Deafness and the Development of Communication Skills in Developing Countries

Examples from Mongolia and Nepal

# Mongolia

Mongolia is a vast country, the 17th largest in the world, with enormous stretches of beautiful steppes, mountain and desert areas where traditional herdsmen on horseback attend to their herds of sheep, goats, cattle, camels and horses as they have done for centuries.

Mongolia has a population of 2.2 million of which about one quarter lives in the capital Ulaanbaatar, one quarter in the towns or centers of the18 aimags (districts) and the rest in smaller communities and family units. A large part of the population are nomads who move several times a year to find the best grazing for their herds. The nomadic lifestyle, well adjusted to the harsh living conditions, depends upon participation of all family members, even the youngest ones, to ensure survival.

Transition in Mongolia
Mongolia has been heavily influenced and supported by the Soviet Union since its revolution in 1921. Under the socialist regime tremendous changes were made in Mongolia, but the regime became gradually more and more restrictive. The dramatic political changes introduced by Glasnost and Perestroika in the Soviet Union were also reflected in Mongolia. In 1990 Mongolia initiated a comprehensive program of economic, social and political reforms.

School reforms in Mongolia
In 1991, the Government of Mongolia decided to undertake a comprehensive national school reform involving significant changes throughout the primary and secondary school sectors (grade 1 -10). The Government requested the Danish International Development Assistance (Danida) to provide technical assistance for development and implementation of the national school reform. The Danida supported program which started in August 1992 is carried out by the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies (RDSES) on behalf of Danida in cooperation with Mongolian teacher training and educational institutions.

Special Needs Education (SNE)
In 1994 support in the development of special needs education was included as a component of the larger Danida /RDSES program. The overall objective of SNE component emphasized an integrative, inclusive approach to SNE in order to enable teachers in regular primary schools to better meet the needs of children with various kinds of learning difficulties and disabilities. Such an inclusive or integrative approach to education of children with special needs was very different from the traditional belief in Mongolia that children with special needs should not be in ordinary schools with normal children but be placed in one of the few existing special schools, often boarding schools, or stay at home.

Special teachers; "defectologists"
Most special teachers at the special schools received their training in the former Soviet Union as defectologists. This 4-6 year training was focused on a medical model with emphasis on the defects or deficiencies of people with disabilities, with very little weight on rehabilitation and special education methods. For various reasons, many defectologists did not agree with the objectives of the inclusive approaches emphasized by the new program.

Pilot projects in SNE
The primary teachers selected to be involved in the pilot project were more open but still skeptical about whether children with special needs could be taught in regular schools. After two years of pilot work in selected primary classes and schools to develop good models of inclusion, major efforts are being made to spread awareness about special needs education and to implement the new approaches in all imags

Teacher made teaching and learning materials
The project teachers has shown great dedication to development of inclusive programs in their schools and have succeeded in including children with various disabilities in their classes. They have developed good teaching methods supported by a great number of very creative and beautifully made teaching and learning materials which they have developed to support learning in their students.

New approaches to education of deaf children
The two case stories illustrate in so many ways the situation as it is for most deaf children and adults in rural areas of Mongolia, but also how this situation can be changed dramatically with very limited economic resources. The difference is made by professional and human resources and dedication.

# Tulga

Tulga is a 9-year old boy who goes to second grade in his district school, school # 1 in Dornod aimag in the eastern part of Mongolia.

When Tulga was 8 months old, he got very ill and was taken to the local hospital where he spent some weeks in the intensive care unit. Soon after his recovery, his parents found out that he had lost his hearing and was only able to detect very loud sounds made directly to his left ear.

The parents took Tulga for further examinations in the hospital and bought a hearing aid for him. But the few hearing aids and ear molds available in Mongolia are usually standard models for adults and Tulga was never able to wear this hearing aid for more than a short period at a time. The parents do not know whether the hearing aid assisted his hearing at all and they have long ago given up trying to make him wear it.

Tulga is the youngest of three children and the only son. His father is a lawyer and his mother the best high school math teacher in town. Tulga`s grandfather and his father's sister are also lawyers. Important members of their small town, which is the center of the district or aimag. The family is very close and the handsome boy gets a lot of attention and support from his extended family. Especially, his grandfather used to spend much time with the little boy.

When Tulga was three years old, he started pre-school like most other children in Mongolian towns. His parents felt very lucky that the director of the pre-school agreed to admit him. This did not come easily and they had to plead hard for their son because of the traditional attitude in Mongolia that children with disabilities are "abnormal" and should not be with "normal" children.

In the pre-school, Tulga tried the best he could to imitate the behaviors of the other children and on the pre-school pictures he looks quite happy. However, no attempt to develop any form of communication beyond pointing was made at the pre-school or at home, because nobody knew how to.

When Tulga finished pre- school at age 7, all the children in his group were starting first grade in the local school. The principal and head teacher of the secondary school (1-10 grade) where his mother is a highly estimated teacher accepted to admit the boy to the school.

The photo from Tulga`s first school day shows a serious looking, young boy dressed in a dark blue, three piece suit with a tie, carrying a brand new school bag which looks more like the briefcase of a businessman than a school bag.

Tulga had good reason to look worried and serious. By the time, he started school, he had no means of communication beyond some gestures, pointing and a few sounds. His new teacher was not able to communicate with him at all and it was soon obvious that he was not learning except copying his friends` work.

At this time (1995) the only possibility of education for deaf children was admittance to the only special school for deaf and blind children in Mongolia. This school is situated in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, and very far from Tulga`s home. The parents did not want to send their young son so far away from home and family - as the mother expressed her feelings, "I do not understand how a young child can be expected to learn far away from the support and love of his parents and family. Especially, when we have no way of explaining the situation to him or be in contact with him".

So the father went directly to the President of Mongolia with his plea for support to establish a class for deaf children in his home town. The president referred him to the Ministry of Education, which referred him back to the Governor of the aimag. The Governor told the father that it was not possible to start a class for deaf children when no-one knew how many deaf children there were in town.

The father then made a survey and identified about 90 deaf children and young people. When the aimag administration was presented with numbers and names, they accepted the need to train a teacher for such a class, but regretted that there was no money to pay for such training, because of the difficulties in providing enough teachers and classrooms for the growing number of normal children. To prove the point, the administration told how a special boarding school for children with mental disabilities in the aimag had recently been closed and the children sent home to their families in order to give room for a school for "normal" children.

Tulga's parents were desperate, having exhausted their attempts to find a way that Tulga could receive education without having to be sent away to boarding school in the capital.

At this time, one school in Dornod aimag had been selected to be included in the Mongolian-Danish pilot project to develop an inclusive model for special needs education in Mongolia. The principles of integrating children with disabilities in regular schools are very different from the traditional segregation of "abnormal" children in special schools, where they are taught by special teachers, the so-called defectologists, who have a long training in knowing about disabilities and much less knowledge about effective, pedagogical methods to teach children with special needs

A Mongolian-Danish team visited Dornod to observe and support the first pilot teacher who had included three children with different disabilities in her first grade. Tulga's parents learnt about this project and the team's visit. They brought Tulga in his three-piece suit and their problems to the team. It so happened that the Danish consultant on the team had recently spent three years at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. and with this experience in mind, she could not endure the story of the parents fighting so hard to find ways of giving their son access to education without having to send him away.

After a joint and long meeting with the director of the education center, it was agreed that he would provide two teachers and a classroom for a special class, if the special needs education project would pay for the flight tickets and training of the teachers at the special school in Ulaanbaatar.

When the team returned to the capital, a plan for a one-month training course and a budget for this was agreed upon. Two teachers from each of the other three aimags involved in the special needs project were also invited for the training. The main objective of the training was to give the teachers basic skills in sign language which in itself was quite difficult for the special schools since it applied an oral method and only introduced sign language from eight grade.

The two teachers from Dornod aimag were experienced language teachers of secondary schools. One of them has a deaf son herself. This boy became deaf at the age of 8 because of over-medication. She has herself experienced the sadness of having to send a young child away to a special school and now wanted to help change this situation for other deaf children.

As soon as the two teachers returned to Dornod, a group of 13 young, deaf children were selected for the first grade by a team consisting of the teacher, a psychologist and the pediatrician from the local hospital. The class started at the beginning of the new school year.

Tulga has now finished second grade together with his 12 classmates. He goes to school happily every morning and has changed from the sulky, serious boy who started school into a smiling, eager, outgoing child who often takes responsibility for other children in his class. But he can also be mischievous and fool around with the other children like any other school child. The parents say that Tulga's friends are in and out of their house every afternoon after school, emptying the food supply, playing and having a good time like other children their age.

All the children in Tulga's class will continue in third grade next year. They won second place in a math competition between all schools in the town, and half of the children won recognition for good penmanship. Like all other children in Mongolian schools, the deaf children are involved in dancing, drama and poetry recitals. Tulga is one of the best boy dancer in his class and performs with gusto and enthusiasm. This year (1998), half of the children passed the end of the year exam with good or very good marks. Some children did less well, according to the teacher because of poverty and poor circumstances in their homes, rather than their hearing impairment.

Tulga is happy about his school, his friends, his teacher and his achievements. His parents are happy and very supportive of the class and so are the other parents. The school administration and the whole school family including teachers, parents and students are proud of the special classes and feel responsible for the students. After some cases of teasing and making fun of the deaf children, the principal summoned all students to a meeting and explained to them that such behavior was not acceptable and that all children at this schools should feel welcome.

The deaf children are now fully accepted both in the school and in the community. Children from older classes often visit the class and some of the older girls have taught the young deaf children how to make the complicated steps of traditional Mongolian dances. Also, when the other children meet their deaf school mates outside the school, they are friendly to them.

When the two classes started, the teachers organized a sign language course for family members to teach them basic signs and especially the sign alphabet. Tulga's youngest sister is especially good at communicating with him but the parents have also learnt basic signs and find it much easier to communicate with him than before although they still find it difficult to discuss more abstract topics with him. The father is also pleased that he can begin to communicate in writing with Tulga. Although he is still concerned about the level of education that Tulga may reach.

# Jargalsaihan

The second teacher wanted to reach some of the many young deaf people in the aimag. She made a radio announcement of the new program and also visited many of the villages in the district to inform them about the new programme. Many young deaf people who never had the opportunity of receiving any education approached the school when they or their relatives learned about the new program. A second "first" grade class for young people 13 to 33 years old wasstarted by the second teacher.

Jargalsaihal is a student in the older class. He is 23 years old and the son of a herdsman. When he was three years old he contracted meningitis and after recovery from the serious illness, the parents realized that Jargalsaihan could no longer hear. When Jargalsaihan was 7 years old his grandfather took him all the way to a special school in the capital. But the boy cried so hard and was so desperate that the grandfather decided that he could not leave the boy but had to bring him back home. Since then, Jargalsaihan has stayed home with his family and not received any kind of formal education, but he has learned to become a good herdsman and deals skillfully with the herd of horses, camels, sheep and goats. When he was a boy, Jargalsaihan participated successfully in the traditional horse racing with the other children from the area.

Jargalsaihan's sister went to school in the aimag center, and the parents built a house where the mother could stay with the daughter during school times. Jargalsaihan stayed back with his father in the isolation of the countryside.

The parents worried about the boy. They wanted him to be able to read and write and communicate but they did not know how to teach him or where to send him for education. So when the parents heard on the radio about the new class for deaf young people, they brought Jargalsaihan immediately to be enrolled.

Jargalsaihan seems still quite isolated in family discussions but his mother and sister attended the family sign language course and are better able to communicate with him now. Especially his sister seems quite skillful in communicating through signs and finger spelling with Jargalsaihan and she is also very considerate and tries to tell him what is going on. The parents are not able to include Jargalsaihan in a real conversation beyond daily life activities concerning the animals or household in the ger, the round tent made of felt, which is the family's home in the countryside. But there is no doubt that the family loves the young man and is deeply concerned about his future.

During a visit to the ger, his father solemnly said:

"I am getting gray hairs. I am concerned about my son. I want him to learn to take care of himself, get some vocational training and to be employed. It is easier for him in town. It is very difficult to be a herdsman when you are disabled. People are greedy and will try to take advantage of you." Then the father went on to explain how grateful he and his family were about this late chance to give Jargalsaihan the opportunity for education.

argalsaihan agrees with his father. He now lives in the town with his mother and sister and goes to schools. He is very happy about his education and is very eager to learn. Where he until a year ago was not able to "talk" with anyone and spent almost all his time alone with the animals on the vast steppes, he has now learned to communicate freely with his classmates and friends and says that he would much rather stay in the town because there are many other deaf people and he has many friends.

After one year in "first" grade he can read the newspaper, follow subtitles on TV and the weekly news in sign language. He wants to develop his talent for drawing and become an artist or a designer.

The next step on his new way to get an education has already been planned. After two years of school, Jargalsaihan has obtained a satisfactory academic level, and together with two classmates, he has been accepted at the vocational training schools in Ulaanbaatar where he will train as a carpenter.

Communication
When the children and young people started school they did not know any "formal" sign language and were only able to communicate through some "home made" signs and pointing. Only Tulga had been in pre-school prior to coming to school, but he did not learn any method of communication beyond pointing and gesturing. The children and young people did not know or were not able to express even the most simple facts of their lives, like their names, age, family members and so on.

The teacher of the young children used the first 4 months of school to teach them the simple sign language she knew, the sign alphabet and finger spelling, in order that she could communicate with the children and they with each other. Simple social skills, especially the ones related to appropriate school behaviors also needed to be taught to the children, before the teacher started to teach academic skills.

A sign language, finger spelling course, was offered to the parents and families of the children when the class started. It turned out that younger siblings seemed to be especially good at learning to communicate with their deaf brothers or sisters.

The two teachers received a four-week training course in sign language and finger spelling at the special school in the capital before they started to teach the two new classes. Obviously their sign language is very basic and in many cases they need to use a finger spelling approach. The deaf son of one of the teachers who just returned home after 10 years at the special school in Ulaanbaatar is teaching his mother and the children many signs, but because the special school until now has had an oral approach he is not fluent in sign language either

So the sign language or signed mode of communication used in the two classes are by no means satisfactory and could be criticized from all linguistic points of view. But from a personal and social point of view, the importance of having access to a mutual system of communication, being it simple, cannot be overestimated.

The only support, the teachers have for their own and their students' sign language development is the first sign language dictionary of a few hundred words, which was published a few years ago.

# School achievement after two years

Younger class
In the second grade there are 11 children, 8 boys and 3 girls. Two boys came back from the special school in Ulaanbaatar to join the class.

After the initial period, where the children had to learn standard school behaviors and a mode of communication, the class looks like any other class at the school. The children seem eager to learn and to participate. They have covered the standard curriculum at the same pace as the other classes. Half of the children received a reward for their excellence in penmanship after first grade and the class won second prize in math competition between all first grades in the aimag.

At the recent examination after second grade half the class scored good or higher marks, and all children passed the exam. The teacher explained that the children who did not score too well come from a poor family background and do not always have the necessary support from home. According to the teachers, this fact rather than their deafness would explain their lower results in the examination.

Personal observations of the class not only gave an impression of the involvement and level of skills of the different students, but also of a group of children with "normal" classroom behaviors like conversation, teasing, whispering like children in any other class. The children now seem to communicate freely with each other.

Older class
Fourteen students age 13 to 33 years. The teacher of the older students has developed her own curriculum. Her first priority was to teach the students sign language and finger spelling in order that they would be able to communicate with each other. They do this now. Also they have learned to read and write. They read newspapers, watch the news (sign language once a week), discuss their country, the political system, and local, national and international events. They are learning math especially in relation to handling of money, budget, buying and selling and so on.

Although some of the older students sometimes may feel embarrassed about going to a primary school for children and sharing their classroom, most of them come every day because it is so important for them to learn and to meet new friends.

Both classes participate in traditional school performances with dance, recitals, drama and so on in the same way as all the other classes at the school. They are learning traditional dancing which is part of all gatherings and festive occasions in Mongolia. Some of them are also very good at modern disco dancing. When the classes received an award from the aimag administration, they decided to buy a big tape player for the money.

Parent support
The parents are very grateful to the teachers and the program and they support the two classes in many ways, like helping the teachers get materials for production of teaching aids, special equipment for the classroom like plants and curtains and provision of tea and a snack during the school day. The parents and teachers have formed an organization and try to raise more awareness and support in the community not only for their own children but for children and adults with hearing impairment. Such direct parent-teacher involvement is not common in Mongolia.

What happens after primary school
Primary school in Mongolia is 5 years. After this comes secondary school with more rigorous academic demands and different teachers in each subject. So the big question now is what will happen to the deaf children after completion of the 5-year primary cycle. At this point, it will not be realistic to expect that all subject teachers in the secondary school department would be willing, or able, to learn to communicate with the deaf students in ways that would permit them to follow the regular secondary education.

Right now teachers and parents consider at least two options: one is to enroll the children in the special school in the capital after completion of primary school, possibly with one or two years extension, and the other, is to start some vocational training courses for the children.

Employment
There are many deaf and hearing impaired people in the aimag. Before the transition period, it was more or less compulsory to send the hearing impaired children to the special school in the capital. After 10 years of school, a few were accepted at a vocational school but most of them returned to their homes with little possibility of being employed and left to help out by their family.

The teacher of the older class is preparing to set up vocational training and some business activities where the young deaf people can be employed once they have finished their basic school education.

Present problems
In two years, impressive achievements have been made by students, teachers and parents, but each success in some ways points to new problems which need to be solved to improve the program. The teachers list the most pressing problems as

* need for vocational training
* need for up-grading of teachers' sign language skill (several training levels needed)
* more sign language dictionaries
* teaching and learning materials for both classes
* establishment of more classes.

There are many children on the waiting list, but training of more teachers is needed to open new classes. Money to cover travel, accommodation and training expenses must be paid by the aimag school administration, but money is scarce and demands high.

The special school for deaf and blind children
The special school for the deaf and blind children in the capital is the only special school of its kind in Mongolia. It has an enrollment of about 500 children.

The deaf children have been taught through a traditional, rigid oral method with many hours spent at auditory and language training. A few years ago, sign language was introduced as a subject in 8th grade in connection with development of the sign language dictionary. The children, of course, have used signs to communicate among themselves and the most sensible teachers have learned to use signs outside the classroom, or even to support the oral method inside the classroom.

The school offers an eighth-year education (primary and secondary school) over a ten-year period. A modified version of the standard curriculum is followed. The deaf adults complain about the low achievement of the graduates from the school: "even though the school spends two extra years, it cannot manage to teach the children well enough so they may graduate at an appropriate level". Most of them do not have sufficient academic skills or exam results to be accepted at one of the vocational schools or no other skills which would help them to find employment.

Some deaf children from the capital now have to attend a pre-school program. This program is established as a special class or group in a regular 24-hour pre-school where the children attend the program from Monday morning to Friday afternoon. The special group for deaf children have no contact with the program for the other children because the teachers claim that the deaf children cannot communicate with the hearing children. The teachers do not know sign language but only the manual alphabet, so they communicate with the young deaf children through finger spelling, gestures and spoken language. So the deaf school beginners who have attended pre-school have not necessarily learned to communicate well but most of them do have the advantage of being day students or at least of having more frequent contact with their families. The deaf children from outside the capital area have no pre-school experience and have to stay at the school often for many months before they see their family again.

They are in the situation that Tulga's mother could not imagine for her son - far away from their home and family and with so limited communication skills that it is not possible to explain to these young children what is happening to them and when they will see their family again. It is difficult not to agree with Tulga's mother who could not understand how young children are expected to learn in this situation.

Indeed, the children at the special school do not learn in any way at the rate the children in the two new classes in Dornod have done.

The special teacher who has worked as a consultant to the program in Dornod has experienced the difference in achievement between the two groups. She has now become a head teacher of the special school and started to introduce some changes. From next year, sign language will be used as a mode of instruction from first grade and the standard curriculum for primary and secondary schools will also be used at the special school.

Special school versus special class in regular school
The special school in the capital and the two special classes at the regular school in the rural town are the two major school programs for deaf children in Mongolia. A comparison between the two programs may highlight some experiences about education of deaf children in a situation where parents have had no choices of programs, no access to early information and intervention, no advisory or support services.

Special school Special class

specially trained teachers (defectologists) teachers with limited special training

teachers with no experience in teaching in teachers with many years experience in

regular school teaching in regular schools

adapted curriculum standard curriculum

teacher expectation teacher expectation

only oral method accepted sign language and finger spelling encouraged

family often far away strong family support for most children

only with large group of children with both with deaf and hearing children

disabilities

separate from community part of the community

self image self image

No general conclusions can be made based on a two-year experience, but the involved teachers agree that the deaf children of the special class are doing better than their peers attending the special school with specialist teachers, in terms of academic achievement and likely also in social and personal development.

But we cannot know how the differences listed above or any other differences between the two groups may influence their academic achievements and general development without further quantitative and qualitative research.

Also it is not possible to know whether the special class children will continue to learn at the same rate as their hearing peers during the primary grades or whether their learning rate will slow down when more complex tasks and content areas are introduced in the standard curriculum.

# Experiences from Nepal

In Nepal as part of nationwide special needs education program also supported by Danida, more than 40 special classes for deaf children have been established in regular schools. Also in Nepal, very pragmatic approaches to development of the special classes have been used in order to begin to reach the aim of providing education to all deaf children.

Both in the special school and in the special classes many children have to stay at hostels because it is too difficult and too far for them to get to school each day. Also in Nepal, children come to school with no formal communication skills and no knowledge or no means of expressing this about themselves and their families and life situation.

Differences between the traditional special school approach and the special class approach are similar to the ones found in Mongolia.

* sign language and finger spelling are the mode of communication in the special classes while the oral tradition is first now being changed in the special schools. The teachers of the special classes have very limited knowledge of sign language and therefore depend on finger spelling and writing
* at the special school there is a three year preparatory period for development of communication skills
* teachers of the special classes are experienced primary teachers, but not specialist in the area of deafness
* teachers of the special classes start to teach their students according to the regular primary curriculum and their students are learning at a much faster rate than their peers at the special school

Like in Mongolia, a longitudinal study is needed to follow and compare achievement and development of students in the different types of educational programs to identify which factors may have special importance for differences in learning outcomes and personal development.

# Summary of observations from Mongolia and Nepal

Although no scientific research on development of communication in deaf children and young adults has been conducted in the two countries, a summary of the observations in both countries can be made.

Both in Mongolia and in Nepal the prevalence of hearing impairment and deafness is much higher than the prevalence in western countries. In neither countries are there ready access to prevention and treatment of many causes of hearing impairment. Furthermore, there is only very limited possibilities of receiving a well fitted hearing aid or to any kind of early educational and social intervention. Thus in both countries when opportunity for education is given and accepted by parents, deaf children come to school with very limited if any communication skills or most basic age-relevant knowledge about their own life situation. Most deaf children still have no access to education.

In the newly established special classes in both countries, it was taken for granted that sign language would be the mode of instruction. However, for several reasons the teachers of the new classes have very limited sign language skills:

* there is still no official sign language accepted by all deaf people in either country
* there is no (highly) qualified teachers of sign language
* the oral method has been used as the instructional mode for all deaf people who have had some education
* the oral tradition is still strong and even highly educated people in both countries do not realize that sign language is a real language
* there is only limited resources for training of teachers
* maybe most importantly, the need to give access to education for deaf children is so urgent that they cannot afford to wait

Therefore, experienced teacher with only very short training in sign language have started to teach their new deaf students in classes established in regular primary schools. They develop their own sign language and communication mode together with their students.

The interesting experiences are that the new students are so eager to learn to communicate that they very quickly acquire a functional mode of communication based on signs and extensive use of finger spelling. It is likely to assume that this communication is based on the spoken language, although no research has been done to prove this. However, both the Mongolian and the Nepalese children seem not only to learn effective communication very quickly in spite of the lack of early intervention and to learn to read and write much more quickly and efficiently than their peers at special schools in their own countries and in other more developed countries.

# Questions for research

The questions for research are many. A few spring to mind.

Why is it that deaf children in these situations seem to learn basic reading and writing skills more effectively than in the specialized programs? Or is it even true? Will the deaf children with good decoding skills also be able to develop their understanding of the content as their reading material become more difficult? Is it possible to teach deaf children about abstract concepts through reading and writing or will the early lack of communicative interaction show up at a later stage when understanding and application of written materials are expected.

Are good primary school teachers better able to teach basic reading and writing skills than the experts? If so why? What are advantages or disadvantages of special schools or special classes in regular schools for deaf children in developing countries ? How may we in the western world use some of the new experiences in developing countries? Do we want to?

Address: Birgit Dyssegaard, County of Copenhagen, 252 Kongevejen , DK 2830 Virum, Denmark fax: +45 45 85 14 49 ; e.mail: Dyssegaard@ibm.net

About the author: The author has worked as an external consultant to the Danish International Development Assistance (Danida) since 1985 and full time since 1993. Other professional experiences include: Consultant to Danish Ministry of Education; Adj. Professor New York University; Visiting Research Scholar to Gallaudet University; Chief Psychologist and Director of Dept. of Special Needs Education, County of Copenhagen

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