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Co-teaching that works: special and general educators' perspectives on collaboration

Maryann Jortveit and Velibor Bobo Kovač

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ABSTRACT

There are surprisingly few studies analysing collaboration between special and general educators that has been proven to work well. The aim of the present study is to explore the perspectives of special and general educators on their collaborative efforts on teaching pupils who receive special education assistance. The study adopts a qualitative approach where interviews with eight educators have been analysed to identify underlying processes and mechanisms that are characteristic of successful collaboration between these two educational professions. The sampling was purposive and only educators who have been found to have achieved successful collaboration in the past were invited to participate. Three main themes emerged during the analysis: a meta-analytic approach to teaching, mutual recognition and enthusiasm, and inclusive education teaching. The overall conclusion of the findings indicates that successful collaboration is embedded in the type of instruction that supports the basic premises of inclusive education and appreciation of diversity. Educational professionals who are willing to come closer to one another in terms of their practice and professional identities are better equipped to succeed in co-teaching situations.

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Introduction

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are increasingly taking part in mainstream education in many different cultural contexts (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Clark, Dyson, & Millward, 2018; Florian & Linklater, 2010). However, numerous challenges have arisen in connection with general teachers' competencies when it comes to teaching children with SEND, and more importantly accommodating the existing curricula to their needs and abilities (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2019). Thus, over the years it has become apparent that the diversity of learning abilities and needs requires pedagogical and instructional knowledge and skills that are above the training general teachers currently have (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Hedegaard-Sørensen & Tetler, 2011). One way to overcome this challenge is to develop and analyse collaborative partnerships between special and general educators in terms of teaching, curriculum planning and role divisions (Nilsen, 2017). This is a logical step considering that such interdisciplinary collaboration between somewhat

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different professions is claimed to be a prerequisite for inclusive education (Hedegaard-Sørensen, Riis Jensen, & Børglum Tofteng, 2018). Consequently, the issue of collaboration between general and special educators has lately received a considerable amount of attention in research (Cook & Friend, 2010; Cramer, 2010; Easen, Atkins, & Dyson, 2000; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2016; Van Garderen et al., 2012). The research findings support the obvious common-sense value of a collaborative approach and it is virtually impossible to find voices explicitly stating that collaboration between special and general educators is a bad idea. In other words, research shows that collaborating on and sharing experiences of practices between different professions in school tends to have positive outcomes in terms of performances for both pupils and teachers (Cook & Friend, 2010; Easen et al., 2000). For example, Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) have found value in collaboration when it comes to increased co-teaching competence relating to pupils with special needs, and consequently greater learning outcomes for all pupils. The general idea underlying collaboration is that both general and special educators should minimise teaching as an isolated one-person practice and reinforce educational practices and classroom organisation that support joint work as a part of their standard professional obligations (Lindqvist, Nilholm, Almqvist, & Wetso, 2011). Some authors even go so far as to emphasize the importance of collaboration and call it a 'twenty-first-century skill' that is essential for educational engagement and learning (Weinberger & Shonfeld, 2018, p. 127).

However, even though research recognises the common-sense value of a collaborative approach and provides encouraging empirical support for this idea, a number of challenges in the collaboration between different types of educational professions has been identified. More specifically, studies in contemporary literature examining the nature of this collaboration report that special and general educators hold somewhat different perceptions on inclusive practice (Bruster, 2014), collaboration is mostly limited or informal (Daniels, 2017), data supporting collaboration is still relatively weak or inconclusive (Van Garderen et al., 2012), or simply that collaboration represents a bad practice (Nilsen, 2017). Several other issues are also mentioned, for instance, Gillespie (2016) reports a lack of practices connected to planning, implementation or assessment due to the absence of established procedures and resources. Other scholars (Noonan, McCormick, & Heck, 2003) point out the importance of having a common knowledge base and theoretical underpinning between special and general educators because they have different professional backgrounds (Molander & Terum, 2008) or cultures (Bovbjerg, 2006). The lack of a common epistemological background is probably related to detected value tensions within the relation between general and special education educators, but also between other stakeholders, such as pupils, parents and various support services (Norwich, 2014). All these challenges are reflected in findings from educational practice showing that collaboration in terms of co-teaching between general education and special education teachers is often limited and not very coordinated (Nilsen, 2017). In sum, it appears that the obstacles impeding collaboration are the need for time for planning, insufficient or limited competence, values and attitudes on inclusion, the degree of willingness to develop new ways of teaching and different normative expectations about classroom organisation and instruction from teachers.

Identifying obstacles to and challenges in collaboration between general and special educators is an undeniably important research topic. After all, it is reasonable to assume that progress towards inclusive education is a matter of identifying and removing barriers

to learn and participate in common educational settings (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Norwich, 2014). However, even though a number of studies identify processes that would improve the collaborative practice of co-teaching, suggestions of this kind tend to be very general and primarily based on analyses of obstacles and challenges (Fluijt, Bakker, & Struyf, 2016). Bearing this in mind, it is surprising that there are so few studies analysing well-functioning collaboration practices between special and general educators. Thus, the lack of knowledge and insight is apparent when it comes to the analysis of actual good practice and successful cooperation between different educational professions. But, more importantly, there is also a need to identify the specific positive underlying cooperative processes that might have transferability value to other similar educational contexts in terms of recommendations and guidance.

Having such a theoretical background in mind, the aim of the present study is to analyse experiences of collaborative co-teaching between special and general educators that has proven to work well. The intention is thus to strategically select relevant interview subjects (i.e. special and general educators) and attempt to identify underlying processes that are characteristic of successful collaboration between different educational professions.

Professional co-teaching collaboration

Professions can be recognised by a knowledge base that is acquired through qualifications, the right to execute the specific vocation (jurisdiction) and a collective consensus about the social relevance of the occupation in question (Abbott, 1988). Professionals' jurisdictional control over certain types of work is a fundamental and key element creating a collective understanding of their joint efforts. However, Abbott (1988) argues that the jurisdictions over professions inevitably change over time and within cultures. Similarly, Hargreaves (2000) also claims that professions grow and change over time, and professionals come to agreements on both keeping and surrendering control.

In addition to expected professional evolution over time, professions also operate in a system consisting of many other similar occupations (Abbott, 1988). In this process, several similar yet distinct groups negotiate and establish consensus to adapt to changes and reconstructions of their roles. Thus, professions develop in relation to other groups and therefore cannot be seen independently of one another (Cameron et al., 2018). Collaboration between different professions can be described as 'an interprofessional process of communication and decision making that enables separate and shared knowledge to provide synergistic influence' (Suter et al., 2009, p. 48). In this context the collaboration is based on elaborating mutual goals, mutual responsibility, shared accountabilities for outcome and development of trust and respect (Cook & Friend, 2010). Co-teaching, often described as a model where two or more professionals share teaching for a group or a class of pupils (Cramer, 2010; Noonan et al., 2003), is one of the most important types of collaboration in education and perceived as a prominent part of educators' professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). In historical terms, the concept of co-teaching in education was promoted in the 1980s due to an emerging and increasing focus on inclusion (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Specifically, collaboration between special educators and general educators is described as co-teaching and defined by Cramer (Cramer, 2010, p. 560) as situations that develop

'when two or more professionals share instruction for a single group of pupils in the same class'. Five elements can be recognised in co-teaching: 1) pupils are generally taught by two or more teachers in a co-teaching team; 2) teachers are affiliated to the teaching of pupils with and without disabilities; 3) these teaching teams mostly consist of a special and a general teacher; 4) co-teaching is generally described as a form of collaboration; and 5) co-teaching commonly takes place in a classroom within a general education setting (Fluijt et al., 2016, p. 189).

It is expected that collaborative efforts between different types of educators will, when relevant, improve teaching, give motivation and provide more expertise. It is important to note that successful professional collaboration not only yields improvements for the educators but also produces a positive outcome for pupil learning and achievement (Cramer, 2010; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Furthermore, and as noted above, the widespread implementation of the ideas based on inclusive education (Unesco, 1994) resulted in a paradigm shift in many cultural contexts where it is now expected that children with disabilities should be able to participate in mainstream or general education (Lindqvist & Nilholm, 2014). Teaching in the inclusive classroom with a diversity of pupils thus requires an expansion of existing knowledge and understanding of teaching approaches (Hargreaves, 2000). Hence, one of the important collaboration processes in school with a multitude of pupils is the one between the professions of the special educator and the general teacher.

Special educator and general educator professions

The special educator profession has been extensively researched and undergone transformations over time (Cameron & Jortveit, 2014; Connelly & Rosenberg, 2009). This is a result of developments and historical changes in society where it is currently expected that all citizens should have a meaningful life and participate in inclusive environments (Hausstätter & Connolley, 2007). The special educator profession is embedded in a complex and diverse theoretical field that initially included the disciplines of medicine, psychology and pedagogy, but recently also ethical, juridical, health-professional, historical, cultural and technological science practices (Befring, 2012). The essence of the special educator role is connected to the desire to help pupils with their individual learning process (Hausstätter & Connolley, 2007), as well as to develop structures and find alternative solutions in agreement with the inclusion paradigm (Cole, 2005). Thus, from the original idea where individuals with special needs were educated in special schools, classes, groups or individually, special educators currently tend to employ a more systemic, relational and inclusive approach to their teaching (Cook & Friend, 2010; Göransson, Lindqvist, Klang, Magnússon, & Almqvist, 2019). The work field of the special educator is situated in the span between persons with a disability and a disabled environment and society. Bearing such complexities in mind, it is apparent that special educators have knowledge that can add valuable competence to a collaborative relationship with other actors in school (Blanton & Perez, 2011; Pellegrino, Weiss, & Regan, 2015). Indeed, the research shows that collaboration is an important part of the profession of special educators. Special educators are involved in collaboration with parents (Lendum, Barlow, & Humphrey, 2015), the school psychology services (Anthun, 2000), principals (Gillespie, 2016) and minority groups (Banks, 2012; Jortveit, 2017), to mention just a few.

Their role might also involve an element of supervision for colleagues, parents and other actors in school (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014), but might also include working with pupils in inclusive classrooms (Cameron et al., 2018).

The general teacher profession has also had to adapt to recent developments in inclusive education where a diversity of learners is taught in the same classroom (Hargreaves, 1994). In general terms, the competence of the general teacher is based on knowledge and didactic approaches to teaching a specific subject to a group (class) of pupils, and facilitating and carrying out teaching so that the class as a whole can develop knowledge (Hausstätter, 2012). However, the current demands for a high standard of academic achievements combined with increased diversity among learners are a challenge for general teachers when it comes to reaching satisfactory levels of adapted instruction (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). Thus, the role and positions of the general teacher have evolved from being one single teacher in the classroom, applying more or less the same teaching approach to all pupils, to a collaborative teaching context where several educators attempt to differentiate and adapt the subject curriculum to accommodate pupils' diversity and achieve the desired learning outcomes (Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, & Patterson, 2017). Based on these developments, it is not uncommon to find collaborations between the special and the general educator in the form of a co-teaching team where the partnership requires shared planning, instruction and assessment of the pupils (Cook & Friend, 2010; Fluitj et al., 2016; Pratt et al., 2017). In this collaboration, the general teacher leads the class, has more in-depth pedagogical content knowledge within specific subjects and possesses valuable knowledge of conditions in the class as a whole (Cramer, 2010; Miller & Oh, 2013). However, the overarching aim is to have an inclusive classroom and an adapted learning context that satisfy the needs of all pupils (Friend et al., 2010). Considering the complexity of such tasks, it is not surprising that research finds that teacher educators need to prepare pre-service teachers for the impact arising from the inclusion of all pupils in the mainstream classrooms (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Hence, current research on the education of teachers shows that collaboration with other educational professions is essential to ensure the quality of student teachers' experiences and development (Gurl, 2019).

Methods

The present study is based on a qualitative approach consisting of interviews with special and general educators. Data were collected from teachers working in the public school system in the southern part of Norway. Considering that the aim of the study was to examine a collaboration practice that works well, educators succeeding in their cooperation were selected according to the strategic selection process to provide rich information on the theme in focus (Patton, 2002). The interview subjects were selected according to the assessment of the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) staff who had experienced a good collaborative atmosphere among these educators and deemed them appropriate for the aims of the present study. The EPS is the agency in Norway which is responsible for assessing whether a child needs special education and has a reasonably good overview of the quality of the collaboration between the special educators and general educators in the region. The data material has been collected from four special educators and four general educators who are collaborating on teaching pupils who have been granted

special needs resources. The informants were spread across the following class levels: One special educator (S1) and one general educator (G1) teaching in Year 1; one special educator (S2) and one general educator (G2) teaching in Year 7; one special educator (S3) and one general educator (G3) teaching in Year 11 (high school); and one special educator (S4) and one general educator (G4) teaching in Year 13 (high school). The informants were interviewed in pairs, one special education educator and one general teacher, so they could elaborate on and enrich each other's answers, and so the interaction between the two would be clearer (Bryman, 2004). One male and seven female educators participated in the study. Contact was established through the head of each school. All the interviews were conducted at the informants' workplace to ensure familiar and safe surroundings in the interview situation (Kvale, Brinkmann, Anderssen, & Rygge, 2009).

The interview was mainly structured around the educators' experiences of collaboration. The interviews consistently started by introducing the interviewer, followed by a brief presentation of the study's purpose, ethical rules (confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation) and other relevant background information. We continued by asking a series of questions about relevant themes, such as (1) the nature of the collaboration; (2) knowledge sharing; (3) discussions about educational values; (4) examples of collaboration; (5) strategies leading to consensus; and (6) division of roles during collaboration. It is important to note that the questions were asked in an open format to give the interviewees the opportunity to express themselves according to their experiences. This also means that follow-up questions were regularly asked to broaden the answers and to give the informants the opportunity to exemplify their experiences by describing specific situations. All interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to an hour, were recorded on a device that did not have an internet connection (NDS, 2019) and later transcribed. The use of recording devices was pre-approved by the interviewees.

Analysis

The point of departure in the present study, from a scientific point of view, was based on the premise that present objective data (i.e. spoken and transcribed statements from participants) represent a form of human judgement that needs to be constantly interpreted in order to discover the subjective value (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2015). Hence, the data were analysed according to a continuous interpretative approach where the aim of capturing the essential meaning of the collaborative experiences was in focus. The interviews were transcribed and analysed according to the concept of double hermeneutics in which the informants' interpretations of collaboration were interpreted and analysed by the researchers (Giddens, 1993). During the initial interpretation of the data, the answers were coded and grouped according to emerging patterns. Thus, we clustered identified codes in several overarching categories that tend to revolve around the same underlying process (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In the second circle of data interpretation, two distinct themes began to emerge. These emerging categories that contained a grouping of coded data with important common features were organised, thematised, and consequently labelled (Bryman, 2004) as shared educational principles and mutual recognition, enthusiasm and flexibility. Finally, in the third circle of the data analysis, the two emerging categories were interpreted on the meta-level where true meanings in terms of 'what do

the findings really mean' tend to emerge. This continuing back-and-forth interpretative process through different levels of meaning produced the two main categories that were able to concisely summarise the essential features of successful collaboration between a special and general educator: cognitive 'contract' and emotional 'consonance'.

Findings

Cognitive 'contract'

The first category characterising good collaboration between special and general educators is the common ground concerning basic educational principles. This means that the educators spend a considerable amount of time reflecting on shared principles that are associated with the manner in which they approached and satisfied the pupils' needs. For example, establishing a common view concerning understandings of child development was accentuated as important in all the interviews. As one of the special educators put it: 'We work according to the same pedagogy that we very much believe in, are passionate about, so we have become very interconnected' (S1). Similarly, another educator expressed the importance of common values that are:

... related to situations in the class, related to the physical environment, and this includes the value of classroom behaviour, of dividing pupils into groups, the teaching approach ... The most important is us working closely together (S2).

All in all, participants in the study conveyed that their cooperation did not merely focus on preparation and evaluation of teaching, but also on close dialogue relating to essential educational beliefs. Thus, the participants were quite concordant when it came to what they believe are important approaches to teaching and relating to pupils. This type of mindset that the educators had was also communicated to the pupils and presented to everyone as attitudes they wanted to be dominant in the classroom. Some of the major concerns for both types of educators were equity, active participation in social and academic activities and absence of stigmatising behaviour. This is not surprising considering that all these values are key elements in inclusive education. Such shared perspectives on inclusive educational organisation and teaching are visible in many of the extracts from our data material, showing that inclusive education is adopted as the overarching principle.

For example, one participant describes this in the following way:

... I like to have some open tasks, which can be used by both strong and weak pupils, right, so they can shape them according to their abilities and skills, so that there are opportunities for those who are struggling a bit, and then there are also opportunities for those who have some skills to benefit from the task (G3).

It is clear from this extract that their collaborative efforts value educational organisation where the pupils with special needs were a part of an ordinary class. This also indicates that their successful cooperation could be attributed, at least partially, to joint efforts to perceive the whole class and all pupils as a cohort (i.e. all pupils working together through the same academic curriculum). Furthermore, the interviewees reported that there is a connection between what is taught to the general class and the teaching given to the pupils who receive special education. This suggests that inclusive principles are not

applied ideologically or 'blindly' but are based on continuous discussions on which tasks are appropriate for the class as a whole, and in what ways all the pupils can participate.

Furthermore, the analysis of our data material reveals that one additional common feature in all the collaborations was the mutual focus on the pupils, in contrast to task or plan accomplishments. Thus, the individual needs of each pupil are at the centre of their work, and these efforts are guided by the principle of working towards the pupil's best interest. One special educator put it this way:

We think of the child in the centre all the time. When I, or we, write ILPs (individual learning plans), our first priority is always that the child should feel secure, that we support her or his well-being and promote mastery. And all this is simply the foundation. If it's not, then we'll not be able to construct all these other things (S2).

The interviewees also pointed to the importance of building a good relationship with their pupils as an underpinning for achieving the above-mentioned aims. 'What can I say? Show some kindness and ask "are you okay" and ask in different ways about that' (S3).

This is conceptually related to the educators' efforts to establish the grounds for a common value among all the pupils, a fact that is, in turn, reflected in the school's ethos statement:

Our school motto and policy is: Here you are something and here you become something. You bring something with you, something good, right? And, you can also become something more (G3).

Some other interviewees added that they have an agreement about practising zero tolerance when it comes to making fun of another pupil or limiting pupils' possibilities to be different. Diversity is explicitly seen as something positive that strengthens the class as a whole.

In sum, it is clear in our data material that the whole educational process, from planning to implementation and assessment, was a common project for the special educator and the general educator. It almost seems that these professionals had an unwritten, yet specific, contract concerning priorities and what is important when teaching children. They discussed methods to use, where to carry out the teaching, inside or outside the classroom, and how long each teaching session should last. The pupils' potential to learn was a common ideological project both for the special educator and the general educator as they jointly prepared pupils with special needs to be able to perform in the classroom with their peers. All this suggests that there is some sort of tacit agreement between these professionals to not work within their own 'bubbles', but rather to exchange ideas with the aim of achieving the common goal of inclusive teaching.

Emotional 'consonance'

The second category characterising good collaboration between special and general educators refers to mutual recognition, shared enthusiasm and emotional flexibility in terms of teaching. During the interviews it was easy to detect the positive interaction and harmony between the educators in the study. They tended to talk about each other confidently and showed enthusiasm for each other, emphasising that collaboration 'has a lot to do with chemistry'.

For example, special educator (S1) and general teacher (G1) had the following dialogue:

(G1) It's, of course about openness, sharing, handling both criticism and praise, and not taking offence at that criticism, I think ...

(S1) ... yes, but at any rate, being good at praising each other.

(G1) ... yes, that's important.

In addition to describing each other in positive terms, they also perceived collaboration as a resource. It seems that the educators functioned as a team, enjoying working together and appreciating each other's professions and knowledge. For example, all the interviewees in the study were passionate about the academic performances and achievement of mastery.

'Sometimes I have a plan and I'm semi-happy with it, right, and then we often like to sit down and talk a little, and that's useful' (G3). Educators in the study describe the working atmosphere where different ideas were proposed and discussions were held without the fear of receiving unfounded criticism. One educator said: 'I feel like I can come up with all kinds of suggestions, so I can sense what's reasonable and not, but it's also okay to say that it's not reasonable' (S3). Describing their relationship, one of the interviewees underlines: 'What's incredibly important is that we're equally attuned to what we want. We like to work together ... we've become very interconnected' (G3). Our impression from the interviews is that the interviewed pairs were so interconnected that they frequently tended to complete each other's sentences. The following dialogue exemplifies the back and forth emotional tuning between the participants:

(G3) We have a very flexible approach to cooperation, I think, and you're always ready to contribute.

(S3) Yes, Yes,

(G3) It's easy to get things done, and I think that's marvellous.

(S3) So it looks like we're two people who find it easy to cooperate with, ... ha ha ha ('ha ha ha' indicates the participant's self-ironic tone).

(G3) I think it's true, we like to work as a team.

(S3) The best thing is that we can 'play ball' with each other.

(G3) We discuss things and I feel it too, that we can freely say what's on our mind.

(S3) Because, it's not like I don't dare say what I mean.

(G3) It's good. It's the same with me. We just freely say what we're thinking.

Reporting such unilaterally positive experiences of course invited us to ask the interviewees about what they did when they disagreed on any issues. After all, one of the conditions in any cooperative venture is providing and receiving hopefully constructive feedback and basing future work on positive elements. When asked about mutual feedback, one of the interviewed pairs said:

(S1) But we also use our cooperation time to guide each other and give each other

(G1) ... feedback.

(S1) Yes, feedback and tips, I think so. We've worked together here for many years

(G1) ... it's in our blood.

When we posed a question about possible disagreements, two of the interviewees answered in the following way:

(G3) It has never happened, ha, ha, we discuss things ...

(S3) ... we think alike a lot ...

(G3) ... yes.

This excerpt from the interviews gives the impression that there is no room for disagreement and that the collaboration depends on the educators having concordant positions. Although the degree of harmony between the participants must certainly be questioned in terms of reliability, it is important to point out that the data material in the present study is based on collaborations that have been reported by a third party as working well and being successful.

In sum, it is clear in our data material that educators in the study express high levels of mutual recognition and enthusiasm in working together. They are transparent and feel free to express themselves. Discussions are not taken in the spirit of being ideological or professional battlefields, but rather as a means of achieving cognitive and emotional tuning. Participants in the study report flexible co-regulative, yet constant, adjustment leading to positive interactions and emotional consonance during professional cooperative interaction.

Discussion

The starting point for school-based collaboration is that different types of educators perform work that is interconnected, with the common aim of helping all pupils (Blanton & Perez, 2011). This work is only possible in situations of shared knowledge and experiences where neither professional is treated as an assistant for the other (Pratt, 2014). Even though the subjects in our study have their roots in slightly different professions, have different jurisdictions and perhaps mandates (Abbott, 1988), they nevertheless succeed in developing a shared view on education and teaching.

Two distinct themes emerged during the data analysis. First, all the interview subjects in the study seem to agree on basic educational values and principles. The interviewed educators report that they invest a considerable amount of time reflecting on essential educational issues on their path towards achieving reported collaborative concordance. Some of the underlying themes that are part of such an accomplished collective mindset are equity, active participation in social and academic activities, absence of stigmatising behaviour, focus on pupils (i.e. having the pupil in the centre of instructional work) and valuing diversity. One of the most important values appears to be the process of inclusion that unites other related sub-topics, such as participation and democracy, equity and social justice, access and quality and the balance between unity and diversity (Norwich, 2014). Second, the interviewees report enjoyment in working together and sharing enthusiasm for teaching under the umbrella of mutual recognition. Such collaborative

harmony is characterised by experiences of transparency, honesty and appreciation of constructive feedback. Overall, it is easy to detect a pattern in these two reported themes that smooth the path to successful collaborations: they both refer to a complex interplay of multiple cognitive and emotional processes working in concert. Our findings clearly show that successful collaborations are based on the balance between a negotiated cognitive 'contract' and emotional consonance. Thus, it seems that basic educational principles depend on open and direct communication and flexible emotional reactions (Hargreaves, 2001; Pratt, 2014).

In many ways, the general findings from this study support previous research suggesting that educators who tend to reflect on their own teaching and ways of practising it succeed in negotiating a shared way of working in which they both feel comfortable (Fluijt et al., 2016). Thus, we know from earlier studies that various teaching responsibilities bring together competence and expertise with great potential for supporting pupil learning processes (Brendle, Lock, & Piazza, 2017; Jurkowski & Müller, 2018). Effective co-teaching also reduces labelling and stigmatisation because the educators' collaborative approach and the adaption of the teaching improve the chances of being included in the class environment (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Cramer, 2010). Moreover, the successful working climate increases the sense of belonging (Pesonen, Rytivaara, Palmu, & Wallin, 2020), thus providing a safe environment within which to tackle educational challenges and discuss sensitive issues (Blanton & Perez, 2011). However, the present study contributes to existing knowledge by presenting empirical support for the rather intuitive idea that successful collaboration is based on a somewhat spontaneous form of negotiated cognitive contract concerning basic educational principles and emotional consonance, where a flexible give-and-take behavioural pattern is established. Put in another way, successful collaboration requires a constant attuning process involving both cognition and emotion in order to function properly. This finding, although seemingly trivial, could easily be neglected under the long-standing dualistic view that sees reason in terms of rationality and logic as separate from emotional subjective experiences (Macmurray, 1999). Although the contemporary view on this is more nuanced, showing that analytic thinking and emotional experiences complement each other (Damasio, 2001; Odaci, Değerli, & Bolat, 2017), there is a genuine historical tendency to perceive one's professional competencies predominantly in terms of rationality and cognition, thus downplaying the role of emotional competencies. Emotional competency can be defined as the individual ability to identify, describe, understand and deal with one's own and others' emotional experiences (Ciarrochi, Scott, Deane, & Heaven, 2003; Saarni, 1997). This echoes the basic premises of humanistic theory where it is explicitly underlined that the ability/willingness to recognise and understand others' emotions helps people to feel less isolated and leads to higher qualities of human interaction (Rogers, 1995).

In the situations of everyday educational praxis, professionals tend to use their strengths to balance out each other's weaker areas and use their unique competence to mentor one another (Pratt, 2014). In other words, they create 'joint work', sharing responsibility, dialogue and honest feedback (Little, 1990), where emotional competence plays a major role. This means that competence in terms of common educational principles and various educational ideas will not take us far during collaboration if these cognitions are not supported by competence that is embedded in handling emotional reactions. Our data indicate that successful collaboration appears to be a constant

double-tuning process where individual reflections that are rooted in one's own educational traditions tend to develop to a point of collaborative sharing, but only when supported by direct non-threatening flexible communication and partnership. This simple intuitive, yet empirically-based conclusion, might have significant value when it comes to transferring this knowledge to other types of collaborations in educational contexts. This concerns collaborations between professionals and parents, leaders and teachers, and teachers and assistants. It is also a relevant skill for newly trained teachers and pre-service teachers. For example, we believe that is a fair assertion to say that traditional literature, as well as theoretical and practical training of pre-service teachers, is in general overwhelmingly focused on the role of cognitive processes in collaboration. The analysis of successful collaboration that has been presented here indicates that cognition in terms of planning and shared educational perspectives represents just a part of the necessary conditions for good teamwork. The other necessary element, the one that provides a context for cognition, is a teacher's emotional competence to deal with all challenging situations that arise during the collaboration. This means that emotional competence is perhaps an understated concept when it comes to defining a teacher's general competencies for individual work, but certainly in situations where collaboration with other professions is required. It is also tempting to conclude that the present examples of successful collaborations are the matter of pure luck in coupling educators together. For this reason, we recommend that in addition to pursuing this theme in more depth using various methodological approaches, future studies should especially focus on the explorations of the mechanisms that systematically lead to such harmonic joint professional work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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