Exploring the collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants in regular and special education from the perspective of the teaching assistant

Name: Jurrian Nutma

Student number: s3804526

Supervisor and first assessor: dr. R. Tan

Second assessor: prof. J. Westberg

Abstract

Binnen het Nederlandse onderwijs geldt een grote vraag om het onderwijs inclusiever te maken. Om deze omschakeling te maken is een belangrijke rol voor onderwijsassistenten weggelegd. In dit onderzoek is de samenwerking tussen leerkrachten en onderwijsassistenten onderzocht en is er gekeken naar de verschillen en overeenkomsten tussen het regulier en speciaal basisonderwijs. De dataverzameling is gedaan aan de hand van semigestructureerde interviews (N = 5) en de data is vervolgens geanalyseerd door inhoudsanalyses. De resultaten geven een inzicht in hoe de onderwijsassistenten de samenwerking ervaren en wat voor behoeften ze hebben voor een goede samenwerking. Daarnaast worden overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen het regulier en speciaal basisonderwijs in kaart gebracht.

De samenwerking is in kaart gebracht aan de hand van de factoren: communicatie, deelname aan professionalisering, behoeften voor een goede samenwerking en de vergelijking tussen regulier en speciaal basisonderwijs. Op alle vier de aspecten maken onderwijsassistenten zowel positieve als uitdagende ervaringen mee. Zo kan de communicatie bemoeilijkt worden door een verschillende denkwijzen, wordt de onderwijsassistent niet uitbetaald voor deelname aan vergaderingen, voelt de controle vanuit de leerkracht als vervelend of wordt er enkel gewerkt met leerlingen met extra ondersteuningsbehoeften.

Op basis van deze factoren worden een aantal aanbevelingen gedaan en nadruk gelegd op verder onderzoek om de samenwerking tussen leerkrachten en onderwijsassistenten te bevorderen. Ook wordt geadviseerd de twee werelden van regulier en speciaal basisonderwijs dichter bij elkaar te brengen om uiteindelijk inclusiever onderwijs te verwezenlijken.

Introduction

National and International Perspectives on Inclusive Education

The international discussion on promoting greater inclusion in education has been ongoing for some time and is supported by organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU). This was first reflected in international law in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994. Hereafter followed the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Verenigde Naties, 2006), which states that inclusive education must be realized at all levels. In the Netherlands, the "Wet op Passend Onderwijs" (Rijksoverheid Nederland, 2019) was adopted to ensure more inclusion in Dutch education. Recently, the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which again emphasized and supported the importance of equal opportunities and inclusive education (Global Goals, 2024).

Inclusive education can be defined as the commitment to include more students with specific educational needs in regular education (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006). This manifests in improving and adapting classroom practices to the individual educational needs of children (Coates & Vickerman, 2008).

Within Dutch education, there is a multi-track educational system in which regular and special education are usually separate from each other. However, since 2019, there has been a desire to intensify the collaboration between regular and special education to achieve more inclusive education. This is in response to national and international legislation, which states that inclusive education must be realized at all levels.

Teachers currently find the implementation of more inclusive education challenging (Ledoux & Waslander, 2020). Recent research on the state of Dutch education indicates that the workload in education is high. Partly due to this high workload, the quality of Dutch education is under pressure. According to school leaders, the deployment of teaching

assistants (TAs) or other professionals is the best way to reduce workload (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2024). This view is supported by research showing that the use of TAs leads to a reduction in stress and workload for teachers (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011).

Research by Armstrong (2014) shows that the support teachers experience from the school can influence their attitudes towards inclusive education. This view is supported by research showing that the more teachers enjoyed their collaboration with support staff, the higher their sense of efficacy and the more effective they felt in socially involving and providing emotional support to students with special educational needs (Van Mieghem, Verschueren, & Struyf, 2022). From this, it can be concluded that in a more inclusive form of education, a crucial role is reserved for TAs (De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra, 2023).

Implications by deploying TAs

Despite this crucial role for TAs, research indicates that the role of TAs is under scrutiny. According to Giangreco (2010), there is an increasing demand for TAs to form more inclusive education. However, this research also reveals a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of TAs and the role they should play in the classroom.

Research by Sharma & Salend (2016) even suggests that the deployment of TAs has inadvertently contributed to undermining the goals of inclusive education. This could be because TAs cannot assume the role of a teacher, they hinder interactions between classmates, and they promote a stigmatizing view of dependency among students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Despite more positive results being found when TAs act as support teachers in the classroom, it is still evident that TAs attention is mainly focused on students with lower performance levels (Vogt, et al., 2022). This picture is reinforced by research from Blatchford et al. (2007), which suggests that TAs more often support cognitively weaker students, while the teacher instructs the rest of the class.

Recommendations by deploying TAs

Radford et al. (2015) provide several recommendations for shaping the role of TAs and how to deal with them. They suggest that TAs work best based on the principle of scaffolding, especially for students with SEN. The scaffolding model proposed by Radford et al. (2015) consists of three dimensions: repair, support, and heuristic. Particularly, this last aspect can pose difficulties as it involves modeling learning strategies by TAs to the students. One possible solution to this is for the teacher to demonstrate this during instruction in an early phase so that the TA can take over.

Additionally, teachers and TAs should attend joint training sessions for development and engage in conversations about the professionalization of education. This is also evident in the research by Douglas, Chapin & Nolan (2016), who emphasize the importance of adequate training for teaching assistants and a clear evaluation process that considers the perspectives of both TAs and teachers. Furthermore, this research highlights that teachers express the importance of training to adequately support TAs. These training sessions should be particularly targeted at teachers who frequently interact with TAs, such as those in special education.

To integrate TAs effectively within an educational team, it is crucial that the role of the TA is clearly defined for everyone within the team (Bennett, et al., 2021). In this way, TAs can collaborate well with teachers, thus enabling students to be supported as effectively as possible by the TA. This research also revealed that there are good interpersonal relationships between teachers and TAs. Interpersonal relationships are particularly high when there is meaningful collaboration. This is best achieved when teachers and TAs plan together, exchange ideas, problem-solve, and co-teach.

Collaboration between teachers and TAs

The collaboration of teachers and TAs are perceived as important by teachers. De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra (2023) mapped the collaboration between teachers and TAs. They found that both groups indicated that additional hands are necessary for providing inclusive education. The role of the TA is mainly focused on providing specific support to a student, allowing the teacher to continue with the lesson. Having a sparring partner and help with differentiation are also seen as significant advantages of having a TA. The collaboration between the teacher and the TA is described as very satisfactory in this study.

The collaboration between teachers and TAs is built on various factors. For the collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants, De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra (2023) identified several inhibiting and facilitating factors from the perspective of the TAs. The inhibiting factors mentioned include the lack of consultation between the teacher and them, not being on the same page, and the absence of a personal connection. The facilitating factors include working as a team, having good communication, making clear agreements, having a good personal connection, and mutual trust.

The relationship between teachers and TAs is crucial for effective collaboration. In a literature review, two recommendations are mentioned for maintaining and strengthening the relationship between teachers and TAs (Jackson et al., 2021). The first recommendation focuses on fully including TAs within the communication sphere of a school. Teachers in a study highlighted the importance of TAs attending meetings to stay well-informed about developments within the school. According to them, this would also lead to improved support from TAs to the students. However, it was also noted that TAs are often absent from meetings because these often take place outside their working hours (Butt, 2016a). Other research also emphasized the importance of good communication, stating that it is necessary to support inclusive educational practice (Groom & Rose, 2005).

Additionally, there are other skills important for teachers in guiding TAs. Wallace et al. (2001) found that effective communication by teachers was seen as an important skill in supervising TAs. This communication ranged from sharing student-related information to explaining the role of the TA in supporting individual students or small groups of students. Each of these findings underscores that the work and collaboration of teachers with TAs can be improved through enhanced communication. In addition to effective communication being important for the collaboration between the teacher and the TA, appreciation also plays a significant role.

The second recommendation shows that TAs feel more valued when their collaboration with the teacher is based on good teamwork (Jackson et al., 2021). Teachers and TAs should invest in developing a collaborative work environment to build mutually beneficial and effective working relationships. In research by Giangreco et al. (2001), the importance of regularly thanking TAs for their work is highlighted. This would improve collaborative relationships and ensure more appreciation for the TA. Devecchi & Rouse (2010) also describe the importance of this. After all, TAs take on a lot of work from teachers who often experience their job as having high work pressure.

A study examining collaborative relationships between teachers and TAs found that positive collaborative relationships contribute to a pleasant working atmosphere and promote an inclusive learning environment for both staff and students. It was found that effective professional relationships were crucial to ensuring students received high-quality educational experiences (Biggs et al., 2016). When teachers in the study showed that TAs were valued, welcomed, and needed, TAs felt a greater sense of inclusion. Seeking the opinions of TAs and encouraging their participation in meetings further facilitated positive, collaborative working relationships. The findings also emphasized the importance of schools facilitating and supporting collaboration between teachers and TAs.

Aim of this research

Research shows that effective collaboration between teachers and TAs is crucial for providing inclusive education (Jackson et al., 2021). Since inclusive education is currently limited in the Dutch education system, despite the desire for it, this study will investigate how the collaboration between teachers and TAs is functioning in both mainstream and special primary education. So far, little research has been done on this topic, and the existing research is mostly from the teachers' perspective. Research on inclusive education conducted from the perspective of the TA is often focused on the TA's pedagogical practices (Bowles, Radford & Bakopoulou, 2018).

To gain more insight into this collaboration in different areas of Dutch education, the following research question will be addressed: *How do teaching assistants collaborate with teachers in regular and special education in the North of the Netherlands?*

To answer this question, this research will further examine the collaboration between TAs and teachers in terms of communication and professional development. Additionally, it will identify when and how TAs perceive their collaboration with the teacher as positive and what the needs of the TAs are in this regard. Finally, the differences and similarities between regular and special education concerning collaboration and roles in the classroom will be analyzed. To answer these questions, a qualitative study will be conducted with TAs through interviews. This paper includes a description of the methodology, the results of the study, and finally, a discussion.

Methods

Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the differences and similarities in the collaboration between teachers and TAs in regular and special primary education in the Netherlands. To answer the research question, data were collected through

interviews and available literature. Qualitative research was chosen because this type of research provides in-depth insights into the experiences, perceptions, and dynamics of the collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants. Qualitative research allows for the exploration and understanding of complex aspects of collaboration that are not always possible with quantitative methods. Through interviews, this study has qualitatively acquired detailed and rich data that help identify the nuances in the working relationships and interactions between teachers and teaching assistants.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasize the ability of qualitative research to provide in-depth and context-specific insights that are crucial for understanding complex social phenomena, such as the collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants.

Population and sample

For this study, TAs from the northern region of the Netherlands participated. Respondents were recruited using a convenience sample from the researchers' personal network. Five TAs were interviewed for this research, one man and four women. Three of them were employed in regular primary education and two in special education. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 61 (M = 32.8), and their work experience ranged from 6 months to 20 years (M = 7.9). The educational backgrounds of the participants included Vocational Degree in Education Assistance Level 4[1] and Care Provider Specific Target Groups Level 4[2]. The three TAs working in regular education have completed the education Vocational Degree in Education and the two TAs working in special education Care Provider Specific Target Groups.

---

[1] Perform - in addition to caregiving tasks - simple, routine tasks. For example, guiding individual students or small groups of students.

[2] Providing supportive, activating guidance and care. Offering support to specific target groups.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Schools

TA	Place	Province	Type of education
1	Winschoten	Groningen	Public primary school
2	Steenwijk	Overijssel	Christian primary school
3	Groningen	Groningen	Catholic primary school
4	Groningen	Groningen	Christian special primary school
5	Groningen	Groningen	Christian special primary school

As shown in Table 1, this research included five TAs from three general primary schools and one special primary school (TA4 and TA5) located in the provinces of Groningen and Overijssel. These schools represented different types of education, including Catholic, Christian, and public.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Teaching Assistants

TA	Gender	Age	Degree	Years of experience	Working in grades
1	Man	35	Vocational Degree in Education Assistance Level 4	12	3-8

2	Woman	22	Vocational Degree in Education Assistance Level 4	3	1–5
3	Woman	61	Vocational Degree in Education Assistance Level 4	20	3-8
4	Woman	20	Care Provider Specific Target Groups Assistance Level 4	6 months	4-5
5	Woman	26	Care Provider Specific Target Groups Assistance Level 4	4	1-2

As indicated in Table 2, the research sample included both men (N = 1) and women (N = 4), totaling five participants. Their ages ranged from 20 to 61 years. Three out of the five TAs held the same qualification, a Vocational Degree in Education Assistance Level 4, while the other two had the Care Provider Specific Target Groups Assistance Level 4. The TAs' years of experience varied from six months to twenty years. The grades they worked in also varied, with some TAs working across nearly all grades and others working in just one grade.

Instruments

The interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured with pre-prepared open-ended questions (see Appendix A). In total, the interviews were conducted by five different researchers, and the transcripts were shared for processing according to the specific research question. The questions were formulated based on literature. The interview questions focused on various topics such as general information, role definition, giftedness, collaboration with the teacher, and differences between regular and special education. Objective general information was gathered through a pre-given form that the TAs could fill out. This form included questions about the participant's age and how long they had experience in education.

For the other topics, open-ended questions were used. For example, in the collaboration theme, the question "which strategies have you found most effective in collaboration with the teacher?" was asked (see Appendix A).

Analysis

For the content analysis, the online program Atlas.ti (2023) was used. The analysis employed a conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Based on the literature, several codes were pre-established, such as "extent of communication" and "participation in meetings and professional development."

The data coding process was conducted as follows. First, the interviews were transcribed based on the audio recordings and entered Atlas.ti (2023). Next, the interviews were read with the research question in mind. The focus was primarily on the parts of the interview concerning collaboration with the teacher and the difference between regular and special primary education. Then, the coding process began with open coding, where codes were created and potentially revised later. These codes were then categorized into sub-themes, which were subsequently grouped into overarching themes to create more clarity. The progression of this process is visually represented in a code tree (see Appendix D).

Throughout this process, continuous switching and comparisons were made between the different transcripts, based on the first two steps of the Constant Comparative Method (CCM; Boeije, 2002). This approach allowed for the adjustment and replacement of existing codes with new ones.

For example, the theme 'needs' emerged because in the open codes there was a lot of mention of various needs of TAs in their collaboration with the teacher. These open codes were then grouped into sub-themes such as 'autonomy' and 'expectations'. Finally, the different sub-themes were placed under the overarching theme 'needs'.

Procedure

Prior to participating in the study, the participants were informed about the research through a letter containing general information (see Appendix C). After giving an informal agreement to participate, the participants signed a consent form before the interview, in which they formally agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix B). The form clearly outlined the participants' rights, such as the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, before the interview, participants were reminded of their rights. Participants also filled out a form with general information before the interview. The interviews were conducted either at the schools where the TAs worked or online. The duration of the interviews ranged from 19 to 35 minutes. The interviews were conducted between March 22, 2024, and April 22, 2024.

Results

During the coding of the interviews, four different themes were defined. These four themes are 'communication between TAs and teachers,' 'level of involvement in meetings and professional development,' 'needs of the TAs regarding collaboration,' and 'comparison between regular and special primary education.' These four themes are further divided into 15 sub-themes. Examples of some sub-themes include frequency of communication, autonomy, and the role of the TA in comparing regular with special education. The sub-themes are constructed based on the different codes. The process can be seen in Figure 1 or in Appendix D.

Figure 1

Data structure: Codes, subthemes and Themes
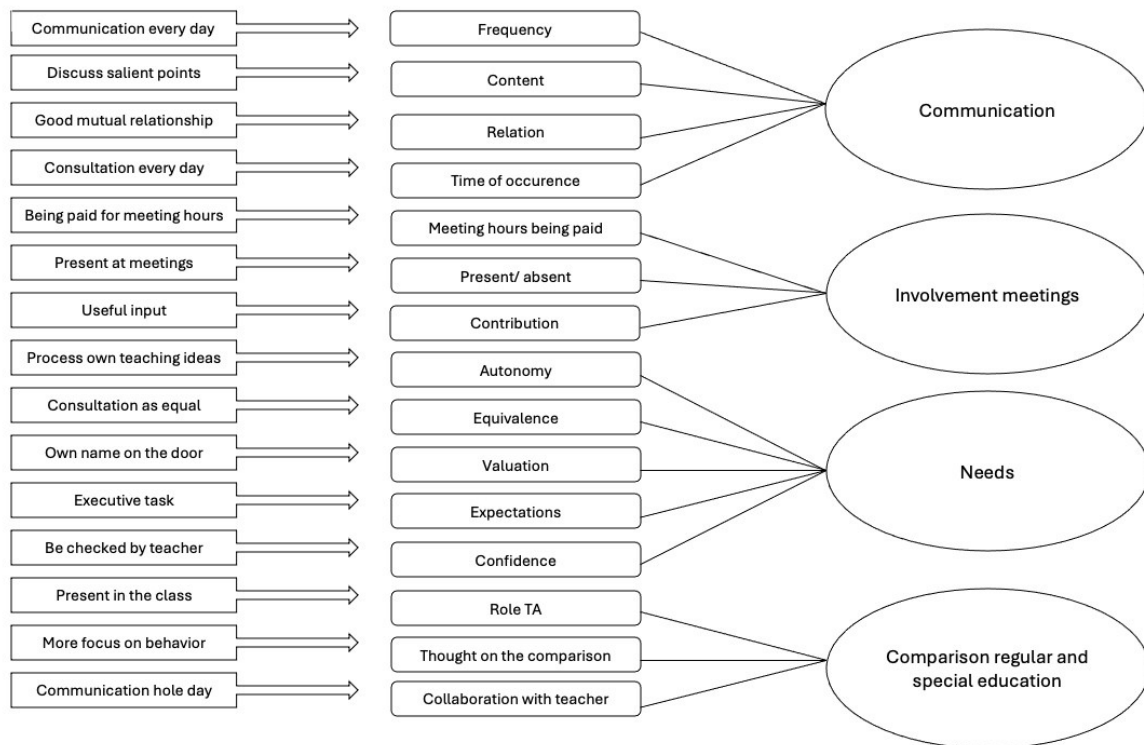
Communication between TAs and Teachers

As an important part of collaboration, this research focuses on the communication between TAs and teachers. Through the interview questions, communication is divided into aspects such as frequency, content, interpersonal relationship, and timing. TAs emphasize the importance of being able to communicate in a pleasant manner with teachers to foster a positive working atmosphere. Similarities are particularly evident in the frequency and content of communication. However, there are differences among TAs regarding interpersonal relationships and the timing of consultations.

Despite some differences of opinion all five interviewed TAs indicate that they currently have pleasant communication with the teacher and mention this as an important part of their work. The TAs appreciate having "short lines of communication" and being able to "discuss noticeable things." However, communication with a teacher can also be perceived as challenging: "communication with teachers, that's always a challenge" (TA1). The TAs find it

pleasant when there is a good rapport with the teacher and they can also have conversations about matters outside of work: "but I also just have contact with her, and ask what are you doing over the weekend?" (TA5). As a strategy for dealing with a less pleasant collaboration, the importance of continuing to communicate with each other and making everything open for discussion is mentioned.

> *"Well, I did have a conversation with my colleague about that. Like, you know, I just have a different perspective on certain things." (TA4)*

Communication between the TAs and teachers takes place both before, during, and after work. However, there are differences regarding until what time TAs are paid, which results in less time available for consultations after school for TA4 and TA5. Before the school day begins, the day is discussed, and the teacher expresses their expectations to the TA. The interviews reveal that much of the work is done in consultation, but the teacher usually takes the initiative.

> *"Yes, I think that really depends on the teacher. If the teacher likes it to happen that way, then I'll do it." (TA4)*

After the students go home, the TA and the teacher often discuss the day. The interviews show that this happens on both a cognitive and didactic level. The interviewed TAs indicate that they want to align their own instruction and actions as closely as possible with those of the teacher. "How a teacher explains it, that's how I do it too" (TA2). During the school day, meetings take place in the period between instruction and processing or during moments such as recess and outdoor play. During these times, TAs mainly discuss incidents and notable occurrences.

Degree of involvement in meetings and professional development

The involvement of TAs in meetings and professional development is seen as an important part of collaboration. This theme revolves around whether they attend, getting paid

for their hours, and how their input is evaluated. There are significant differences in the involvement of TAs in meetings and professional development among those interviewed. TAs are generally welcome at meetings, but there are variations in whether they are paid for attending. TAs cite the payment of these hours as a reason for deciding whether to attend meetings. Both TAs who attend and those who do not attend meetings find their input meaningful.TA1 and TA3 attend all meetings and training sessions and are paid for this time. TA2, TA4, and TA5 can decide for themselves whether to attend meetings but are not compensated for their time. They express that they find it unfortunate to have to miss the meetings and feel that they are less informed and less involved with the team.

> *"And I find that quite difficult because I do feel that sometimes I miss out on things. For example, on professional development days, a lot of interesting things are discussed. Yes, I just miss that now." (TA2)*

However, these three TAs mention that if they miss a meeting, they ask a colleague the next day for a brief summary of what was discussed. TA2 and TA4 also state that they read the minutes when they have not been present. Additionally, TA1, TA2, and TA5 indicate that they find it important to be present because they believe their input can be of added value.

> *"Yes, that is definitely something that can be done. And that's simply because, as a teaching assistant, you are the one working with the students. So you know the students. I work with these students more often than the teacher does. So from my experience, I would say I know the student... maybe even better or just as well as the teacher does. So having that input as a teaching assistant... seems absolutely essential in education." (TA1)*

For professional development in the form of training and study days, all five TAs are expected to attend and are compensated for their time. TA5 notes, "so it is very important to continue developing yourself."

16

Needs of TAs regarding collaboration

To facilitate effective collaboration, TAs have different needs. The overarching needs for a positive collaboration mentioned by TAs in the interviews include autonomy, equality, expectations, appreciation, and trust. Particularly regarding expectations, appreciation, and trust, there are many similarities among the TAs. They indicate a need for these aspects to foster effective collaboration. Autonomy and equality are seen as important needs, especially by the more experienced TAs (TA1, TA3, and TA5).

According to the TAs, a pleasant collaboration is characterized by "clear expectations," "trust from the teacher," "a need for equality in communication" and "short lines of communication".

> *"Well, on equal footing. I mean, the teacher is, of course, more educated,*
> *so to speak. So I think, I don't interfere with that, I don't know about that.*
> *But in terms of equality, in terms of talking and things like that." (TA3)*

TA1, TA3, and TA5 additionally appreciate having some autonomy in their support of the students, such as implementing lesson formats. These TAs express a desire for freedom: "they give me more freedom in that regard, and I must say that I find it pleasant" (TA1). TA2 and TA4 indicate that they find it more pleasant when the teacher has clear expectations of them, so they can adjust their work accordingly and act upon those expectations.

TA5 indicates a need for more hours to complete the work fully and to be present at meetings. The interviews reveal that TAs also find it pleasant to work with a fixed schedule and daily planning. The TAs indicate that this provides clarity on what they will do in a day and what is expected of them.

"At the beginning of the school year, we sat down together and discussed 'this and that is what you could do,' and just a few weeks ago, the program changed. Then we sat down again and discussed 'oh, now you can do it this way,' and we made a new plan." (TA2)

All the interviewed TAs except TA2 mention having experienced less pleasant collaborations in the past. They all find it unpleasant when they feel overly monitored or corrected by a teacher. "When I am working with children, they sometimes interfere, and I find that very annoying" (TA3).

"Oh, oh, oh. Yes, there was one teacher I worked with. Or actually not really, but I worked with her two days a week. And she was very, she was such a micromanager." (TA5)

Comparison of regular and special primary education

To compare regular and special primary education regarding the collaboration between teachers and TAs, the study examined their roles in the classroom, TAs' general perspectives on the comparison, and how the collaboration is structured. The research revealed several similarities and differences in the collaboration between TAs in regular and special primary education. Similarities include the frequency of meetings and the discussion of notable issues. The differences primarily focus on the approach of TAs. In regular education, their focus is mainly on the didactic development of children, whereas in special education, it is more on the behavior of the students. TAs in regular education also work more frequently outside the classroom, whereas TAs in special education almost always work within the classroom.

In both settings, teachers take the initiative and guide the TAs. The TAs in both regular and special primary education primarily have an executing role. All TAs reported that dealing with disruptive behavior is the most challenging aspect of their work. The two TAs

from special primary education noted that they must intervene in disruptive behavior more frequently, making it a larger part of their job.

> *"But if I look at the intern, for example, yes, he sometimes pushes her or pulls on her clothes. That is not okay. And I find that difficult. Then I think, oh yeah, what if that happens to me? Can I handle it the right way?" (TA4)*

According to the TAs in regular education, collaboration is primarily important for aligning instructional methods. In special primary education, the focus is more on managing behavior. When asked about the difference between regular and special primary education, all TAs agreed that work in regular education is more focused on supporting cognitive skills, while in special primary education, it is more behavior oriented.

> *"Yes, here it is more didactic, and there it is more about behavior. Of course, also with arithmetic and reading and things like that, but overall, you are more focused on behavior." (TA3)*

The TAs in regular education mentioned that they often spend multiple times a day outside the classroom with a group of students who need extra support. In contrast, the TAs in special education reported that their work mostly takes place within the classroom

Discussion

This exploratory study focuses on the collaboration between teachers and TAs in mainstream and special primary education from the TAs' perspective. Based on this collaboration and comparison, it aims to identify factors that are beneficial for transitioning towards more inclusive education. The discussion will compare the significance of the findings with existing literature. This will lead to a conclusion that addresses the research question. Finally, limitations and opportunities for further research will be discussed, and recommendations will be made based on this study and the literature.

Because there has been limited research on the collaboration between teachers and TAs from the perspective of TAs, the results cannot be fully compared with the existing literature. However, the results do align with expectations. The basic needs for a good collaboration, positive interactions and mutual trust, are the same for both groups. This would also enhance the quality of education (Biggs et al., 2016). This view is shared by the TAs.

The collaboration between teachers and TAs manifests in various ways. Effective communication is crucial for a good collaboration. According to the TAs, it increases job satisfaction and the quality of education. This finding aligns with previous research by Biggs et al. (2016). However, TAs also highlight communication with the teacher as a significant challenge, especially when it does not go smoothly. TAs find it beneficial when there are short lines of communication and when misunderstandings can be discussed openly and equally with the teacher.

Most communication occurs with the group teacher and continues throughout the day. The research indicates that TAs primarily have an executive role, which is also reflected in the collaboration. The teacher often assigns a task, which the TA then carries out. This leads to another communication moment due to the discussion that takes place afterward. TAs value this moment, which is also supported by previous research (De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra, 2023).

In addition to teachers finding, it beneficial to have TAs involved and present at meetings (Butt, 2016a), TAs themselves also express this. Bennett et al. (2021) indicate that meaningful collaboration contributes to a good working relationship between teachers and TAs. Furthermore, this involvement makes TAs feel part of the team, which is something they desire. For successful integration, it is also important that the role of the TA is clearly defined for all parties involved.

The TAs themselves do not comment on the implications of employing TAs as described in the introduction. However, TAs in regular education indicate that they mainly help students with additional educational support. This aligns with the findings of Vogt et al. (2022).

A notable result from the research is that four out of five TAs reported having or having had an unsatisfactory collaboration with a teacher. This underscores the importance of continuing to invest in the relationship between teachers and TAs, as it can impact the quality of education, which would ultimately affect the students. Additionally, the expectations of TAs regarding their own role in lessons and teaching methods seem to vary. Less experienced TAs prefer more guidance from the teacher, while more experienced TAs desire to have their own input in daily teaching practices. This is something teachers should be aware of and consider in their collaboration with TAs.

The results of this research have shown that the collaboration between teachers and TAs is of tremendous importance. Additionally, TAs from regular education and special primary education can learn a lot from each other and improve their work practices. In inclusive education, there will be more focus on specific behaviors, where the knowledge of TAs from special primary education is highly valuable. Working in the classroom, a goal within inclusive education, is already common in special primary education. However, working with groups of different cognitive levels is something TAs in regular primary education have more experience with. It would be beneficial to bring these two areas together.

Conclusion

This study examined the collaboration between TAs and teachers, with a particular focus on identifying differences and similarities between regular and special education. The aim was to gain insight into factors that could be beneficial for the transition to more

inclusive education. To further transition towards inclusive education in the Netherlands, TAs are crucially needed. The collaboration between teachers and TAs is paramount for effectively structuring education (De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra, 2023). This is best achieved through fostering frequent communication between teachers and TAs, organizing moments for peer supervision, ensuring TAs' presence in meetings and training sessions with appropriate compensation, and promoting clear and equitable communication from teachers. In addition, TAs need trust and appreciation to perform their tasks effectively. TAs find it beneficial when there are clear expectations from the teacher. Depending on the TA's experience, there is a need for autonomy and equality.

Both forms of education, regular and special, can learn a lot from each other. TAs in special education are more present in the classroom and more focused on all students. TAs in regular education primarily assist students with additional support needs. TAs in special education mainly focus their communication with teachers on behavior. However, more discussion could be had about didactic development to better support students in this way as well.

Recommendations

Based on this research and the available literature, several recommendations can be made to optimize the collaboration between teachers and TAs. These recommendations are aimed at improving and strengthening the relationship and collaboration between teachers and TAs.

First, it is crucial to involve TAs in meetings and training sessions and to compensate them for their participation. Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan (2016) emphasize the importance of involving TAs in meetings and highlight the significant value of evaluating from both the teacher's and TA's perspectives. Additionally, participation contributes to appreciation for the

TA's role within the team. TAs feel more valued when collaboration is based on effective teamwork (Jackson et al., 2021).

Second, TAs should spend more time in the classroom to support students. This allows them to connect with all students and better implement the teacher's instructional strategies. According to Blatchford et al. (2007), this positively contributes to the approach of TAs in the classroom. This allows TAs to have more interaction with different children and facilitates the adoption of instructional strategies for classroom use. The research also indicates that TAs in regular education particularly assist students with additional support needs. Conversely, Butt (2016) advocates for integrating these students into additional teacher instruction. TAs can then focus on students who already grasp the material but may have occasional questions or uncertainties.

Third, all teachers and TAs should undergo training on how to interact with each other and how to express their expectations. Such training will clarify mutual expectations, enabling all parties to act accordingly. None of the TAs in the study indicated that the teachers they work with have received training for supervising a TA. According to Douglas, Chapin, & Nolan (2016), it is highly recommended for teachers to undergo such training to effectively supervise TAs. This research also shows that teachers themselves express a need for this training.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. The sample used in this study is relatively small, which could distort the results. Additionally, both TAs from special primary education work at the same school. The study is quantitative and utilized an open-ended questionnaire, which is only partially based on literature due to its limited availability. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted by five different individuals without training. Finally, the interviews only

include respondents working at schools in the northern part of the Netherlands. This limits the generalizability of the findings to the rest of the Netherlands and other parts of the world.

Further Research

This study can serve as a basis for further research. As previously mentioned, TAs play an important role in the transition to inclusive education (De Boer, Tenback & Bijstra, 2023). The role of the TA in this process could be further investigated. This could also include examining whether there is a need for a different way of collaboration between the teacher and the TA. The research indicates that TAs in regular primary education primarily support students with additional educational needs. This view is supported by earlier research (Butt, 2016).

It would be interesting to explore whether they do this on their own initiative or at the teacher's direction. Further research on this topic would be valuable. While this study describes the collaboration between teachers and TAs in regular and special primary education, additional research could be conducted on the role of TAs within different types of education and the factors that enhance or hinder their effectiveness. Findings from the UK identified 'marked and productive changes' (Blatchford, Webster, and Russell 2011) resulted when TAs were deployed to facilitate student learning while teachers focused on providing learning support for all students. More research could also be conducted in the Netherlands to better align the collaboration between teachers and TAs.

References

Ainscow, M., Booth, T., & Dyson, A. (2006). Improving Schools, Developing

    Inclusion. *Abingdon: Routledge.*

Armstrong, D. (2014). Educator perceptions of children who present with social, emotional

    and behavioural difficulties: A literature review with implications for recent

    educational policy in England and internationally. *International Journal of Inclusive*

    Education, 18(7), 731-745.

ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2023). ATLAS.ti Mac (version

    23.2.1) [Qualitative data analysis software]. https://atlasti.com

Bennett, S., Gallagher, T., Somma, M., & White, R. (2021). Transitioning towards

    inclusion: a triangulated view of the role of educational assistants. *Journal of*

    Research in Special Educational Needs, 21(2), 187-197.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12508

Biggs, E. E., Gilson, C. B., & Carter, E. W. (2016). Accomplishing more together: Influences

    to the quality of professional relationships between special educators and

    paraprofessionals. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 41*(4),

    256-272.

Blatchford, P., Russell, A., & Webster, R. (2011). Reassessing the Impact of Teaching

    Assistants: How research challenges practice and policy (1st ed.). *Routledge*.

    https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203151969

Blatchford, P., A. Russell, P. Bassett, P. Brown, & C. Martin. (2007). The Role and

    Effects of Teaching Assistants in English Primary Schools (Years 4–6) 2000–

    2003. *British Educational Research Journal, 33*(1), 5–26.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920601104292

Boeije, H. (2002). A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the

    Analysis of Qualitative Interviews. *Quality And Quantity, 36*(4), 391–409.

    https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1020909529486

Bowles, D., Radford, J., & Bakopoulou, I. (2018). Scaffolding as a Key Role for Teaching

    Assistants: Perceptions of Their Pedagogical Strategies. *British Journal of*

    Educational Psychology, 88(3), 499–512.   https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12197

Butt, R. (2016). Employment procedures and practices challenge teacher assistants in

    mainstream schools. *School Leadership & Management, 36(*1), 63–79.

Butt, R. (2016a). Teacher assistant support and deployment in mainstream schools.

    International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20(9), 995–1007.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145260

Coates, J., & Vickerman, P. (2008). Let the children have their say: children with special

    educational needs and their experiences of physical education – a review. *Support for*

    Learning, 23(4), 168-175.

De Boer, A. A., Tenback, C., & Bijstra, J. O. (2023). Op naar geïntegreerde

    onderwijsvoorzieningen: beleids- en praktijkonderzoek. Groningen:

    Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Basiseenheid Orthopedagogiek: Leren &

    Ontwikkelen / Regionaal Expertisecentrum Noord Nederland, cluster 4.

Devecchi, C., & Rouse, M. (2010). An exploration of the features of effective

    collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants in secondary schools.

    Support for Learning, 27(2), 171–184.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research.

    Sage.

Douglas, S. N., Chapin, S. E., & Nolan, J. F. (2016). Special Education Teachers'

    Experiences Supporting and Supervising Paraeducators: Implications for Special and

    General Education Settings. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 39*(1), 60–74.

Giangreco, M. F. (2010). Utilization of teacher assistants in inclusive schools: Is it the

    kind of help that helping is all about? *European Journal of Special Needs Education,*

    25(4), 341–345.

Giangreco, M. F., Broer, S. M., & Suter, J. C. (2011). Guidelines for selecting alternatives to

    overreliance on paraprofessionals: Field-testing in inclusion-oriented schools.

    Remedial and Special Education, 32(1), 22–38.

Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., Broer, S. M., & Doyle, M. (2001). Paraprofessional

    support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional*

    Children, 68(1), 45–63.

Groom, B., & Rose, R. (2005). Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and

    behavioural difficulties in the primary school: The role of teaching assistants. *Journal*

    of Research in Special Educational Needs, 5(1),   20–30.

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis.

    Qualitative Health Research, 15(9), 1277–1288.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Inspectie van het onderwijs. (2024). De Staat van het Onderwijs 2024. Retrieved March 17,

    2024, from

    https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/documenten/rapporten/2024/04/17/rapport-de-

    staat-van-het-onderwijs-2024

Jackson, C., Sharma, U., Odier-Guedj, D., & Deppeler, J. (2021). Teachers'

    Perceptions of Their Work with Teacher Assistants: A Systematic Literature

    Review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 46*(11).

Ledoux, G., & Waslander, S. (m.m.v. Eimers, T.) (2020). Evaluatie passend onderwijs. Eindrapport.

Radford, J., Bosanquet, P., Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. (2015). Scaffolding learning for independence: Clarifying teacher and teaching assistant roles for children with special educational needs. *Learning and Instruction, 36*, 1-10.

Rijksoverheid Nederland. (2019). Doelen passend onderwijs.

Sharma, U., & Salend, S. (2016). Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Classrooms: A Systematic Analysis of the International Research. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(8).

The Global Goals. (2024, January 23). Goal 4: Quality education. The Global Goals. Retrieved June 26, 2024, from https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/

Van Mieghem, A., Verschueren, K., Struyf, E. (2022). Samen bouwen aan meer inclusief onderwijs: relevante inzichten voor de lerarenopleiding. *Tijdschrift voor lerarenopleiders, 43*(1), 54-65. ISSN 1876-4622.

Verenigde Naties. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol. Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly.

Vogt, F., Koechlin, A., Truniger, A., & Zumwald, B. (2022). Teaching assistants and teachers providing instructional support for pupils with SEN: Results from a video study in Swiss classrooms. In F. Vogt, A. Koechlin, A. Truniger, & B. Zumwald (Eds.), Teaching Assistants, Inclusion and Special Educational Needs (pp. 125-142). *Routledge*.

Wallace, T., Shin, J., Bartholomay, T., & Stahl, B. J. (2001). Knowledge and skills for teachers supervising the work of paraprofessionals. Exceptional Children, 67(4), 520–533.

Appendix A

Vragen	Doorvragen
Algemene vragen	
Zou u uzelf kort kunnen introduceren?	
Hoe lang werkt u al als onderwijsassistent Hoelang heeft u gestudeerd om onderwijsassistent te worden Hoe zou u leerlingen met extra ondersteuningsbehoeften beschrijven?	Wat voor diploma's heeft u Wanneer heeft u geleerd voor onderwijsassistent
Hoe ziet een dag als onderwijsassistent er voor u uit?	Zou u daar wat meer over kunnen vertellen? Wat zijn taken die u doet? Vinden deze taken zich meer binnen of buiten de klas plaats?
Hoe ziet u uw rol in de klas?	Hoe ziet die rol eruit voor leerlingen met extra ondersteuningsbehoeften? Hoe ziet die rol eruit voor leerlingen zonder die behoeften?
Wat ziet u als competenties die u als onderwijsassistent gebruikt?	Hoe komen die terug in uw dagelijks werk met leerlingen met extra ondersteuningsbehoeften? En hoe ziet dit met leerlingen zonder die extra behoeften?
Wat zijn algemene uitdagingen die u tegenkomt als onderwijsassistent? *10 minuten*	Hoe komen die terug in uw dagelijks werk met leerlingen met extra ondersteuningsbehoeften? En hoe komt dit terug bij leerlingen zonder die extra behoeften?
Onderzoek laat zien dat onderwijsassistenten vooral ingezet worden bij leerlingen die achterlopen of extra ondersteuning nodig hebben, wat vind u van leerlingen ondersteunen die juist meer uitdaging nodig hebben of hoogbegaafd zijn?	
Hoe ziet uw samenwerking met de leerkracht eruit?	Hoe ziet een bespreking er tussen jullie uit en hoe frequent komt dit voor? Wat verwacht u van de samenwerking en begeleiding?

Indien u in zowel regulier als speciaal onderwijs werkzaam bent geweest, welke verschillen merkt u in uw werkzaamheden?	
Hoogbegaafdheid	
Begeleid u momenteel leerlingen die hoogbegaafd zijn?	
Wat heeft u nodig om hoogbegaafde en getalenteerde leerlingen te begeleiden?	Wie moet in die benodigdheden voorzien? School? Leerkracht?
Zou u leerlingen die meer uitdaging nodig hebben anders begeleiden dan leerlingen die meer ondersteuning nodig hebben?	
Hoogbegaafde leerlingen kunnen gedragsproblemen hebben zoals sociale afzondering, hoe zou u deze leerlingen begeleiden?	
Hoogbegaafde leerlingen kunnen dyslexie hebben. Dit zorgt voor veel frustratie. Ze kunnen zich dan incompetent voelen. Hoe zou u deze leerlingen begeleiden?	
Samenwerking met de leerkracht	
In welke mate bent u betrokken bij professionalisering binnen het team, zoals vergaderingen of trainingen?	
Wat zijn de belangrijkste uitdagingen bij het samenwerken met leraren?	Bijvoorbeeld: als de leraar de neiging heeft om alles zelf te willen doen en aarzelt om taken te delegeren?
En, hoe gaat u daarmee om?	Hoe ga je om met meningsverschillen of verschillende benaderingen tussen jou en de leraar als het gaat om het ondersteunen van de behoeften van diverse leerlingen?
Welke strategieën heeft u het meest effectief gevonden in samenwerking met de leerkracht (om te voldoen aan de behoeften van diverse leerlingen)?	Kun je een voorbeeld delen waarin jij als onderwijsassistent met de leerkracht samenwerkt om leerlingen te helpen leren?
Hoe belangrijk vindt u het dat een onderwijsassistent inbreng heeft bij het plannen en uitvoeren van lessen of lesdelen?	Kun je voorbeelden geven waarin jouw inbreng een verschil heeft gemaakt?

Appendix B

TOESTEMMINGSFORMULIER

"Exploring teaching assistants' role and collaboration with main teachers in Dutch special schools "

PED-2324-S-0053

- Ik heb de informatie over het onderzoek gelezen en de gelegenheid gehad hierover vragen te stellen.

- Ik begrijp waar het onderzoek over gaat, wat er van mij wordt gevraagd, welke consequenties deelname kunnen hebben, hoe mijn gegevens zullen worden behandeld en wat mijn rechten als deelnemer zijn.

- Ik begrijp dat deelname aan het onderzoek vrijwillig is. Ik kies er zelf voor om deel te nemen. Ik kan op elk moment stoppen met deelnemen. Als ik besluit te stoppen, hoef ik niet uit te leggen waarom. Stoppen met deelname zal geen negatieve gevolgen voor mij hebben. Ik begrijp dat na de hieronder aangegeven geldigheidsdatum de toestemming onmiddellijk wordt ingetrokken en alle gegevens worden verwijderd.
- Omdat voor dit project mijn persoonlijke gegevens nodig zijn, moet ik daar apart toestemming voor geven.
- Hieronder geef ik aan waar ik toestemming voor geef.

Toestemming om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek:
[ ] Ja, ik stem ermee in om deel te nemen, deze toestemming is geldig tot   28-05-2024
[ ] Nee, ik geef geen toestemming om deel te nemen

Toestemming om audio-opnames te maken tijdens het onderzoek
[ ] Ja, ik stem ermee in om audio-opnames van mij te maken tijdens het onderzoek
[ ] Nee, ik geef geen toestemming om audio-opnames van mij te maken

Volledige naam deelnemer:	Handtekening deelnemer:	Datum:

Volledige naam van de aanwezige onderzoeker:	Handtekening onderzoek:	Datum:

De onderzoeker verklaart dat de deelnemer uitgebreide informatie over het onderzoek heeft ontvangen.

U heeft recht op een kopie van dit toestemmingsformulier

Appendix C

"Het verkennen van de rol van onderwijsassistenten en de samenwerking met leerkrachten binnen speciale scholen in Nederland"

PED-2324-S-0053

Waarom ontvang ik deze informatie?

U wordt uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan dit bachelorproefschriftproject. Het onderzoeksproject heeft als doel onderwijsassistenten en hun rollen en hun samenwerking met leerkrachten in Nederlandse speciale scholen te onderzoeken. Dit bachelorproefschriftproject wordt begeleid door professor Run Tan. Vijf bachelorstudenten zullen hun bachelorscripties schrijven binnen dit project. Alle betrokkenen bij het onderzoek zijn afkomstig van de faculteit Gedrags- en Maatschappijwetenschappen van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Het project start aan het begin van februari en zal worden afgerond eind juni 2024.

Moet ik deelnemen aan dit onderzoek?

Deelname aan het onderzoek is vrijwillig. Echter, uw toestemming is nodig. Lees daarom deze informatie zorgvuldig door. Schroom niet om vragen te stellen indien iets onduidelijk is. Pas daarna beslist u of u wilt deelnemen. Als u besluit om niet deel te nemen, hoeft u niet uit te leggen waarom en er zullen geen negatieve gevolgen voor u zijn. U heeft te allen tijde dit recht, ook nadat u heeft ingestemd om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek.

Waarom dit onderzoek?

Onderwijsassistenten worden steeds vaker ingezet om de inclusie van leerlingen met verschillende behoeften te ondersteunen in algemene of speciale schoolsituaties. Dit project beoogt te onderzoeken hoe Nederlandse onderwijsassistenten hun rollen definiëren en hoe zij samenwerken met leerkrachten in speciale schoolsituaties. Dit zal helpen om het begrip en de kennis van student-leerkrachten over onderwijsassistenten te vergroten, een groep die zelden is onderzocht in de Nederlandse context. Daarnaast zal het ook waardevolle inzichten opleveren die essentieel zijn voor het ontwikkelen van richtlijnen voor een alomvattende definitie van de rollen van onderwijsassistenten in speciale onderwijsomgevingen. Dit draagt bij aan het overbruggen van de kloof tussen onderzoek en praktijk, zowel op nationaal als internationaal niveau.

Wat vragen we van u tijdens het onderzoek?

Er zal een eenmalig interview worden afgenomen dat ongeveer 30 minuten duurt. Het interview zal worden opgenomen op een recorder voor gegevensverzameling. Het interview zal bestaan uit vragen zoals 'hoe ziet uw dag eruit als onderwijsassistent' of 'hoe communiceert u met de leerkracht', met als doel te onderzoeken hoe u uw rol als onderwijsassistent definieert en hoe u samenwerkt met de leerkracht.

Wat zijn de gevolgen van deelname?

Uw deelname aan het project zal bijdragen aan een beter begrip van en kennis over onderwijsassistenten, als een belangrijke groep professionals die de dagelijkse leerervaring van leerlingen met verschillende behoeftes in speciale omgevingen ondersteunen. Dit is vooral waardevol omdat kennis over deze groep sterk ontbreekt in onderzoek, beleid en praktijk in de Nederlandse context. Het zal ook het publiek helpen om enig begrip te krijgen van de rollen van onderwijsassistenten en hoe zij samenwerken met de leerkrachten. Dit zal toekomstige leraren en andere professionals informeren over hoe ze beter kunnen samenwerken met onderwijsassistenten om zo de inclusie van leerlingen met verschillende behoeften beter te kunnen ondersteunen.

Hoe zullen we uw gegevens behandelen?

De interviewgegevens zullen alleen worden gebruikt om de bachelorscripties te schrijven voor onze vijf studenten die bij het project betrokken zijn. Dit betekent dat de informatie enkel zal worden verzameld, voorbereid en geanalyseerd door onze vijf bachelorstudenten. De interviewgegevens en transcripties worden opgeslagen in een nieuwe 'Y'-opslagmap van de universiteit die is aangemaakt door de hoofdonderzoeker en alleen de vijf studenten en de hoofdonderzoeker hebben er toegang toe. Ondertussen hebben alle deelnemers recht op inzage, rectificatie en verwijdering van hun persoonlijke gegevens tot de datum waarop de deelnemers anoniem worden gemaakt. Eind juni, wanneer het project is afgerond, worden alle interviewgegevens verwijderd. De deelnemers aan het interview zullen niet naar hun echte naam worden gevraagd tijdens het verzamelen van de gegevens, maar tijdens het transcriberen en analyseren van de transcripties van het interview zullen we een andere kleur toekennen aan elke individuele leerkracht (bijv. rood aan leerkracht één, zwart aan leerkracht twee) als pseudoniem om uw identiteit te beschermen, maar tegelijkertijd kunnen we de kleur later koppelen aan de individuele leerkracht om later uw persoonlijke gegevens te herleiden en te verwijderen.

Als u geïnteresseerd bent in deelname aan dit onderzoek, neem dan gerust contact op met Run Tan door een e-mail te sturen naar r.tan@rug.nl.

Appendix D

Open codes (examples)	Sub themes	Themes

Open codes:
- Communication every day
- Discuss salient points
- Good mutual relationship
- Consultation every day
- Being paid for meeting hours
- Present at meetings
- Useful input
- Process own teaching ideas
- Consultation as equal
- Own name on the door
- Executive task
- Be checked by teacher
- Present in the class
- More focus on behavior
- Communication hole day

Sub themes:
- Frequency
- Content
- Relation
- Time of occurence
- Meeting hours being paid
- Present/ absent
- Contribution
- Autonomy
- Equivalence
- Valuation
- Expectations
- Confidence
- Role TA
- Thought on the comparison
- Collaboration with teacher

Themes:
- Communication
- Involvement meetings
- Needs
- Comparison regular and special education