teacher will recognize the pupil's assessment that he or she has something valuable to contribute.

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<sup>4</sup> Ole Løw & Else Skibsted (red.) Psykologi for lærerstuderende og lærer side 95

Besides open questions is understanding, another important element of recognition. Through understanding, a teacher can empathize with the pupil's experiences.<sup>5</sup> This means that in order to recognize pupils, the teacher must understand how the situation looks from the pupil's perspective. Though, it is very important for a teacher not to question the pupil's perspectives, but instead recognizes their perspectives.

The third element of recognition is confirmation. Confirmation is very much about communicating. It's not about giving positive or negative feedback, but it is about the pupils feeling that they are being seen, heard and confirmed by the teacher.<sup>6</sup>

### **Recognition in the classroom – How?**

Pupils can be recognized for accomplishment, for notable work in reading, math, writing, or any content area; and for acts of kindness, caring, or bravery. Pupils can also be recognized when the teacher asks them open questions. The teacher must show understanding of pupils' view/perspective by nodding, and by not questioning what they say, but instead ask more questions. It is also important to acknowledge and treat all pupils as individuals with unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs rather than as generalized representatives of particular racial, ethnic or cultural groups. The teacher can create an open classroom that recognizes and values the experiences and perspectives of all pupils. Recognizing your pupils can also happen through communication, which leads to confirmation. The teacher must see, hear and confirm each pupil. That way a teacher can create a successful learning environment in a diverse class.

### **Inclusion in a diverse classroom**

As a result of a worldwide globalization the Danish society is today, filled with diversity in religion, color, background and culture. This tendency has led to both positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes. A number of people argue that diversity weakens a country's unity, and similarity due to the differences between the various cultures, and religious backgrounds. However investigations and cases around the world have shown otherwise. According to Bhikhu Parekh, a country can ensure unity, even though the population of a certain country differs from

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<sup>5</sup> Ole Løw & Else Skibsted (red.) Psykologi for lærerstuderende og lærer side 96

<sup>6</sup> Ole Løw & Else Skibsted (red.) Psykologi for lærerstuderende og lærer side 97

one another. “While a society needs to ensure unity and cohesion, it cannot ignore the demands of diversity”<sup>7</sup>. He furthermore points out the importance of reaching out to other cultures, but without a complete assimilation. He argues that it takes both sides to reach a united and equal understanding. The importance of co-existing, according to Parekh, is acceptance and avoiding the need to dismantle the various cultural societies.

This idea of unity also applies diverse schools, and the approaches are various, however the main and essential approaches are reaching out and understanding.

### **Inclusion in a diverse classroom – How?**

According to Axel Honneth and Thomas Gitz Johansen, it is crucial to show children *social appreciation*. This is the kind of recognition and inclusion that is relevant in school and while teaching. It allows relating positively to children's specific qualities, and viewing them as resources and potentials, rather than problems, or something that needs to be “fixed”. It is an active form of inclusion, which presents an increasing interest in the special and different, instead of providing it negative attention. When acquiring knowledge and when learning in general, it is not only the learning process that is essential. Other aspects must also be considered. It is important that pupils, with different cultural backgrounds, feel socially valued, and also that we teachers create an inclusive learning environment.

Thomas Gitz Johansen believes that *ethnic chance inequality* (the different ethnic group's inequality to do well in school) can lead to two reactions; the *monocultural strategy* and the *multicultural strategy*. It is said that we in Denmark have the monocultural approach. This leads to a “deprivational”<sup>8</sup> understanding, which means that we consider minorities as “impoverished” and disadvantaged. These thoughts can lead to, teachers catching themselves saying that the children “need help to find the right culture” or something in the lines of “They aren't good enough”. Furthermore the monocultural strategies also apply the compensatory pedagogy, which idea is to show the kids their cultural “lacks” (For example, show them cultural monuments like the round tower<sup>9</sup> or the little mermaid). The multicultural strategy is on the other hand build upon inclusion.

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<sup>7</sup> Bhikhu Parekh: A commitment to cultural pluralism.

<sup>8</sup> In Danish “deprivations forståelse”

<sup>9</sup> Rundetårn

In this approach, the aim is to create a “we” without dismantling ethnic groups, by including the children and acknowledging the diversity. So instead of trying to erase the differences, and strive for assimilation, this approach tries to use the resources the children have, and erase the negative understanding of diversity. At the same time, the focus on this strategy is upon the similarities, the children have, instead of highlighting the differences.

During our teaching practice, we tried the multicultural approach, and integrated it in an English sequence. We called the sequence “My life”, and we told the pupils that the sequence was a possible method of getting to know each other in an alternative way. Our main goal was to give the pupils, the possibility to see their classmates’ culture, families and everyday life in an unusual light. The sequence was supposed to be an eye-opener, and a way of underlining that the similarities between the children are various. Throughout the sequence the kids began to talk about culture, religion, and how their religions didn’t differ much from one another. During the theme, we also discussed stereotypes, prejudices and different ethnical societies in an intercultural manner. When we ended the sequence, we made an evaluation both orally, and with the help of an evaluating exercise. The impression we got was that the children, learned a lot about themselves and each other throughout the sequence. Furthermore they all told us in the evaluation that they felt heard, included and accepted, which is exactly what the multicultural approach’s aims are.

## **Conclusion**

We have through our undertaken methods, observed approaches and throughout the procedure of them, concluded that it is essential to create a common class culture. By class culture it is meant that although, the pupils are from different backgrounds, cultures, social capitals and habitus, it is important to create a common platform with a learning-promoting environment. This is done by using the right approaches, with the right amount of time. With approaches such as reconciliation, dialogue, inclusion and recognition we can conclude that these methods are very useful in order to establish a safe including and acknowledging atmosphere in a diverse classroom.

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