



## Co-teaching in inclusive classes: The development of multi-professional cooperation in teaching dyads



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Study on general and special education teachers' cooperation in teaching dyads.
- Cooperation behavior did not change across one school year.
- Cooperation behavior within the teaching dyads was not correlated.
- Students assessed the teaching dyads' cooperation increasingly worse.
- General teachers and special education teachers did not attune to each other.

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### ABSTRACT

We investigated the development of general teachers' and special education teachers' cooperation in teaching dyads in inclusive classes. At the beginning, the middle, and the end of the school year, 13 dyads reported on their cooperation behavior and 184 students rated their perception of these teaching dyads' cooperation. Multilevel analysis revealed no change in cooperation behavior for general and special education teachers. No reciprocal effects between the dyad members' cooperation behavior occurred. Students' perception of the dyadic cooperation decreased. The results indicate that the dyad members failed to harmonize as an effective teaching dyad.

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### 1. Introduction

In 1994, 92 countries adopted the articles from Salamanca, stating that students with special educational needs must have access to regular schools that are committed to providing these students with the necessary support (The Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994). Subsequently, the educational system in many countries shifted towards inclusive education. However, many differences exist between countries in their implementation of

inclusive education (see Ainscow & César, 2006 for an overview). In Germany, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* became effective in 2008. Germany implemented an inclusive educational system in which students with and without special needs learn together in inclusive classes at regular schools. A class is labeled as an inclusive class when at least one student with special needs attends the class. About one third of students with special needs currently attend regular schools. However, the inclusion rate decreases with the level of education (primary schools: 46.9%, secondary schools: 29.9%; Klemm, 2015). Note that in Germany, secondary education refers to Grades 5 to 9, which is equivalent to level 2 in the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO, 2011).

In Canada, Australia, the United States, and several countries in

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Europe, co-teaching is established to manage the increasing heterogeneity in inclusive classes and to adapt instructions to varying students' learning capabilities and special needs (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012; Werning & Avci-Werning, 2015). The definitions and practices of co-teaching differ between countries as their educational systems do. Often, one general teacher and one special education teacher form a teaching dyad (see Fluijt, Bakker, & Struyf, 2016 for an overview). The co-teaching practice in German inclusive classes is based on teaching dyads formed by one general teacher and one special education teacher that share the instruction in some lessons. The subjects taught dyadically vary depending on the needs of the students and the resources of the special education teacher. Consequently, a special education teacher in Germany might work in multiple dyads with several general teachers within one school or even simultaneously with general teachers from different schools.

A close cooperation between general teachers and special education teachers within the teaching dyad is assumed to be essential for effective inclusive education in terms of providing students with individual support (Löser & Werning, 2013; Schwager, 2011; cf. competence profile of teachers in inclusive education, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012). The cooperation of general teachers and special education teachers is characterized by the different expertise of teachers (Pool Maag & Moser Opitz, 2014). This multi-professional cooperation has great potential for supporting students' learning processes. However, disagreements and conflicts might arise, resulting in the need for general and special education teachers to develop their cooperation in the course of teaching together.

The present study investigated the development of this multi-professional cooperation in teaching dyads in secondary schools in Germany by employing a longitudinal design that assessed general teachers and special education teachers across one school year. In the following sections, we briefly explain how co-teaching between regular and special education teachers can be achieved, and we provide an overview of theories and international findings on multi-professional cooperation that form the framework for the hypotheses tested in our study.

### 1.1. Teacher cooperation in inclusive classes

Co-teaching is implemented with a broad array of responsibilities for dyad members during lessons. Research shows that general teachers mostly teach while special education teachers assist (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). Assisting the general teacher can even take the form of instructing a subgroup of students at a different location (Preiß, Quandt, & Fischer, 2016). In contrast, team-teaching or alternating instruction to the entire class between the two teachers seems to be rare (Strogilos & Tragoulia, 2013). Thus, the responsibility for student learning during lessons appears to be unequally apportioned between general and special education teachers. This arrangement is in line with the results of Gavish (2017) who showed that special education teachers' views about their responsibilities in class range from feelings of being not wanted and having to protect "their" special needs students to feelings of responsibility for all students in the class.

In addition to the responsibilities during lessons, cooperative behavior between general and special education teachers is another aspect of co-teaching. Teacher cooperation is defined as teachers acting together for job related purposes (Kelchtermans, 2006). Cooperation is assumed to provide teachers with practical assistance and social-emotional support from their colleagues as well as the opportunity to develop their teaching (Steinert et al., 2006; Takala & Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Teacher cooperation is also expected to be indicative of school effectiveness in terms of

student academic achievement (Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995). Cooperation can take several forms which vary in the degree of interdependence (Little, 1990). Gräsel, Fußangel, and Pröbstel (2006) described three forms of teacher cooperation that increase in the degree of interdependence: (1) exchanging information and materials; (2) coordinating and bringing together individual work; and (3) co-constructing, that is, working together on the same task. Research shows that cooperation with stronger interdependence between the teachers occurs less frequently than cooperation with lower interdependence (Drossel & Willems, 2014; Richter & Pant, 2016).

Kelchtermans (2006) assumes that generally no form of teacher cooperation is better than the other. Instead, the form of teacher cooperation that would be most beneficial for teaching and learning depends on the cooperation task. An important condition for multi-professional cooperation is the dyad formed from the different expertise of the teachers. In particular, general teachers have subject-specific, didactical, and educational knowledge and skills for instructing students in an entire class, whereas special education teachers are experts on various special needs and how to deal with these needs for students' individual benefits (Schwager, 2011). An inclusive class requires that general teachers and special education teachers contribute their different expertise to address the individual needs of students with and without special needs (Benkmann, 2011; Schwager, 2011). We assumed that this cooperation task predominantly requires general teachers and special education teachers to coordinate and bring together their individual work.

The different expertise of general and special education teachers has a great potential for supporting student learning processes. However, general and special education teachers can differ in their attitudes towards inclusive education, their understanding about teaching and learning, or their views about their responsibilities in class. For example, special education teachers were found to have higher self-efficacy beliefs in supporting students in inclusive settings and a better understanding of inclusive education than general teachers (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999). Pool Maag and Moser Opitz (2014) showed that general teachers assume individual student work and ad-hoc groups of students with similar difficulties to be most beneficial for supporting student learning. In contrast, special education teachers find individual learning objectives, working assignments, and working materials to be most effective for student learning. In Preiß et al. (2016), general teachers and special education teachers reported that their differences in understanding of teaching and learning can lead to conflicts within their teaching dyad. Consequently, general and special education teachers might not succeed in coordinating and bringing together their expertise right from the start. Hence, multi-professional cooperation in teaching dyads should be seen as an ongoing process in which general and special education teachers' cooperation behavior can develop.

### 1.2. Development of multi-professional cooperation

Similar to professional learning communities at school in which the teaching staff develops a collaborative work culture (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), general and special education teachers in teaching dyads may be faced with various tasks, including finding a common ground in their understanding of inclusive education, teaching and learning, or their responsibilities in class. Furthermore, dyad members should learn how to create a teaching environment in which they feel safe to make mistakes and ask for help, feel interdependent with their partner, and perceive that their teaching dyad will succeed (Vangrieken, Dochy, & Raes, 2016; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015).

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