Language Teaching with Pupils with ADHD

According to the publication *Tre magiska G:n (2001)* pupils with diagnosis ADHD, DAMP and Asperger Syndrome have difficulty in reaching the required goals in the three main subjects Swedish, English and Mathematics. The reasons according to the report are connected to the pupil’s learning difficulties. We have chosen to focus on why pupils with the disability ADHD have such difficulties in reaching the aforementioned goals in Swedish and English. We wish to develop a greater understanding for the difficulties that can arise when working with pupils with ADHD. Through developing our understanding we hope to find the tools to aid us in our future role as teachers. Our goal is to see all pupils as unique individuals and plan our lessons in a way which covers the needs of each and every pupil.

The purpose with this paper is to, from an English and Swedish language perspective, illustrate the attitudes of teachers when dealing with pupils with ADHD. Furthermore we believe that this greater understanding will aid us as future teachers to form teaching so that pupils with ADHD will have a greater chance of reaching the goals for English and Swedish.

1. How do teachers adapt their environment to enable maximal learning opportunities?
2. Which didactical choices do teachers make when working with pupils with ADHD?
3. Where can teachers find the knowledge they need to aid them in their work with pupils with ADHD?
It states clearly in the steering documents of the Swedish educational system that pupils who have difficulties in reaching the required goals in the main subjects should be given extra attention and help and schools have a specific responsibility towards pupils with varying disabilities *Läroplanen för de frivilliga skolformerna* (Lpf 94).

ADHD is an abbreviation of “Attention deficit hyperactivity Disorder” and is a neurodevelopmental disorder. According to Kadesjö (2005) between three to five percent of school pupils have ADHD or ADHD related difficulties, such as concentration problems and hyperactivity, of these 20-25 percent have learning difficulties. Typical symptoms are attention difficulties, impulsivity and hyperactivity. These symptoms can lead to difficulties in concentration on an exercise, difficulty in understanding instructions and difficulty in finishing an exercise.

Pupils have difficulties in concentrating on two things at once for example listening whilst taking notes, they often lose things, and easily forget homework or to take books to school. Symptoms of impulsivity and hyperactivity can for example be difficulties in sitting still, running around and always appear to be on the go. In class discussions they may have difficulty in waiting on their turn to speak and ask questions or say answers without particular reflection.

To help us in our study we have chosen relevant literature on the subject ADHD and concentration difficulties. Educational psychological theories based on the works of Vygotsky, Bruner and Dysthe are central to our research, giving us a greater understanding of the importance of dialog and communication in the language classroom.

We have chosen to do an observation of two lessons and four interviews at an upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. The school provides the pupils with an occupational education and has 55 pupils. The teachers we chose to interview are teachers of Swedish and English and one of the Swedish teachers is even a special educational teacher. The choice of teachers was made due to their subject but also due to their varying degree of experience of working with pupils with ADHD.
Result and Analysis

Environment
Our observations revealed that the classrooms are traditionally designed with the students’ desks placed in rows facing towards the front of the class. In one of the classrooms changes were made by placing a desk at the front of the class by the side wall so the pupil could easily see the class without having to turn around whilst still enabling a close contact with the teacher. The special education teacher explained that this “makes contact with the pupil easier”. Three of the teachers said that the classroom environment is not adapted at all.

In the Swedish classroom the walls were sparingly decorated which the special education teacher said was due to pupils being easily distracted by too much on the walls. We were also informed that the school’s policy was to have no more than 16 pupils in each class and that no pupil was to go through the day without being seen. The classes we observed had each 14 pupils. In the English classroom the pupils chose themselves where to sit whereas in the Swedish classroom the special education teacher decided the pupils’ placing. This is done she explained as some pupils are easily disturbed by their friends around them.

Didactics
The English lesson begins with a grammar lesson. The teacher writes grammatically incorrect sentences from the pupils’ own work on the whiteboard. The teacher then asks the pupils to correct the sentences she has written. The pupils offer a variety of answers until they succeed. The teacher agrees with the pupils’ correct answer without rewriting it on the whiteboard. During an interview one of the teachers name structure, clarity and reasonable goals as important factors when teaching pupils with learning disabilities. We also noticed during our observations that the English teacher spoke often to the class whilst writing on the whiteboard and spent large portions of time by her desk.

After the grammar exercise pupils were given an individual exercise to work with. The exercise included three topics with two to three questions in each topic. The goal of the exercise was to gain information before the showing of the film *This is England*. The pupils are advised to search for the answers on the internet. We observed that the first 15 minutes are spent searching, chatting and listening to music. After a while the pupils begin to search for
the relevant information and are advised by the teacher to use Wikipedia as their source of information. In an interview with the English teacher she mentions that writing and reading exercises are problematic and says that when confronted with a challenge they seem to lose focus completely. During the lesson the pupils are given a ten minute break which is not respected by many in the class as they re-enter the classroom up to 15 minutes late. All communication in the English classroom was in Swedish.

In the Swedish classroom the pupils are working with the short story *Kylan* by Inger Alfven. The teacher reads the story aloud whilst the pupils follow the story in a compendium. After the reading, the class then discusses the story from a gender aspect. The teacher engages the pupils in the discussion with enthusiasm. In her interview she explains that dialog is essential to learning due to that many of her pupils express themselves better orally than in writing. After the class discussion the pupils work with the novel individually. We observe that one of the pupils leaves the room during this time to work undisturbed in an adjacent room. The special education teacher explains in the interview that a mutual respect is a condition for her language classes to succeed. The pupils are given a ten minute break. With two minutes left of the break the teacher leaves the classroom to remind the pupils that they will soon have to return.

**Knowledge**

The special education teacher tells us that she would like the other teachers to use her experience and encourages a greater cooperation between the staff. The other teachers name, “limited time” and “unfamiliar with routines” as reasons why they do not make use of her services. The special education teacher says that the size of the school encourages a successful cooperation. She further describes the importance of parental contact and sees both pupils and their parents as important sources of information. The school has a mentor system which encourages parental and pupil contact but unfortunately not all teachers are mentors.

Our results concluded a difference in pedagogues’ awareness of their environment and the importance of the environment for learning. The special education teacher describes the size of the school and the size of the classes as positive factors in the learning environment whereas the other teachers do not appear aware of these aspects. By reorganising the classroom the special education teacher creates an environment for optimal learning.
Our observations show that in the Swedish classroom pupils are given a variety of ways to work with the story whereas in the English classroom the pupils were given information either orally or in writing. This limits the pupils’ chances of understanding and learning. We also observe that both classes were given ten minute breaks, which was respected in the Swedish classroom due to the teacher reminding the pupils that they were due to return, but was not respected in the English classroom where pupils were left to return on their own accord.

The main sources of information, according to the special education teacher, are the pupils and their parents and she encourages a mentor system which she says leads to greater cooperation between everyone involved.

**How do teachers adapt their environment to enable maximal learning opportunities?**
The special education teacher adapts the environment based on the group of pupils she is teaching. The changes made were predetermined and thought through. The other pedagogues did not seem to reflect upon the classroom environment and its importance for learning which led to that no changes were made.

**Which didactical choices do teachers make when working with pupils with ADHD?**
Our study shows that the didactical choices of the pedagogues are related to experience and knowledge and how the pedagogue relates to the pupil. The special education teacher offers the pupils a variety of ways of learning whereas in the English classroom pupils are given limited ways of learning.

**Where can teachers find the knowledge they need to aid them in their work with pupils with ADHD?**
Our study shows that the information needed when working with pupils with ADHD is not limited to literature. It is the responsibility of the pedagogue to collect all available information. This can be found in literature, through the special education teacher, other teachers who work with the pupil, the pupil himself, and their parents.