Connective Collaboration Around Alex – A Constant Searching Around Inclusive Education

Silke Daelman | ORCID: 0000-0001-5109-9117
MA, PhD; Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
Silkel.Daelman@UGent.be

Elisabeth De Schauwer | ORCID: 0000-0002-4030-8515
MA, PhD; Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
Elisabeth.DeSchauwer@UGent.be

Geert Van Hove | ORCID: 0000-0003-3266-0524
MA, PhD; Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent, Belgium, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
Geert.VanHove@UGent.be

Abstract

Hand in hand with policy developments, educational practices are constantly looking for how teachers can be (better) supported and professionalized in dealing with pupils with specific educational needs in regular education. Supporting and strengthening the competences of teachers in dealing with diverse needs is closely related to the question of connective collaboration within inclusive learning environments. But when is collaboration connective?

In this ethnographic study, we set out using research material that succeeds in giving form and substance to connective collaboration within Alex’s inclusion process. By means of a diffraotive analysis, four helpful and necessary developments emerge: four doing words that emphasize a process that is never complete. ‘Purposefully encountering’, ‘exchanging’, ‘negotiating’ and ‘affirming’ encourage a continuous development towards connection in the interaction between Alex, his individually adapted curriculum (IAC), the classroom environment, his family and all education and welfare actors involved.
Keywords

inclusive education – connective collaboration – primary education – ethnographic research

1 Introduction

Legislation on inclusive education has slowly developed in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and faced a lot of resistance. Together with these policy developments, educational practices are looking for HOW teachers can be (better) supported and professionalised in dealing with children with special education needs in regular education. Supporting and strengthening the competences of teachers in dealing with special education needs in their students’ learning process is related to the question of connective collaboration within inclusive learning environments. We often talk about this, but when is collaboration connective? What does ‘connecting’ add to or demand from the collaboration? What is collaboration as part of fostering connections?

The purpose of this study is to map emerging movements in the collaboration in the team around Alex in order to conceptualize connective collaboration from the perspective of everyday educational reality. What can we learn from Alex’s trajectory and team about (the movements of) connective collaboration? A small story as Alex’s is situated within larger systems and educational structures -with expectations upon teacher education, competences of pupils, education levels and quality of education- and can therefor offer abstractions that bring movement on a larger level. This means it is important to listen to and learn from his small story. We hope the contribution of this study might be to help concretise connective collaboration in order to built knowledge on how to support and professionalise teachers in inclusive education.

2 Inclusive Education in Flanders

Flanders has a history of two separated systems: regular education and (9 types of) special education and knows an overrepresentation of students with low socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds in special education as well as an overall high percentage of children in special schools (De Schauwer, Van de Putte & de Beco, 2019).

We have seen many moves to structurally embed inclusive education; the first important step became the M-decree in 2015 (De Schauwer, Van de Putte
& de Beco, 2019), with the aim of making the referral of children with special education needs to special education exceptional and to educate as many pupils as possible within regular education (Vermeir & Kelchtermans 2020). Pupils who cannot follow the common curriculum can (with a special education report) follow an individually adapted curriculum (IAC) in regular education and make use of reasonable accommodations (Vermeir & Kelchtermans 2020). At the same time, the M-decree strives for a modernisation of special education that remains to exist for children with particular education needs (when accommodations are not considered reasonable). Here, the M-decree mentions frequent evaluation to stimulate possible return to regular education (De Schauwer, Van de Putte & De Beco, 2019). The meta-analysis of publications related to the M-decree by the Department of Education and Training (2017, p. 14) concludes that actors within inclusive education in Flanders are all doing their own thing and that proper co-ordination and choreography are missing. With regard to action-oriented working and a care policy that builds upon a continuum of care in regular education, the meta-analysis emphasises the importance of (more) constructive collaboration in and between schools, also for bringing in support from special education.

More recently, regulations relating to support networks within the support model (2017) have come to the fore. This support model involved a reform of the existing GON (Integrated Education) and ION (Inclusive Education), with the aim of focusing more on flexible teacher- and team-based support. This model made it possible for schools to attract extra support for educating children with special education needs (when basic care and increased care seem insufficient) and/or an IAC. The extra support can be provided in collaboration with special schools or by support networks (Struyf Commission, 2019). The Flemish Government announced this reform as an interim step towards a new guidance decree. An evaluation of the support model by the Struyf Commission (2019) notes that support networks indicate working points in relation to collaboration: they include references to more accessible communication with parents and more structural consultation within schools. With regard to high-quality collaboration, the Commission stresses the importance of a thought-out care policy, clear support questions, a shared vision and a continuous trust relationship.

3 Collaborating Connectively in an Inclusive Learning Environment

Due to the ‘twin-track system’ in Flanders, teachers have for longtime been working on their own with children without disabilities behind closed
classroom doors. Diversity and inclusion disrupt this way of thinking and brings along anxiety, uncertainties and the need to experiment and built new competences (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2013). It requires teamwork, a platform and open classroom doors. Inclusive education becomes a process in which teachers admit and feel capable they want to invest in collaborative teaming (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2013).

Cooperation where the interaction between the teacher, the student with special education needs and the classroom environment is central has been found to be a success factor, associated with inspiring practices in inclusive learning environments (Hunt et al. 2003; Sanahuja-Gavalda, Olmos-Rueda & Moron-Velasco, 2016; Mulholland & O’Connor 2016; Lyons, Thompson & Timmons, 2016). This collaboration starts from an integrated care policy as a ‘whole-school approach’ (Struyf et al., 2012). It is important that we abandon the traditional view of ‘the teacher in his/her classroom’ (Struyf et al., 2012) and look for collaborative teams and shared expertise (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016).

De Schauwer et al. (2022) point to the necessity of a framework that takes collaboration as starting point to develop inclusive trajectories of students with special education needs. They describe connective collaboration where involved parties share knowledge and expertise and built constructive relations based on trust, reciprocity and respect. Nel et al. (2014) define ‘transdisciplinary collaboration’ in education with an emphasis on equal interactions in groups, sharing expertise, supporting the other and a collective goal related to developing support for the teacher and the classroom environment. Other concepts that come close to the content of connective collaboration in education are ‘interdisciplinary collaboration’ and ‘communities of practice’. Definitions of these concepts built on interaction (Al-Natour, Al-Zboon and Alkhamura, 2015; Mortier, Hunt, Leroy, Van de Putte & Van Hove, 2010b), negotiation (Laluvein, 2010) and a common purpose (Adams, Harris & Jones, 2016, Al-Natour et al., 2015; Hesjedal Hetland, Iversen, & Manger, 2015; Laluvein, 2010). Also ‘inter-professional collaboration’ is described, as a collaboration between a variety of professionals from different disciplines, organizations, education, welfare, etc. offering support to students and their parents (De Schauwer et al., 2022).

This article builds upon previous research into collaboration within inclusive education, but takes the opportunity to look in depth at the connective, collaborative processes around one child, his parents and various professionals from education and welfare in the design of an IAC within the Flemish context. We emphasise inclusive education as a searching and learning movement (Geduld, 2015), as constantly becoming (Tynell, 2016). Drawing on posthumanist literature and the thinking of Biesta, Tynell (2016) indicates that the concept ‘move-ability’ rethinks an educational practice as a relational and performative process, as in motion and with infinite possibilities. Rather than
separate entities or actors, it is about a practice of moving together and moving each other – about interacting and being constantly connected and shaping oneself and the process (Tynell, 2016).

4 Methodology

This study involves ethnographic research in which the first author was present in Alex's classroom from the middle of the 3rd year of preschool to the middle of 3rd grade as a supporter-researcher. This connection of research and support was made possible by a partnership with parents. The first author got to know Alex and his parents during her Master’s internship and remained involved in his journey, working together once more for her PhD. Alex’s parents consider it valuable to support science that proves what inclusive trajectories make possible. The school and support network are open to collaboration in internships and exercises, appreciating the win-win situations that arise from this. The partnership with the team of Alex was formalised in informed consents and relationally attuned during every intra-active research-support encounter. The team was connected within the process of this article as well. They were consulted in an early stage with ideas for this paper and in a later stage with a first version of this paper.

This study received approval from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Ghent University. Beyond that, we also built on our earlier work on ethics in research with children. We picture qualitative inquiry with children-in-their-web as intra-action in which we affect and are affected (Daelman, De Schauwer & Van Hove, 2020). This makes every research encounter with children an ethical entanglement where emergent listening and attunement are prominent. Ethics becomes a never-ending process of negotiation and taking responsibility. The decision to use identifiable photos and Alex’ genuine name, was a shared and negotiated decision by which Alex’s parents wish to take ownership of a story they are proud of. Names of all other involved people are anonymised or pseudonymised as agreed in informed consent. Alex did not give formal consent for his photos to be present in this publication. We positioned this decision in the web of people that knows Alex well and is acquainted with educational and academic contexts. Guided by relational ethics in research with children, we value the connective above the individual. In earlier work (Daelman, De Schauwer & Van Hove, 2020) we explained how ‘the individual is never present in research’ (p.491) – it is always about movements, contexts and relationality.

Ethnographic research, according to Gullion (2018), is about becoming part of a process, of a relational event, of constantly changing experiences in search
of understanding what is moving and happening in practice. The ethnographer starts in the middle of ongoing processes, allows these to affect him and follows how events and assemblages develop (Gullion 2018). He does not look for the static but for the development, the relational, the social interactions through which people, phenomena and assemblages take shape – assemblages of which the ethnographer are a part (Gullion 2018).

From her presence as a supporter-researcher, the first author collected research material consisting of participant observations, interviews with Alex’s parents, the support worker, teachers and the care co-ordinator, consultation reports and communication in successive WhatsApp groups. After Gullion (2018), we applied a diffractive analysis that ‘thinks with the assemblages we are entangled with’ (p. 106) to explore how materials, data, the process and our thinking work together in entanglements and interference patterns. Davies (2021) describes how diffraction differs from reflection, a practice where we strive to copy the original. In a diffractive practice we recognize interference, intra-action, heterogeneity and difference (Davies, 2021). We consider the collected research materials to be fragmented, connected and in assemblage with ourselves as researchers. We work with the materials in the sense that we make connections between words, images, memories, objects and people, etc., in order to give them a new existence in the context of our research question on connective collaboration in Alex’s team (Gullion, 2018). This, according to Gullion (2018), is the challenge of thinking with materials and people (rather than about them) and of thinking with assemblages (rather than individuals).

Throughout the analysis, four central developments emerged: ‘purpose-fully encountering’, ‘exchanging’, ‘negotiating’ and ‘affirming’. In Alex’s story, these four movements contribute to concretising connective collaboration. Four “doing words” that accompany the development from the ‘teacher as an individual in the classroom’ to connection within a collaborative team. The movements emphasise the action-oriented, searching, and process-oriented nature of an inclusive learning environment – the ‘move-ability’: the continuous relational movement with infinite possibilities for (re)shaping educational practices in infinite interactions (Tynell, 2016). Together, the movements spin a web between people (Alex, teachers, support workers, parents, classmates), plans and goals, places and materials, etc.

5 Context of the Ethnographic Research

5.1 Alex at school
Alex goes to school with his younger sister and brother in the centre of Ghent. Alex is 8 years old and is in third grade, along with the 23 classmates with
whom he entered preschool. Alex is a sociable and caring boy who enjoys making jokes. Alex likes to learn things about animals and countries. Alex enjoys being a photographer and playing on his iPad at home. On Sundays, Alex goes to the Scouts; in school holidays, he goes to camp.

Alex has Down Syndrome. This makes it a challenge to make himself understood, but Alex is happy to reiterate. Alex learns maths, reading and writing more slowly than his classmates. He prefers to finish something off before starting something new. Taking a break, drawing or puzzling in between works to stay focused. Alex attends World Orientation and Religious Education, he likes to go swimming and to do physical education. Alex goes to a rehabilitation center twice a week for speech and occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychotherapy. Since kindergarten, Alex has been receiving 5 to 6 hours of support from the same support worker from special education.

Alex goes to a small school in Ghent providing traditional education for four preschool and seven primary school classes (Figure 1). Also in the past, the school has worked with inclusive trajectories. Alex is well-known at school. Walking down the hallway, he gives high fives to sixth-graders, hangs out in the doorway of teacher Marie (nursery), visits his brother in kindergarden and shows off his newest skill to the teacher Emma (first grade). He might have a conversation with Abdu, the cleaning staff: “Hey Alex, everything alright?” Abdu and Alex enjoy meeting each other and understand each other without saying much.
Arriving in the classroom, Alex's desk is closest to the door. Alex's school desk is surrounded by classmates on three sides; on the fourth side is a table with learning materials, library books and puzzles. At the top of the pile are worksheets with a post-it addressed to a trainee or support worker.

5.2 The Team Around Alex

The composition of the team around Alex changes at least every school year. New members bring new expertise, different concerns, dynamics, opportunities, (shared) responsibilities, etc. The team is constantly in movement to provide high-quality education for Alex. Various partners – each with their own roles, training, experiences and vision – are involved in Alex's inclusive journey within a classroom where the teacher makes his/her mark and orchestrates the learning environment.

Alex's parents took the first step in negotiating with the school based on their expectations and Alex's support needs. Alex's inclusion process is founded upon mutual trust between the parents and the school, which is an important factor within an inclusive learning environment (Lyons et al., 2016). The parents are not passive informants (Mortier et al. 2010b; Zeitlin & Curcic 2014), but play a role in shaping, monitoring and adjusting the trajectory.

The care co-ordinator (in tandem with the principal) negotiated with the parents from day one about their request for education for Alex. The care co-ordinator and principal are responsible for an integrated care policy at the school level (Struyf, Adriaensens & Verschueren, 2013). The care co-ordinator also plays a key role in reporting to and exchanging with the support network, the rehabilitation centre and the Center for Student Support (CLB).

The teacher is key within Alex's inclusion process (Mortier et al. 2010a; Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018), she spends the most time with Alex in his classroom and maintains an overview of his trajectory – while providing instruction and care for all students in the classroom (Lyons et al., 2016).

The support worker from the support network supports Alex at school. A strength within Alex's story is the continuity in the presence of the same support worker since kindergarten. She is the only permanent figure who brings the team together each year in new configurations. She describes herself as a chameleon that adapts according to school year, teacher and team. Just like the need for support, the way the support is implemented is tied to the situation (Mortier et al., 2010a), but always starting from an inclusive vision, assuming there are possibilities for Alex in regular education.
5.3 Individually Adapted Curriculum and Alex’s Participation

Connective collaboration takes shape in the creation, implementation and monitoring of Alex’s IAC (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). The IAC contains individual learning paths in several areas, starting from Alex’s abilities (Mortier et al., 2010a). The setting of individual goals goes together with the search for appropriate tools and goal-oriented adaptations that ensure the elimination of barriers with regard to participation, instruction, evaluation, etc. (De Schauwer et al., 2010). Adaptations and aids for Alex are related to communication, providing structure, motor skills, school learning, socio-emotional skills and incorporating rest (Figure 2). Adapted, achievable and challenging curriculum objectives are drawn up during a continuous process of matching what Alex can do and what he wants to be able to do (De Schauwer et al., 2010). The question when setting goals is: ‘What does Alex need to be able to participate in classroom activities, based on his abilities and limitations?’ (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018).

Throughout the preschool years, Alex continually participated – with or without support – in the same activities as the other pre-schoolers. The corner work allowed the teacher to make choices as to what was offered and to differentiate. In groups, other children could be involved in activities where individual goals for Alex were paramount. In primary education, there are many moments when Alex participates – with or without support – in regular classroom activities (Mortier et al., 2010a). Time spent on activating work formats or the digital board are rewarding moments for joining in like the other students.

Sometimes Alex works with the support of the teacher, the intern or the support worker, other times along with a peer who acquires other skills in this way. Whether this happens spontaneously or planned, they are moments of connection (Mortier et al., 2010a; Lyons et al., 2016) that provide learning opportunities related to socio-emotional goals within Alex’s IAC.

Alex’s participation is evolving throughout his school career. Firstly, this is related to how his learning path is developing in relation to that of his classmates. The difference between Alex’s individual and the group’s learning trajectory is greater at times, causing teachers to move toward a larger repertoire of participatory forms. Alex’s learning starts with the common classroom environment (the instruction, the material, the subject) and then splits off to do individual processing within the classroom at his own pace or with his own material. Afterwards, Alex’s work is brought back to the class group.

Secondly, every teacher needs to look for opportunities to participate for Alex within her own teaching style and classroom management. For some teachers, the constant search for participation and connection is second
nature. Others find the search for connection between an individual learning path and the class group a challenge.

A strength of Alex’s IAC is how academic and socio-emotional goals are balanced. During classroom learning, the team’s concern is for how Alex is feeling about his learning process, while respecting his individuality. At certain points, the choice is made to invest time in his social development: learning to express feelings, becoming aware of talents etc.

6 Results – Mapping the Movements in the Connective Collaboration Around Alex

The collaborative process within Alex’s team is never ‘finished’; it takes a new form every school year. This requires constant fine-tuning. Yet across the school years, we see four powerful movements taking shape: four “doing words” that help us concretise connective collaboration in Alex’s classroom context, and emphasise searching and acting in a neverending process.

6.1 Encountering Alex in His Web

The first development that leads to connective collaboration is that of encountering. In first instance, this is about engaging with the central partner in the
inclusion process: Alex himself. In the encounter, it becomes clear that Alex is more than Down Syndrome; we get to know his multi-faceted identity (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018), whereby his disability is one part of a large and growing web of possibilities and relations.

Collaborating in an inclusive learning environment requires teachers and support staff to meet Alex in order to match goals, expectations and materials with Alex’s abilities, difficulties and pace.

*He said to me, ‘Don’t go too fast’. And yes, when I’m dictating words and he’s still writing and it’s going a bit too fast... and we’d said this one, not that one, but he doesn’t accept that [to write one word on two], he wants them all.*

1st grade teacher

Encountering is about spinning the web: constantly connecting with who Alex is and growing relationships with different supporters. Alex often indicates ways in which he can learn things and how he prefers to be supported in doing so (Figure 3). Alex also indicates that he wants to do things himself or on the same way as the other children (e.g. getting homework).

Encountering Alex means getting to work with his interests and talents in order to establish a relationship and promote learning within his iac. This way, Alex gets motivated to work and gets the chance to show himself and his

![Image](image-url)
perspective to others. This co-ordination within the team requires us to stay up-to-date with what his classmates are doing, so that Alex learns by seeing other children at work (De Schauwer et al., 2010).

_Telling the time – Alex does have an interest in that and you can see he actually gets the hang of it very quickly. He’s really on a par with kids of his age. So he can do it if it interests him and if it’s taught to him properly and in a fun way (Figure 4)._

ALEX’s mum

For Alex, this movement of encountering also means delineating or letting go of the predefined educational goals and curriculum objectives of the 3rd grade. Alex can work with his individual educational plan and his team can start from the activities of the 3rd grade but with major accommodations in expectations and learning outcomes. This requires an exercise in letting go for teachers, who seem to measure the success of their students and their own professional success by the achievement of those standards. Letting go of the emphasis on scores, the testing of progress and the expected cognitive development feels like a leap into the unknown.

**Figure 4** Connecting with Alex’s interests and sense of humor. Communication in WhatsApp group.

*Speech therapist*

We practised speaking ‘slow, large and loud’ during reading exercises. Alex added ‘crazy’.

*Support worker*

He is in good shape!
Alex, his things, his pace. If you cast those attainment targets aside, we can look at what works and work on that. [...] It's about daring to distance yourself from 'I have these final attainment targets here, there's something here that I have to finish, it's got be done here...' They find it hard to let go of that with a child like Alex.

care co-ordinator

Encountering means that we do not see ‘a pupil’ before us, but rather Alex himself (Mortier et al., 2010a), and our quest to match up with his interests, level and pace can take shape. In a personalised way, Alex’s growth and learning are documented (Naraian, 2010) in a customised report with individual goals and space for self-evaluation.

The individual trajectory also requires his parents and Alex himself to adjust their expectations. When Alex’s individual learning path (and the difference from that of his classmates) became clearer in the first year, it was an exercise in letting go for all team members. They are particularly proud of the steps Alex is taking in his own development (Figure 5).

The movement of ‘encountering’ is a quest in which the team also encounters each other and a shared vision of Alex and diversity is nurtured. Taking the pressure off the end goal gives the process more space to develop.

6.2 Exchanging on Alex’s Inclusion Process

Equal active involvement of parents and professionals (Naraian, 2011) is specified as a point to be worked on in inclusive education (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). In Alex’s story, this is made possible by the powerful combination of formal and informal exchanges through various channels.

During multidisciplinary consultations with the parents, teacher, support worker, care co-ordinator, principal and therapists, Alex’s progress, the (academic and socio-emotional) objectives, next steps and new concerns are discussed three times a year (Figure 6).
I know that the first meeting – at the end of September or the beginning of October – is always nervous. [...] I’m always very nervous about that... ‘How’s it going to go here and how much is he going to be interrogated?’ Meetings will always be that, they’re always tense.

ALEX’S mum

In addition to the formal meetings, Alex’s learning process is constantly evolving through informal exchanges between different partners: in the corridor, on the playground, in the staff room – letting each other know how Alex is doing and how we move on from there keeps people constantly in touch with each other and shapes his trajectory here and now (De Schauwer et al., 2010).

In addition to back-and-forth notes and a OneDrive with the team of the rehabilitation center as channels of communication, a strength in Alex’s story comes from the WhatsApp group that closely connects the parents, teacher and support staff and aims for trust and openness (Naraian, 2011). It’s not just a digital place for quickly sharing practical matters, but also a forum for coordination around Alex’s IAC: which materials will be tried out, which content will be applied, etc. Forms of participation and support are shared and support needs are documented in a rich amalgam of photos, messages and emoticons (Figures 7 and 8).

That way, we know what’s going on and what he’s actually doing in the classroom. Because Alex really surprises me at times. [...] I love that. When I hear how many mums really struggle with communication. That’s gone like wildfire this year.

ALEX’S mum

Above all, the WhatsApp group is a place for experiences of success and applause (Figures 9 and 10). It shapes an awareness of the daily goings-on in Alex’s classroom and becomes a beautiful reflection of a shared vision emerging in the team.
There have been moments in that year, where you think ‘this is wow’ and you put a message in WhatsApp and just start filming to show off that ‘wow’. Last year too, starting to take videos when he was dancing and joining in with the group to show ‘you can really see it’s wow’.

supporter
The positive communication in the exchange on Alex’s trajectory is striking. The team focuses on what is possible. Sharing experiences has a stimulating effect and offers protection against deficit thinking, in which only shortcomings are highlighted (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). Alex is discussed as part of the class group and the exchange is in the service of creating an appropriate classroom climate that benefits his learning needs (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). This vision on diversity is embedded in the school’s care policy, which is born out by the principal and the care co-ordinator.

FIGURE 9  Creating a space for success and applause. Communication in WhatsApp group.

FIGURE 10  Creating a space for success and applause. Communication in WhatsApp group.

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Make sure the communication is open and wide enough, and stays that way. [...] I've really appreciated the open communication, including with the parents. That things can be discussed and that everyone can share their thoughts openly. To use the positives there, the wonderful development through that. [...] They know that well enough, using the positives. That you can't just come out with 'what's not working', but also 'what is working' and do something with that.

Care co-ordinator

Alex's trajectory and support are determined and implemented within the team on the basis of dialogical reflections (Figure 11). This connective movement creates trust (Mortier et al., 2010a) and cohesion, as well as a shared responsibility (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018).

The support worker managed to give some tips right away. He snapped up those tips and it's happening. The same with swimming – at first he was a bit worried about how that would go and ‘I don’t want him to drown, that’s my responsibility’ and then it was ‘you’re not alone, we’re all here...’: [...] It shouldn’t be just the teacher, it should be the team. It’s all of us in there together.

Care co-ordinator

Figure 11 Alex working on a school assignment with his therapist. Communication in WhatsApp group.
The teacher, as the central figure in the classroom, is not alone. The inclusive trajectory became a shared responsibility of the team of people closely involved with Alex (Sanahuja-Gavalda et al., 2016; Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018) (Figure 12). When expertise, practices and interpretations from different angles can find and reinforce each other, much becomes possible (Waitoller & Kozsleski, 2013).

6.3 Negotiating on Positions, Priorities and Transitions

Within the classroom walls, the teacher and support worker look for a connective collaboration that results in a high-quality educational trajectory for Alex. However, there may be different views on teaching and classroom management, on setting individual goals, on responsibility and division of tasks within the classroom environment (Mulholland & O’Connor, 2016). Negotiation between partners in inclusive education always goes together with listening – opening up, attuning all senses to the other and allowing the interaction to affect you (Davies, 2014). In Alex’s story, we see the movement of negotiation and listening becoming necessary in relation to three recurring themes.

Firstly, support requires a different way of organising the class (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). Despite the fact that Alex has been supported by the same support worker since his entry at school, the position and role this person assumes changes depending on the teacher who is organising the classroom environment.

For support to be experienced as supportive, the support worker must adopt a flexible attitude to the way of working and support needs of the student and the teacher (Mortier et al., 2010a). One teacher likes to open her classroom door and feels less lonely with two. Another prefers to work within her own

**Figure 12** The inclusive trajectory as a shared responsibility. Communication in WhatsApp group.
classroom walls and finds a second attendee peculiar (Mortier et al., 2010a, De Schauwer et al., 2011). One teacher is in favour of co-teaching and shares her place in front of the class with the support worker. Another prefers to see the support worker come in quietly and not interrupt the lessons too much. Some like it when the support worker supports on level of the class, others do not (Naraian, 2010). At certain points in Alex’s inclusive trajectory, differences of opinion made communication and collaboration difficult and transparency about the teacher’s needs was needed.

What is particularly necessary is to listen to the needs of the class teacher in relation to the child, because he/she is the one who must ensure that the child feels good in the group without disrupting the other children, because they often need special attention too.

2nd grade teacher

A second point for negotiation is around when to use support in class. Despite the agreed learning objectives in Alex’s IAC, teachers put their own stamp on it. One teacher likes to work from the socio-emotional point of view and puts working on social contacts and Alex’s well-being in the classroom first. Another accentuates academic skills and makes it a requirement that support moments are integral to cognitive skills.

It was really necessary for Alex to receive one-to-one support to continue to develop at his level in maths and Dutch and that materials were sought to make the subject matter easier for him and more appropriate.

2nd grade teacher

The prolonged search for constructive collaboration between parties who feel they are on different sides can require a lot of energy, causing communication and shared responsibility to fall by the wayside. The care co-ordinator has a role in finding a shared experience of competence (Van Mieghem, 2020) and enabling people to listen genuinely.

Thirdly, the negotiation always keeps an eye on the future: on transitions within Alex’s journey and on goals in the long term. These are moments when the team around Alex changes in composition; teachers from two consecutive grades come together (Lyons et al., 2016). One teacher is preparing to pass on her class and Alex’s care and learning path. Another comes around the corner and is imaging herself working with Alex in September. The experience teaches us that anticipating as a team with an open listening attitude ensures that transitions do not become barriers (Mortier et al., 2010a). Experience accumulated
with Alex over the years is shared and reinforced. Support methods and tools that work are passed on.

_I think it’s a really great strength to sit down with everyone, which we always do. Always including the next teacher towards the end, so they’re already involved. And so it’s less new, which is nice for the parents to get to know them already. That’s reassuring._

care co-ordinator

We note that transitions and barriers in Alex’s trajectory go together with transitions and barriers in the teacher’s personal growth process. An inclusive learning trajectory encourages teachers to reflect on their own classroom practice and their professional identity, and ensures that they grow as teachers and partners in collaboration (Waitoller & Kozsleski, 2013; Geduld, 2015). Often, teachers apply adaptations for a child with a disability at the group level and learn to use didactical materials in different ways, resulting in benefits for all the children (De Schauwer et al., 2010).

_The teacher asks what the children can say about the number 8. A lot of fingers shoot up in the air. One child says ‘8 = 4 + 4’; another says ‘8 is half of 16’. Alex sticks his finger in the air and says ‘8 comes after 7’. All correct answers, each at their own level and according to their own understanding._

1st grade observation

As they get to know Alex, they get to know themselves as teachers in new ways (Mortier et al., 2010b) and begin to think more in terms of possibilities (Mortier et al., 2010a).

_And the more I thought about that, the more I thought ‘I just don’t want to let that opportunity go’. I saw that more as an opportunity that I had to seize because I’ve been in it for 22 years now and this is the first time something like that has occurred. [...] And the closer that came, the more I liked it. And it really enthused me. So that went from all kinds of question marks to really wanting to take on that challenge. I thought that was really great for me._

1st grade teacher

6.4 Affirming Each Other and the Process

An inclusive trajectory comes with doubts on the part of the teacher, who is sometimes stepping into an inclusive trajectory for the first time. Teachers
often feel unprepared (Geduld, 2015), have questions regarding students with special education needs (De Schauwer et al., 2011), and are concerned about providing quality instruction to a diverse group with limited time and resources (Lyons et al., 2016). We also see that education professionals are not familiar with collaborating with people from different backgrounds and training, across education and welfare (Friend & Cook, 2003).

If I’m honest, the image I had at the time was of ‘whoa, whoa, whoa,’ to be frank. But that was because of things that you... hear. [...] Yes, and that’s also a worry that you – over the year, that’s ebbed away, but that was a worry for the whole team... ‘how can he go from kindergarten to primary school?’ And that was just around the place in our team.

1st grade teacher

A strength in Alex’s team is the way in which time and attention are devoted to vulnerabilities and questions that exist within the team. Being able to express these concerns shows that teachers feel responsible and actively involved (De Schauwer et al., 2011). Often, it’s actually getting down to work with Alex that provides reassurance.

He’s never broken anything in my class, but it turned out he’d broken a lot of things last year. So then you think ‘whoa, if that little guy is going to be in my class, I need to make sure he doesn’t break any toys’. But he’s never broken any toys. Yes, those are things... you hear about them and you wonder about them, but in the end you’re reassured when you’re dealing with them yourself.

1st grade teacher

Many questions from teachers are about the IAC in which familiar and normative tools are abandoned; this ‘freedom’ seems frightening. Also, the teacher is going to work with a diverse group, in which Alex is not the only one with a need for support. It is often not Alex’s inclusive trajectory that confronts the teacher with boundaries, but rather the combination with other questions for care within a diverse group. At such times, it is important to start a search process based on the competences and strengths of the teacher and what can grow from them. What learning question can we distil from the teacher’s concerns? What does the teacher need to work with this student in this class? From there, we engage in activating support: responsibility and direction remains in the hands of the teacher, whose position and experience of competence is
strengthened (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). The care co-ordinator plays an important role here too.

*I'm the care co-ordinator for the children, but also for the teacher, because if things aren't going well there, I can't help my children. My teacher needs to feel comfortable and see things going well. I think that's just as important as for the children. They're both part of the same thing. It's the care for everyone that will get you the furthest.*

care co-ordinator

On the one hand, teachers seem to feel supported by the team around Alex, while on the other, they want to hear how things are going from fellow teachers. Teachers enter into a partnership to carry the inclusive journey together across the years. This way, a fertilisation occurs in the school team, which learns new skills and provides affirmative confirmation for each other. Diversity thinking is passed on.

*Tips that Emma then spreads to her parallel colleague and the second grade teacher: 'This is how we do it and you can do this, this and this.' The teacher is never alone. And they did the same in previous years, 'how did you do that last year?' and 'ah, you need to do this, this and this! That's how they're off again.*

care co-ordinator

Lyons et al (2016) described the value of passionate team members in sharing their passion and making it visible. Open classroom doors, scouting out colleagues and sharing experiences ensures that enthusiasm becomes infectious and Alex’s (future) teachers allow ideas to mature.

Thinking about how Alex is represented among colleagues, and among classmates and (their) parents, appears to have a major influence on learning and participation within an inclusive learning environment (Mortier et al., 2010a; Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018). Colleagues will share experiences of success, as well as uncertainties and tensions (Figure 13). The frequent sharing of negative experiences can increase anxiety and feelings of incompetence in a team. Affirmation revolves around the repetition of ‘yes’: in order for the yes of affirmation, assent, consent, alliance and commitment to resonate with each team member, it must carry the repetition (Allan, 2008). Sharing positive experiences and pride motivates the rest of the team to work with Alex and his IAC, and contributes to a shared open view of the child.
Positive attitudes toward an inclusive trajectory promote a school climate that seeks to engage in diversity thinking (Van Mieghem et al., 2018) (Figure 14). In contrast, thinking in terms of deficit and impossibilities creates barriers to achieving equal educational opportunities (Macleod et al., 2017).

*I also think it comes from the view of the teacher on the child: believing in what someone can do. I’m going to try to do it or I’m not going to try because it’s not going to work. Either that’s not going to happen or I won’t be doing it... I think there’s a big difference in that, which I’d say Alex feels and experiences too.*

*care co-ordinator*

### 7 Conclusion

In this article, we used a diffractive analysis (Gullion, 2018) to give form and content to connective collaboration from the perspective of everyday educational reality, more specifically from Alex’s inclusive trajectory. Alex’s story is
situated within a larger systemic and structural educational context and can therefore offer abstractions that bring movement on a larger level where we think about supporting and professionalising teachers in inclusive education.

We described connective collaboration in the four movements of ‘purposefully encountering’, ‘exchanging’, ‘negotiating’ and ‘affirming’. These four movements contribute to theory and practice of inclusive education in four important ways.

First, the four movements become handles to continuously invite Alex (or another child with special educational needs) to participate. The movements constantly look for links between what is meaningful for Alex and what the other children are doing and learning (Mortier et al., 2010a). This way, they underscore the idea that inclusive education equals the idea that it is valuable for every child to be connected to the whole (De Schauwer et al., 2011).

Second, the four movements seek for confirmation in a team in which everyone’s position and expectations are not only recognised but also transcended (Gillies, 2014) in search of attunement, cohesion and transparency, shared responsibility and a collective experience of competence. An inclusive learning environment then becomes a space of transition, a ‘hybrid’ practice without strictly separated professions (Naraian, 2010). This underscores the idea that teaching children with special educational needs benefits from collaboration and teamwork rather than from a different specialized pedagogical approach; high-quality teaching methods can accommodate all children (Lyons et al., 2016).

Third, on a theoretical level (in policy and research contexts) this paper teaches us that inclusive education requires thinking with people (rather than about) and in terms of connections between people. Inclusion is about the continuous quest and movement towards connection: between children, between children and professionals, between professionals, between parents and professionals, between involved actors and policy makers (Van de Putte & De Schauwer, 2018).

Fourth, thinking in terms of ‘move-ability’ highlights the neverending process of inclusive education. It ensures that we move and are moved together in an educational practice where the relational element is paramount (Tynell, 2016). Connection and movement go together and require time to learn and grow within educational practices.

Author bios

Silke Daelman, MA, PhD, has a background in educational studies. She is a PhD student at the Department of Special Needs Education (Faculty of Psychology
and Educational Sciences, Ghent University) with the support of a Special Research Fund fellowship. As a disability studies researcher she is mainly interested in particular children's voices in educational settings and explores borders in ethics and methodology in research with children.

Elisabeth De Schauwer, MA, Phd, has a background in educational studies. She is working as a guest professor at the Department of Special Needs Education (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University). As a researcher, her field of interest is situated in inclusive education and disability studies. She is intrigued by the role of disability in (pedagogical) relations.

Geert Van Hove, MA, PhD, has a background in educational studies. He is working as a professor at the Department of Special Needs Education (Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University). As a researcher, his field of interest encompasses disability studies and inclusive education.

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