Pedagogical practices and teacher discourse relating to deficit-labeled pupils in Académie de Versailles, France: The effects of co-teaching

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Abstract

Context / Purpose
This study explores the impact of co-teaching between special education teachers and general classroom teachers on both pedagogical practices and professional discourse regarding deficit-labeled pupils in French primary schools. The research occurs within the current institutional framework of inclusive education in France, as defined by ministerial guidelines and national teacher training standards for special education teachers (e.g. Bulletin Officiel n°10, 2021). These frameworks promote a shift from deficit-based categorizations toward the recognition and acknowledgment of the diverse learning needs of all pupils. In this context, this study questions the continued use of the term deficit-labeled pupils and explores whether co-teaching can foster more inclusive and needs-based professional approaches.

Approach / Methods
Conducted from 2023 to 2025 in the Versailles school district, this study involved seven teacher pairs (one classroom teacher and one special education teacher trained in inclusive pedagogy) and uses a qualitative methodology, including classroom observations, interviews, professional documentation, and reflective seminars. Teachers also engaged with a structured grid of "quality indicators for co-teaching" to guide self-assessment and collaboration. The analysis focused on changes in teaching practices and teacher discourse over time.

Findings / Results
Initial observations revealed asymmetrical roles and internal segregation of support: special education teachers focused on specific pupils while classroom teachers maintained distance, often expressing uncertainty. Over time, co-teaching evolved into a more integrated, collaborative practice. Both teachers began to co-plan, co-regulate, and support all pupils through differentiated instruction and shared pedagogical gestures. Teachers' discourse then shifted from deficit labels to contextualized expressions of individual needs. These developments also contributed to professional growth, deeper knowledge of students, and enhanced clarity of instructional goals.

Conclusion / Key message
Co-teaching, when supported by structured frameworks and reflective practice, can promote both inclusive pedagogy and more nuanced understandings of pupil diversity. While some deficit-based labels persist, the findings highlight the potential of collaborative teaching to transform how learning needs are addressed. Beyond its empirical contributions, the study also provides a basis for teacher education programs seeking to prepare practitioners for inclusive and cooperative approaches in heterogeneous classrooms.

Points of Interest

- This research focuses on pupils often labeled as having "difficulties" and argues that an inclusive school must meet the needs of everyone without resorting to labels.
- Gradually, while co-teaching between specialist teachers and mainstream teachers in the same classroom over several months, the teachers stopped distinguishing between "deficit-labeled

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pupils and the rest of the group and developed a teaching and learning environment that was more accessible to all.

- This approach transformed their perceptions: instead of highlighting weaknesses, they focused on the specific needs of each child.
- Cooperation encouraged the sharing of teaching methods, strengthened professional confidence and helped to build more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Key words: Deficit-labeled pupils, educational needs, co-teaching, inclusive education

1. Introduction

France reinforced its approach to inclusive education with the reorganization of training for special education teachers. This specialized teacher education program[2], introduced at the start of the 2017 school year, is based on a skills reference framework[3] attached to the ministerial directive, updated in March 2021, which states that "the special education teacher exercises in the specific professional context of an inclusive education system". In particular, these special education teachers can work within RASEDs (*Réseau d'Aide aux Elèves En Difficulté*)[4], supporting networks to provide "help and support for pupils experiencing persistent difficulties" (Ministerial directive no. 2014-107 of 18-8-2014). Most of the time, classroom teachers send the RASED a request form for support, which specifies the purpose of the request and sets out the difficulties of the pupils concerned.

It is therefore interesting to link this mission of assistance and monitoring of pupils by the special education teacher with the inclusive orientation set out in the reference framework. Considering these same guidelines, we observe three complementary missions that feed this inclusive paradigm; first, the specialized teacher must design "teaching sequences with other teachers and by co-intervening within the framework of inclusive practices"; second, the specialized teacher "performs the function of resource person for inclusive education in diverse situations"; and third he/she "performs the role of an expert in the analysis of special educational needs and the responses to be constructed".

Based on this perspective of the special education teacher's skills reference framework, this article questions the term deficit-labeled pupils, through the prism of the inclusive paradigm that now cuts across the French education system[5]. Causal explanations and interpretations relating to deficit-labeled pupils ---an expression that we will discuss later in this article--- are always based on causalities exogenous to the school (pupils, families) and rarely related to endogenous causalities (...) to concrete teaching processes (Roiné, 2014). Because it is part of the reference framework for specialized teachers that must design co-intervention (whose definition we will narrow down to co-teaching later on), we can imaging using the term deficit-labeled pupils in this new teaching space (that of co-teaching), which Tremblay specifies "seems to have become the ideal vehicle through which injunctions relating to the inclusive school can find an adequate response" (2023. p.9).

With this philosophical and institutional framework exposed, we can ask the following research questions:

What practices do classroom teachers use with pupils they have labeled as having deficits? What do these teachers say when they talk about these same pupils? Will teachers change their educational

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[2] Ministerial directive no. 2017-026 of 14-2-2017 on specialised vocational training and the certificate of vocational aptitude for inclusive education practices (Cappei).

[3] Référentiel des compétences caractéristiques d'un enseignant spécialisé, Bulletin officiel n°10 du 11 mars 2021. Circulaire du 12-2-2021

[4] Specialist support teachers (in France, members of networks providing targeted assistance to primary school pupils experiencing persistent learning or behavioural difficulties).

[5] Law no. 2013-595 of 8 July 2013 on the orientation and programming of the refoundation of the school of the Republic introduced the concept of inclusive schools into the Education Code.

practice while co-teaching? Will the way regular teachers and special education teachers talk about deficit-labeled pupils remain the same? These questions guide and direct our research, which began in 2023 and is based on the observation of pairs of regular teachers and special education teachers working together in the classroom.

This qualitative research was undertaken with seven pairs of teachers from the Versailles Academy, consisting of a special education teacher working in the RASED and a class teacher (which, as we shall see, defines the framework of inclusive co-teaching (Tremblay, 2023)). These pairs were initiated by the class teacher as a result of the identification of deficit-labeled pupils, as implied by the very title 'RASED', with a resulting co-teaching situation. As defined, co-teaching inherently includes the need for co-planning. The authors provide a definitional framework for the pairs, to guide the collaboration and thus have an impact on the teachers' discourse and the practices engaged in.

We first outline the theoretical, epistemological and anthropological framework of this research. We then present the institutional framework that determines the operation of the RASEDs and the reference framework for the skills of special education teachers in France. We then outline the methodological framework of the research. Finally, we will present some of the initial results analyzed.

1.1. Theoretical and anthropological framework

1.1.1. Inclusive schools and "deficit-labeled pupils"

The inclusion of pupils with special educational needs remains a major challenge for schools, particularly in France. Several laws have progressively shaped this field. The Law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship for people with disabilities required all children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools. The Law of 8 July 2013 on the Orientation and Programming of the School of the Republic laid the foundations for inclusive education: *"The public service recognizes that all children share the capacity to learn and progress. It ensures that all children are included in school, without distinction."* This marked a paradigm shift: pupils with disabilities were no longer expected to adapt to school; instead, schools had to adapt learning situations to enable them to progress. The Law of 26 July 2019, known as the "School of Trust" law, replaced the notion of *school inclusion* with that of the *inclusive school*, extending attention beyond disability to all pupils with special educational needs.

The terms *inclusion*, *inclusive school* and *inclusive practices* lack a single, consensual definition. As Ventoso-Y-Font and Fumey (2016) note, their meaning varies in practice and remains open to debate. More than fixed definitions, they operate as conceptions shaped by the interplay between individual practices and collective environments, which show significant variation (Champain & Dufournet, 2024). Against this backdrop, the term *deficit-labeled pupils* must be questioned and de-naturalised. Ordinary language presents it as a "reified category" (Roiné, 2015). The expression has been used in French ministerial directives and reports since the 1990s and appears in the very acronym RASED. In everyday teaching, it often closes discussion: the *deficit-labeled pupils* is simply the one declared as such (Montfroy, 2002). This tautological use reflects an essentialist and stigmatizing conception (Goffman, 1975). Are we speaking of pupils who "do not succeed at school" or of those who "fail at school"? Goigoux (2000) demonstrated that supposed or actual difficulties can create a vicious circle in which teachers impoverish the learning environment, thereby limiting learning opportunities.

From this perspective, inclusive education, which underpins our analysis, is in tension with the very notion of the *deficit-labeled pupils*. If inclusion is truly about meeting the needs of all, then this category ceases to exist: pupils are considered instead in terms of their learning needs (Barry, 2011). The anthropological and philosophical roots of this approach emphasise individual learning pathways, personal development, and participation in a social framework adapted to each person's capabilities (Sen, 2007, 2015). It resonates with the notion of *educability* and Meirieu's (1984) "wager on educability," described as "ethically just and necessary, because it is a wager on the human" (Meirieu, 2009, p. 5).

We therefore argue that the expression *deficit-labeled pupils* sustains a normative school but loses relevance in the context of an inclusive school. It is not an operational concept. The shift must be from

a deficit-centred view of pupils to a dynamic, multidimensional understanding that considers pedagogical and didactic parameters

1.1.2. RASED: Networks for helping deficit-labeled pupils

In French primary schools, when class teachers identify pupils as struggling, they may request support from a special education teacher working within a RASED (Réseau d'Aide aux Élèves en Difficulté[6]). This support can be provided at any point during primary education to complement the work of classroom teachers. Their role is to "prevent and remedy persistent difficulties at school that resist the help provided by classroom teachers."

According to their skills framework (Circulaire du 12-2-2021), these special education teachers act as resource persons who:

- promote awareness of the ethical and societal issues of inclusion;
- advise on the development of pedagogical responses to special educational needs;
- prevent the emergence of difficulties in vulnerable pupils;
- and contribute to awareness-raising and training on inclusive education.

They may therefore work in partnership with classroom teachers and engage in co-teaching.

1.1.3. Co-teaching

1.1.3.1. A collaborative space for supporting deficit-labeled pupils

Institutional regulations, whether in the form of ministerial directives or local guidance notes, explicitly recommend that classrooms be the preferred place for RASED teachers to intervene. The IGÉSR (2021) report stresses the importance of developing inclusive practices within the classroom to avoid disruptions to learning, such as missed content and difficulties in catching up. The report highlights that co-teaching is valued by classroom teachers, who describe it as providing opportunities to adjust and enrich their practice

This is particularly relevant since the very term *deficit-labeled pupils* is being questioned and contrasted with the principles of inclusive education. Policy guidance, on which teachers rely to address "difficulties," has since 2014 encouraged special education teachers to intervene primarily inside the classroom through co-teaching.

By contrast, the traditional model of *outsourcing pupils* consists of providing individualised help outside the classroom to those identified as "in difficulty." In this arrangement, the special education teacher—working within the RASED—often uses different methods and objectives from those of the classroom teacher. This model presents several limitations. Pupils are removed from class and must later "catch up" with missed content; the classroom teacher must manage their absence; and the transfer of skills built outside the class is uncertain, especially when there has been no coordination of content. Furthermore, "the fact that some pupils leave the classroom at certain times does not sit well with the idea of an inclusive classroom" (Tremblay, 2015) and generates stigmatization.

In today's evolving landscape of inclusive education, the teaching profession is being reshaped toward more collaborative forms of work. As Janin, Moreau & Toullec-Théry (2021) emphasise, "the pedagogical and educational needs of all pupils require interventions that call for different forms of collaboration between the professionals involved." Co-teaching—defined as pedagogical work in pairs, in a shared classroom space (Tremblay, 2020)—represents one promising form of this collaboration. Moreover, co-teaching between a classroom teacher and a special education teacher is often regarded as the most consistent delivery model for inclusive education (Tremblay, 2020).

This collaborative dynamic allows for support to be internalised and shared within the classroom, rather than being externalised. It is not simply a matter of "resolving" pupils' difficulties but of embedding collaboration into teachers' professional practice, thereby moving towards a genuinely inclusive school.

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[6] Which can be translated as Support Network for Pupils Labeled as Deficient

Two definitions of co-teaching guided our research and were presented to the participating teachers. Tremblay (2012) defines it as "joint pedagogical work, in the same group and at the same time, by two or more teachers sharing educational responsibilities to achieve specific objectives." This definition stresses the collaborative dimension of pedagogical work and the equal responsibility teachers hold toward the entire class. Hartnett et al. (2014) add that co-teaching occurs when two teachers "plan, organize, teach and evaluate" together with the same group of pupils, highlighting the importance of co-preparation and co-evaluation in addition to co-delivery.

It should also be noted that classroom teachers and special education teachers operate within two distinct registers of partnership. The first is cooperative, characterised by symmetrical exchange (Champain & Ruiz, forthcoming 2025). The second is asymmetrical, reflecting the fact that the special education teacher's skills framework includes tasks not found in the classroom teacher's framework. These specialised responsibilities—acting as a resource person and an expert in analysing pupils' needs— inform exchanges and collaborative practices, and are both stimulated and reinforced by this status.

1.1.3.2. Critical approach and limitations

While co-teaching appears to benefit all pupils by fostering exchange and co-construction between teachers, this view requires some qualification. Tremblay & Toullec-Théry (2021) summarise the critical literature, which highlights a number of limitations. One concern is institutional: the lack of administrative support may act as a barrier. Paradoxically, co-teaching is sometimes promoted through top-down injunctions without genuine willingness from all parties involved, which can lead to tensions or ambiguous roles.

Co-teaching can also resemble traditional *educational support*, the closest and most familiar form of practice, especially when clear objectives are lacking. In such cases, its transformative potential is reduced. Tremblay & Toullec-Théry (2021) argue that co-teaching may generate limiting effects: teachers may provide excessive support, the presence of two adults may result in an inflation of discourse and learning expectations may be lowered in favour of compliance with classroom behaviour. The focus on behaviour over knowledge means that learning goals are not fully achieved.

Empirical research supports these concerns. Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie (2007) and Friend & Cook (2010) demonstrate that the "one teaches / one observes or assists" model is particularly ineffective, as it represents an underuse of co-teaching's pedagogical potential. These studies also show that co-teaching has considerable untapped potential to enhance teaching practices when fully implemented. Another risk is the positioning of the special education teacher. Tremblay & Toullec-Théry (2021) note that their role may be reduced to that of a subordinate, creating a hierarchical relationship with the classroom teacher. This risk undermining the equity that co-teaching is meant to foster.

Here, Freire's perspective is instructive: he insists that dialogue forms the foundation of co-teaching (Freire, 1974). A genuine praxis requires teachers to co-construct not only classroom practices but also the knowledge transmitted and to critically examine its implications for all pupils. Without authentic sharing of objectives and practices, there is a danger of further marginalising students with special needs (Ainscow, 2005).

For these reasons, it is essential to establish a clear framework and guidelines for co-teaching that explicitly address these critical aspects. Only then can its full potential as a tool for inclusive schooling be realised.

2. Methodology

This study is part of the inter-laboratory project *E(DI)²PE – deficit-labeled pupils*: *changes in teacher discourse and practice*, conducted from June 2023 to June 2025 in partnership with the Versailles school district. The research follows a collaborative approach (Desgagné, 1997; Butler, 2005), involving classroom teachers, special education teachers, and the research team. Researchers were not only observers but also facilitators: they organized seminars, introduced theoretical frameworks, and

provided tools for reflection, positioning the study at the intersection of observation and action-research (Collectif Didactique pour enseigner, 2024).
Data were collected over two school years using:

- classroom observations of co-teaching sessions;
- semi-structured interviews with classroom and special education teachers;
- professional documentation (support request forms, co-planning materials, student work);
- and research seminars that promoted reflexivity and exchange.

Teachers also worked with Tremblay's (2023) grid of 78 "quality indicators for co-teaching." Each special education teacher selected three indicators as areas for improvement and three as strengths, then discussed them with their classroom partner. For example, one indicator was: *"Both teachers communicate verbally or non-verbally during the activity (micro-concertation)."* This reflective tool aimed to make teachers more aware of their professional gestures and to guide their collaboration.

2.1. Participants

Seven teacher pairs participated, each consisting of a classroom teacher and a special education teacher from the RASED network. All were tenured civil servants of the French Ministry of Education. Classroom teachers had 10–25 years of experience. One special education teacher had 10 years of experience; the others between 2 and 5 years. Six held the CAPPEI (certificate in inclusive education practices) and one the CAPA-SH (older certification).
The pairs worked in two Grade 1 classes (ages 6–7), three Grade 3 classes (ages 8–9), and two Grade 5 classes (ages 10–11). Four pairs had never collaborated prior to this research.

2.2. Focus 1: Teachers' practices

The first analytical focus is the evolution of teaching practices in co-teaching settings. We paid particular attention to how teachers jointly identified and adjusted pedagogical and didactic parameters that support learning. Following earlier work (Champain 2019, 2023), we used the notion of *misalignment* to describe mismatches that may hinder pupils' progress, for example between:

- stated learning objectives and instructions (task representation, Doly, 1996);
- learning needs of "at-risk" pupils and the support actually provided by teachers.

Our observations thus focused on how co-teachers engaged in co-adjustments and regulation during lessons, in line with Allal & Lopez (2007), and on the role of teachers in supporting students' active involvement, following Hadji (2012). We also included mediation strategies (Cardinet, 2009; Bruner, 1983; Feuerstein, 1994) to analyze how tasks were made accessible and meaningful to all pupils.

2.3. Focus 2: Teacher discourse

The second focus was teacher discourse, particularly how classroom teachers referred to deficit-labeled pupils. Data came from support request forms and semi-structured interviews conducted both at the start of the project and after several months of co-teaching. Analysis concentrated on whether teachers' discourse shifted from deficit-based labels toward a more systemic, needs-based perspective.

3. Initial results

3.1. Initial situation

3.1.1. On the practice side

We began with a phase of observation and initial data collection at the very start of the co-teaching process. This provided an overview of the practices of the participating teachers before they had the opportunity to work together and reflect over time. At this stage, their collaborative practices largely reflected their professional schemas—the established patterns of thought and action guiding their teaching (Goigoux, 2018)—as well as their habitual routines.

The first observations showed that collaborative pairs often separated their professional gestures. For example, actions relating to cognitive issues—such as task representation, enrolment, maintaining orientation, and signalling key characteristics (Bruner, 1983)—were usually carried out by the special education teacher during whole-class sessions. This teacher was also in charge of planning and reviewing activities (metacognitive time). In these moments, the classroom teacher tended to stay in the background, displaying resources or writing instructions on the board. They also sometimes rephrased the special education teacher's comments in language that was more familiar to pupils, as drawn from their everyday classroom practice. For instance, during a French lesson, Marie (CT, Year 6) presented a written text on the board (a children's book) and held it up, while Cécile (SET, Year 6) asked the pupils to decode the text and suggested links with clues found in the document.

In many workshop sessions, we observed the special education teacher working only with the pupils considered "in difficulty," often grouped together inside the classroom. This created a form of internal outsourcing: the special education teacher helped these pupils in ways similar to external RASED interventions. Meanwhile, when pupils were working individually, the classroom teacher circulated among the others to check progress and validate work, without ever approaching the "in difficulty" group, who were under the care of the special education teacher. In some cases, classroom teachers remained seated at their desks, meeting pupils one by one for corrections or validation. Pupils sometimes lined up waiting for their turn—these waits could last for over five minutes.

These observations revealed a number of misalignments (Champain, 2019, 2023). The co-preparation did not adequately focus on differentiation, which could have better aligned materials with the lesson objectives. Similarly, support for pupils not assisted by the specialist was generic and did not specifically address their needs. However, from the outset of co-teaching practices, the special education teacher usually took responsibility for enrolment, defined as "engaging pupils' interest and commitment to the demands of the task" (Bruner, 2011). This teacher also guided pupils' attention toward the materials, enabling them to represent the task data to themselves (Doly, 1996) and thus improve task comprehension.

To summarise:

- The distribution of professional actions was exclusive: the special education teacher developed specific professional gestures (e.g., enrolment, metacognitive work).
- Teachers worked in relative isolation, with few micro-consultations (Tremblay, 2022).
- Deficit-labeled pupils were internally outsourced during certain parts of the session.
  Classroom teachers mainly adopted control, counter-support, and teaching postures (Bucheton & Soulé, 2009).
  Learning objectives were often vague and hard to assess.
- Little or no differentiation was observed for pupils in the class.

3.1.2. Classroom teachers' views

For anonymity, teachers' first names have been changed. In our transcripts, each quote is identified by the teacher's name, their role (SET = special education teacher, CT = classroom teacher), and their grade level (CP = Grade 1, CE2 = Grade 3, CM2 = Grade 5). In semi-structured interviews, classroom teachers reported that pedagogical differentiation was difficult to implement:

> "I can't differentiate to provide the necessary support for pupils to really succeed." (Edith, CT, CM2, November 2023)

Teachers also described difficulties in supporting pupils who had not yet acquired reading skills, even when the project did not directly involve reading:

> "Since the pupils don't know how to read in CP, I don't see how I can do writing sessions at all. I tell myself, they're going to call meal the time in a project like this!" (Marie, CT, CP, December 2023)

Some classroom teachers said they were unable to clearly identify pupils' needs, which affected their ability to provide tailored support:

> "I can't figure out what's going on with J. and Z., I don't know how to position myself, I feel like I'm not helping them." (Marie, CT, CP, December 2023)

Special education teachers, for their part, highlighted their expertise in identifying needs and providing targeted responses:

> "I'm going to provide tools and finer-tuned responses that would be difficult for the teacher because she doesn't have the same expertise and because she doesn't have the same material resources, the time, that's all." (Laura, SET, working with Solène, CE2, December 2023)

As a result, classroom teachers sometimes described these pupils as the responsibility of the specialist: "I leave the pupils in difficulty to Emeline, I'm afraid of not knowing, of being overwhelmed by their difficulties." (Marie, CT, CP, November 2023)

> "She's a great help to me! When I don't know what to do with them, she arrives with her tools and magic recipes." (Solène, CT, CE2, December 2023)

Special education teachers themselves sometimes used terms like "special-needs pupils" or "RASED pupils" to designate those they took charge of:

> "As I'm going to be looking after pupils with needs, compared to the five pupils, she hasn't invested much. When it comes to RASED pupils, it's always me, but we haven't said a word about it, it just happened naturally." (Laura, SET, working with Solène, CE2, December 2023)

From these interviews, we see a pattern: classroom teachers tended to delegate responsibility for these pupils to the specialist, citing fear, lack of tools, or established habits. The difficulty was often seen as belonging to the pupil rather than as a pedagogical issue. Meanwhile, special education teachers leaned on their official competency framework, focusing on a specific subgroup of pupils.

3.2. After several months of collaboration/co-teaching

3.2.1. Classroom teachers' practices

As collaboration progressed, the distribution of roles shifted. In most observed situations, the specialist no longer had exclusive responsibility for deficit-labeled pupils. This is perhaps the most striking change. For example, during writing sessions, pupils were organised into heterogeneous groups, rather than separating those who were struggling. Both teachers moved among the groups, co-regulating and adjusting their interventions to avoid redundancy (Champain & Ruiz, forthcoming 2024).

We also noted the appearance of the "skills table" (Tremblay, 2023), which replaced earlier "support tables" for deficit-labeled pupils. Whereas initially certain pupils were consistently grouped together at this table, later it was used flexibly depending on the skills to be acquired. For instance, in Laura's Year 3 class (April 2025), some pupils worked on categorising wolf-themed books, while others worked on story chronology.Another change was that classroom teachers increasingly adopted gestures previously performed by special education teachers. For example, during enrolment—engaging pupils' attention and commitment to the task (Bruner, 1983)—they aligned their posture and timing with the specialist's. They also added questions during metacognitive moments or noted pupils' clues on the board.

Overall, teachers' gestures became more co-prepared and co-anticipated, leading to better support for all pupils, including those previously identified as "in difficulty." Micro-consultations also increased. For example, Lise (CT, Year 6) and Carole (SET, Year 6, November 2024) used post-it notes to exchange messages in real time during lessons.

Lesson objectives also became clearer, tasks more closely aligned, and materials more systematically differentiated. Importantly, differentiation now targeted all pupils, not just those previously considered "in difficulty." What began as internal outsourcing evolved into inclusive support, with both teachers sharing responsibility for accessibility and tailoring support to everyone's needs. To summarise:

- Micro-consultations increased significantly, supporting co-regulation (Tremblay, 2022).
- Professional behaviours shifted, becoming more collaborative and relaxed. Lesson objectives became more specific and assessable. We observed "laboratory effects" (Tremblay, 2023), with teachers experimenting with new allocation methods. Classrooms were reorganised: the old "support table" became a "skills table," used flexibly.
- Teaching methods became more inclusive, mobilising both teachers' resources.

3.2.2. Classroom teachers' views

After several months of co-preparation, co-delivery, and co-evaluation, classroom teachers described significant changes in their practices and professional gestures, especially regarding pupils initially identified as "in difficulty." They reported a stronger commitment to differentiation in daily teaching:

> "I've evolved in my posture as a teacher about what I can do in the classroom. There have been beneficial consequences: on my display for deficit-labeled pupils, on my way of formulating objectives too, where it's increasingly clear, and on my way of differentiating." (Solène, CT, CE2, April 2025)

They also underlined the impact of having a partner to reflect with:

> "I think that if I hadn't been co-teaching, I wouldn't have gone as far in my writing work, I wouldn't have questioned myself as much because it's true that when there are two of you, sometimes, well, you question yourself when you have an idea, because in order to convey it to the other person, you

have to verbalize it, and that makes you think about how you ultimately see things." (Lise, CT, CM2, December 2024).

Teachers pointed out the benefits of two sets of eyes in the classroom:

"If I had been alone in the class, I wouldn't necessarily have been able to deal with certain students who are going to have problems, because there are already other students I have to take care of. And with two of us, we have two sets of eyes. It allows us to reach out to students who may be a little in the shadows and who may have difficulties, but who won't necessarily say so." (Marie, CT, CP, January 2025)

They also described how analysis of tasks during planning helped identify groups with different needs, leading to more accessible activities:

"We are guided by the analysis of the task, and we think about each student in relation to the task. The groups change depending on the session and the task." (Laura, SET, working with Solène, CE2, April 2025)

This allowed for greater pupil participation:

"It's good because they have their place in the work, they're not just spectators, with direct transmission; they participate, they have to think, they have freedom of speech." (Marie, CT, CP, January 2025).

Teachers increasingly rejected the deficit label:

"I no longer describe them as students with difficulties; they need help or tools to do well in class. The word 'difficulty' is misused; I prefer 'student with needs', such as methodology, time, tools, etc." (Solène, CT, CE2, April 2025)

Other teachers stressed that all pupils have needs:

"Almost all of our students need special attention, we're all on the same page. We no longer talk about difficulties, we think about how each student works, even high-achieving students have needs too." (Laura, SET, CE2, April 2025)

They also described professional development through mutual enrichment:

"A lot of things come out of it, tools that we wouldn't have created if we'd been on our own." (Marie, CT, CP, January 2025)

"Everything like metacognition, for example, I was actually doing a little bit, but definitely less. Now, though, it's true that I see her doing it. So I ask them a lot. Anyway, I'm more focused on it now." (Camille, CT, CE2, December 2024)

Special education teachers also noticed changes in their colleagues:

"She's also evolved in terms of clarification interview. We've worked a lot on that, and I think it shows. The success criteria, the session format helped a lot, so she's a bit more explicit about success criteria." (Carole, SET, CM2, November 2024)

Classroom teachers, for their part, said they knew their pupils better:

> "Now I know my pupils better, and it's easier to help them on a daily basis." (Carole, SET, CM2, November 2024)

Teachers highlighted the benefits of shared roles:

> "I'm going to be more focused on the pupils I'm usually with, but even so, we alternate our... how shall I put it... we circulate, we help, we're not with them all the time." (Emeline, SET, working with Marie, CP, January 2025)

Their discourse clearly evolved: instead of blaming pupils ("lazy," "inattentive"), they now described needs ("he needs more meaning to stay motivated," "he needs access to specific vocabulary"). Teachers also became more aware of the risks of isolating pupils:

> "A student like Deborah, who is struggling a lot, doesn't like people to see that she's struggling, so it's true that taking them out like that... They know it's to help them. Anyway, no one will say anything, but I think some students might. You see, Deborah really doesn't like it, she doesn't want things to be different. Deborah really wants to try to do what everyone else does. So it's true that we feel that the system really benefits everyone, and in the end we're going back to the idea of small groups, but we're doing it with the whole class." (Lise, CT, CM2, December 2024)

> "I wondered about possibly taking the four pupils who need extra help in my class to work on their oral skills, everything that could be said in the wolf's bubbles, but we would have lost that competitive spirit that comes from being in a mixed group, and we would have got less out of it or the questions wouldn't have gone as far. Sometimes isolating them deprives them of elements that go even further than what we had planned." (Carole, SET, CM2, November 2024)

Teachers also noted that less formal consultation was now needed, as routines of co-regulation became embedded (Tremblay, 2023):

> "While the pupils are busy, we do a little review among ourselves. We no longer discuss our place, everything is natural." (Edith, CT, CM2, January 2025)
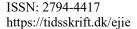
> "It's mainly by message, and for 5–10 minutes at the end of the session. But there's no need for much discussion anymore. We just need to discuss the arrangements and the groups." (Solène, CT, CE2, April 2025)

> "Finally, we know where we're going, because we've established our progress, so it's actually faster. We still see each other regularly, that's for sure, but it takes less time." (Carole, CT, CE2, November 2024)

It is important to note that this research is qualitative and cannot be generalised to all contexts. Teachers volunteered to participate, and the pairs were chosen by special education teachers. This likely contributed to the very positive perceptions of co-teaching reported here. Teachers also acknowledged that some colleagues were reluctant to open their classrooms, or that certain collaborations proved less effective. These statements should therefore be taken as indicative of the possibilities offered by well-supported collaboration over time.

4. Nuances and openings, without definitive conclusions

By recognising inclusive schooling as an institutional and philosophical paradigm (Thomazet, 2008), this article has examined "acting together" as a way of organising negotiated action (Mérini & Ponté,

2008; Bélanger et al., 2018). We applied this to co-teaching as a definitional framework, in order to analyse its effects on teachers' discourse and practice with deficit-labeled pupils. At the outset of the research, before co-teaching began, some teachers spoke of pupils in strongly deficit terms:

"These pupils don't try hard."
"These pupils are lazy."
"I can't do anything for these pupils."
"I don't know what to do for these pupils."

Through collaboration, the expertise of special education teachers in identifying needs, and a process of mutual enrichment, teachers' practices and discourses evolved. This was not only a change for classroom teachers but a joint evolution for both roles. The specialist was no longer the sole person responsible for pupils with "special needs." Co-regulation meant that both teachers adjusted together. Practices and discourse influenced one another: categories such as "in difficulty" or "with special educational needs" were gradually transformed, opening the way to more layered, systemic ways of speaking about pupils. Inclusive co-teaching thus encourages acceptance of diversity. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the research design itself contributed to these changes: meetings, seminars, and interviews provided opportunities to better define co-teaching practices. By stressing the alignment of objectives, resources, and pupil needs, the research team transmitted certain frameworks that may have helped tighten the focus of teaching.

While co-teaching has clearly led to shifts in teachers' practices and discourse, these changes must be qualified: The term pupil in difficulty has not entirely disappeared; it is still used as a convenient shorthand in some contexts.

Co-teaching can sometimes stabilise around internalized externalisation, with specialists still primarily supporting the same subgroup within the classroom. Teachers' "regulatory schemes of activity" (Goigoux, 2018) do not shift uniformly or permanently. We have yet to observe what happens when teachers are alone again with their classes. Finally, identifying and supporting pupils requires clarifying the concept of needs. As Barry (2011) argues, true inclusion involves recognizing anthropological needs—the needs that enable individuals to fully participate in society according to their capacities. Many teachers, however, confuse needs with responses: needing glasses is not the anthropological need, but the response to the need to see; needing the teacher's help is not itself a need, but a pedagogical response.

In France, institutional texts still often link special needs exclusively with disability. Yet all individuals have needs. As Barry (2011) suggests, speaking of learning needs may help overcome the harmful division between pupils "with needs" and those "without," or between deficit-labeled pupils and others. To truly remove the category of deficit-labeled pupils from our discourse, we must move from an inclusive school associated only with special educational needs to a school of learning needs, addressed to all pupils (Champain & Dufournet, 2024).

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