



Research paper

Building successful partnerships between teaching assistants and teachers: Which interpersonal factors matter?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Achieving effective TA-teacher partnerships is a complex process that requires time, effort, and external support.
- Interpersonal factors that affect TA-teacher partnerships should be considered when analysing their impact.
- Personal affinity, open communication, the sense of belonging, and professional compatibility are key to feel at ease.
- Trust can be achieved when partners' expectations are fulfilled, with open communication and teamwork.
- The role attributed and the interpersonal treatment are essential to feel respected and valued.

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies the factors that characterise effective interpersonal partnerships between teaching assistants (TAs) and teachers working in inclusive schools in Catalonia (Spain). This phenomenological study, based on 40 semi-structured interviews with 22 TAs and 18 teachers revealed that the main interpersonal factors affecting partnerships were: feeling at ease; trust; respect; and valuing one another. Participants detailed key aspects such as personal affinity, professional compatibility, open communication, a sense of belonging to a class-group, and teamwork, as additionally important for successful partnerships. The findings provide insight into how schools can support the development of effective TA-teacher partnerships. Implications are discussed.

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Inclusive education for all children is a worldwide goal, underpinned and promoted by the United Nations (2015) with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In many western education systems, the employment and deployment of Teaching Assistants (TAs) has emerged as a popular model for reducing forms of exclusion and marginalization and facilitating access to general or mainstream education for children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities (Blatchford, 2012; Butt, 2016b; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Jardí et al., 2021). However, there are concerns that this practice, often when used further contextual support, has

unintended consequences (Giangreco et al., 2010; Lim et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2011). Blatchford et al. (2012), for example, observed stark differences between the quantity and the quality of the support from teachers and TAs for pupils with and without SEN in UK schools. Pupils with SEN spent more time being supported by TAs, and less time taught by teachers, compared with their typically-developing peers. What is more, the quality of support from TAs was lower.

The issue of role clarity is a consistent theme within the literature on TA deployment and practice (Brock & Carter, 2016; Radford et al., 2015; Slater & Gazeley, 2018). When role boundaries are unclear, responsibility for teaching pupils with SEN has been found to drift away from teachers and towards TAs (Blatchford et al., 2012). Some researchers have recommended replacing TAs with qualified teachers for certain specific supports (Bairbre et al., 2020),

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while others suggest defining and upholding clearer boundaries and roles can improve experiences for learners with SEN. Butt (2016a), for example, proposes the *Teacher Assistant as Facilitator* (TAAF) model, in which teachers assume the responsibility of supporting students with disabilities or learning difficulties in the classroom, while the TA supports students' interactions.

In order to address the aforementioned gaps in support quality, previous studies have investigated the appropriate training and supervision of TAs and teachers, working environment and conditions of employment (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Many of the strategic and day-to-day factors affect the deployment and impact of TA provision are captured in the *Wider Pedagogical Role* (WPR) model (Webster et al., 2011). The WPR model was developed to explain findings from the large-scale UK Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, which found widespread dysfunctions and inconsistencies regarding the use of TAs (Blatchford et al., 2012). In summary, the WPR model contextualises the fine point of TAs' practice – specifically, their interactions with pupils – within a wider set of parameters and related factors, including: how effectively schools and teachers deploy TAs in mainstream classrooms; how well trained teachers are to know how to deploy TAs; the extent to which they plan lessons which make the most of having a TA in the classroom, and the opportunities teachers and TAs have to discuss lessons beforehand. Crucially, the WPR model highlights how the effectiveness deployment of TAs does not depend on the TAs themselves, but on the decision-making of school leaders and teachers.

1. Conceptual framework of partnership

While significant research exists on the preparedness, deployment and employment conditions of TAs, there is comparatively less on the factors that comprise and underpin successful working relationship between TAs and teachers. To date, research has focussed on how to foster teamwork and interprofessional collaboration between TAs and teachers (Capizzi & Fonte, 2012; Cremin et al., 2005; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). However, the process of building partnerships itself and the 'soft' characteristics, crucial to an effective and efficient partnership working in schools, has received relatively less attention from researchers. For this reason, we looked to teacher-teacher relationships as well as relationships in other environments and services that depend on collaboration between professionals and paraprofessionals – such as in healthcare (nurses and healthcare workers) or law (solicitors and paralegals) – as they are likely to be the closest antecedents for TAs-teachers relationships.

As to *building partnerships*, Pratt (2014) proposed the *Achieving Symbiosis* model for the development of a successful co-teaching relationship. The first phase of this three-phase model is the 'initiation', when teachers are paired on the basis of a screening for their shared attitudes towards partnership work. The continuum of feelings experienced when beginning a new relationship (ranging from hesitation to anticipation) can be mostly applicable to the TA-teacher partnership. However, the formation of partnerships is directed by the school leadership and will be based on broader range factors – principally relating to the needs of the children in the class – with comparatively less consideration given to the personal qualities and dispositions to partnership working held by teachers and TAs.

In the second phase, teachers test the waters of their relationship, getting to know their partners and learning how to work together. Through this process, co-teachers begin to complement each other, build positive interdependent partnerships, and engage in professional reflection to improve joint practices. This phase is mediated by: interpersonal factors, such as the compatibility of the

two teachers, parity, trust, and rapport; and external factors such as opportunities for professional development, co-planning time, and administrative support. Finally, the author highlights strategies to become more effective partners based on individual strengths, including being openminded, using open communication, finding common ground, using humour, being selfless, and offering to help.

In the third phase of achieving symbiosis, all the pieces of the partnership come together and work effectively. This phase begins when the participants in the relationship are fulfilled both personally and professionally. In this final stage partners value the relationship, handle challenges smoothly, and have similar instructional styles.

On the basis of their study of teachers' stories about creating shared spaces for co-teaching, Rytivaara et al. (2019) concluded that partnerships are not something that happens suddenly. They are developed through negotiation and considerable time and effort. They highlighted three steps to their development: 1) commitment to building a partnership with a colleague; 2) learning to share practical knowledge through discussing their personalities, professional backgrounds, and classroom practices; and 3) joint reflection.

Another study of multi-professional cooperation in teaching dyads, conducted in Germany, found that, despite the theories, in practice teachers fail to develop as a dyad. Teachers in the study were found to be at an early stage of developing skills for collegiate working; they were neither sharing their understanding about cooperation nor adapting to each other (Jurkowski & Müller, 2018). Likewise, Scruggs et al. (2007) metasynthesis on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms found no evidence within the qualitative research base of true collaboration between two equal partners. Moreover, something similar has been concluded in investigations that included TAs, with Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) referring to collaboration implementation as 'aspirational'.

As regards specific literature on TAs, Capizzi and Fonte (2012) designed a systematic tool that should help TAs and teachers create a collaborative setting. Their four components – orientation to the setting, professional duties and responsibilities, communication, and professional development – are particularly relevant for this investigation since they are aimed at fostering teamwork. With this tool, partners can clarify their roles and expectations and renegotiate them; essential steps for effective collaboration.

The models described above have a common phase of negotiation and reflection about both personal and professional issues that may affect practices. This discussion most likely takes place when stakeholders are planning their co-taught lessons and spending time together. In fact, literature about co-teaching highlights that for its successful implementation both teachers must be involved in co-planification, co-construction and co-evaluation (Murawski & Dieker, 2004; Pratt et al., 2016; Scruggs et al., 2007). Scantlebury et al. (2008) focused on more relational factors such as co-respect and co-responsibility but the third one, co-generative dialogue, also depends on external deployment factors. In addition, knowledge about team teaching also facilitates collaborative practices (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016).

Concerning the *interpersonal relationship* between stakeholders, the items from the Schutz and Valley (1992) questionnaire are useful to operationalize the construct. For this qualitative article, the dimensions that have relevance are *interpersonal behaviour* and *interpersonal feelings* because they can contribute to describing what makes partners feel at ease, respected, valued, and trusting towards the other from a more interpsychological perspective. As to *interpersonal behaviour*: *inclusion* considers how much a person desires to be involved in groups; *control* concerns the balance between control and being controlled by others and has to do with decision making and responsibilities assumed; *openness* involves

how much people enjoy sharing thoughts and feelings with others. Regarding *interpersonal feelings*, *significance* explains how relevant and valued a person is perceived to be. The *feeling of competence* describes the capacity that someone has to cope with situations, handle problems and be self-sufficient. Finally, *likability* is based on how much people like to be with each other because of their behaviour or the atmosphere created. It has to do with liking oneself when being with the other.

Other qualitative studies have considered interpersonal factors such as openness, mutual respect, trust, parity, mutuality, personal and professional compatibility and rapport (e.g. [Devecchi & Rouse, 2010](#); [Ekornes, 2015](#); [Hall, 2005](#); [Pratt, 2014](#); [Scruggs et al., 2007](#); [Slater & Gazeley, 2018](#)). However, few of these studies are focused on TA-teacher relationships. Relationship between TAs and teachers can be slightly different on a purely relational level since the partners do not have the same status and working conditions ([Butt, 2016b](#); [Riggs & Mueller, 2001](#); [Smith, 2017](#)). Therefore, a comprehensive and holistic study on the dyad TA-teacher is needed to fill this gap in the literature.

Within the TAs field, but not exclusively focused on partnerships, [Giangreco et al. \(2001\)](#) explored the perceptions of different stakeholders — including TAs themselves — as regards respect, appreciation and acknowledgement of TAs, important interpersonal factors for the current investigation. Additionally, [Biggs et al. \(2016\)](#) investigated TA-teacher partnerships considering the influences between and beyond them as well as administration influences. They highlighted the importance of TA and teacher attitudes, their proficiency, professionalism and initiative, and other external factors such as supporting their needs, clarifying direction and expectations, and monitoring their performance to provide support if necessary. They also analysed what they called shared and underlying influences, including concepts consistent with the interpersonal factors priorly mentioned. Therefore, the qualitative investigations carried out by [Giangreco et al. \(2001\)](#) and [Biggs et al. \(2016\)](#) are important antecedents for the present research. However, we specifically focus on the interpersonal factors that emerge from TAs' and teachers' discourse, shedding light on the details provided regarding the process of building their partnership.

1.1. Contextualisation

This research is conducted in Catalonia, a Spanish region which has its own education legislation based on a general state law. Catalonia's decree on inclusive education states that the inclusion of all children in regular schools should be guaranteed ([Catalunya, 2017](#)). To foster inclusive education the Department designed a multi-tiered system of support that classifies supports and measures according to their intensity. TA direct support is conceived as one of the intensive measures to foster students' participation and achievements. In Catalonia there are five types of TAs: the Pre-school Education Specialist (PES), the Social Integration Specialist (SIS), the Special Education Educator (SEE) and the Special Education Assistant (SEA) —hired by the Department of Education— and the Carer —hired per hours by subcontracted companies. The main role of SEEs, SEAs and Carers is to support students with severe disabilities, behaviour difficulties or students whose situation is supposed to require intensive support. PESs are assigned to the first year of preschool (3 years old). Finally, SISs are not assigned to any class group and intervene directly with students in at-risk situations, their families, and other social agents from their communities ([Catalunya, 2020a, 2020b](#)). In practice, all these TAs are providing educational support to vulnerable students.

Therefore, research on TAs is important for inclusive education, especially in little-studied contexts such as Catalonia. Moreover, as

shown in the literature review, there is scarce research on TA-teacher partnership and the more generic research does not delve into interpersonal factors. Taking all of this into account, this article is aimed at identifying the factors that define the interpersonal relationship between TAs and teachers in order to ensure better partnership experiences within classrooms.

1. How do TAs and teachers describe their interpersonal experiences?
2. How do TAs and teachers explain the process of development of their partnership?

2. Methods

To provide an insight into the interpersonal relationship between TAs and teachers and to examine how a favourable partnership is built, we conducted a qualitative phenomenological study. This approach enhances the stakeholders' voices through studying the meaning they attribute to their experiences within a particular context ([Brantlinger et al., 2005](#)).

2.1. Settings

The study participants were public school teachers and TAs working in 14 inclusive schools. The inclusiveness of the school was defined using the results of an external investigation that classified schools *into three levels of inclusion* ([Sabando et al., 2019](#)) (see procedures). They used 'The Questionnaire on the inclusive profile of primary schools in Catalonia' which measured the schools' inclusive profile according to six dimensions: school organization — organisational characteristics and inclusive functioning of the school (e.g., student distribution and barriers for inclusion); inclusive school climate — measures to foster collaboration, coexistence and respect between stakeholders (e.g., welcome plan for students and professionals, measures to ensure a good coexistence and against bullying, measures to reduce absenteeism); classroom organization —classroom arrangements and adult participation within classrooms (e.g., grouping criteria and frequency of two adults in classrooms); educational support — description of how, who, where and when the support is provided (e.g., role of special education teachers and participation of different stakeholders in support decisions); community involvement — kind and level of participation of different stakeholders (e.g., volunteering composition and levels of family participation); and lifelong learning — instances of training and professional reflection (e.g., spaces for reflection and percentage of teachers involved in trainings).

From the 615 urban Catalan schools (54.6% of the population) classified, we selected the 10 early childhood and primary schools that ranked as the most inclusive in all dimensions, and the next 4 schools that had the 'lifelong learning' dimension at a medium level of inclusion. The schools additionally reflected different socioeconomic contexts: 2 schools were classified in the lowest level of complexity,¹ 7 in the medium level and 5 in the highest level (see the distribution in [Table 1](#)).

2.2. Participants

We recruited 22 TAs and 18 form teachers from the 14 schools. In terms of the participants' background characteristics, 90.9% of

¹ A status established by the Department of Education according to various indicators related to socioeconomic data. High complexity schools should have a lower student-to-teacher ratio, faster teacher replacement, preferential access to student grants and larger budgets.

Table 1
School description and participant distribution.

School	Complexity level	Dimensions at the highest level of inclusion	Participants
1	High	5	TA14, TA1, T1 & T2
2	Medium	6	TA15, TA2, T3 & T4
3	Medium	5	TA3, TA16, TA17, T5 & T6
4	High	6	TA18, TA4 & T7
5	Medium	6	TA5, TA19 & T8
6	High	6	TA6 & T9
7	High	5	TA7, TA8, TA20, T10 & T11
8	Medium	6	TA9 & T12
9	High	6	TA10 & T13
10	Low	6	TA11 & T14
11	Medium	6	TA12 & T15
12	Medium	6	TA21 & T16
13	Low	6	TA13 & T17
14	Medium	5	TA22 & T18

the TAs were female, ranging from 22 to 58 years old ($M = 42$, $SD = 9.8$). The TAs had work experience ranging from 1 to 20 years ($M = 9.41$, $SD = 6.19$), and 12 were hired by a subcontracted company (carers), while 10 were directly hired by the Department of Education. Most TAs worked across different classrooms, providing individualised (one-to-one) support to 6 students with severe disabilities or behaviour difficulties on average. For more detailed sociodemographic information see Table 2.

All the teachers in the sample were female, and aged 28–65 years old ($M = 40.3$, $SD = 13.4$). Their work experience ranged from 3 to 26 years ($M = 13.11$, $SD = 7.1$) and they had 2 pupils with severe disabilities or behaviour difficulties in their classroom on average (see Table 2). The maximum class size in Early childhood and Primary Education in Catalonia is 25 students, 22 in high complexity schools.

2.3. Instruments

For this study, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted and lasted an average of 43.5 min. The interview guide was designed on the basis of four main topics that emerged from prior research (e.g. Capizzi & Fonte, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Pratt, 2014; Schutz & Valley, 1992): 1) roles, 2) communication, 3) interpersonal interaction and 4) professional identity (see supplementary material). The content of this guide was trialled through a focus group with university teachers ($n = 2$) and schoolteachers from a university-school network on inclusive education ($n = 6$). They found the questions appropriate only suggesting vocabulary nuances (e.g., to replace 'role' for a clearer word or expression). They also stressed the relevance of making the questions as open as possible.

2.4. Procedure

The *Consell d'Avaluació Superior* (Catalan Government) authorised the research and facilitated the identification of the most inclusive schools. Following the European Commission (2013) ethical guidelines, schools were informed about the project, the research goals and the confidentiality of both the school and participants. We also explained that participants could withdraw their consent at any point of the investigation and their right to know the findings of the research. All the schools showed an interest and in the first instance, TAs were invited to participate. Those who agreed to take part were asked to identify the teacher with whom they considered they worked best with; some TAs chose the same teacher. Those teachers selected by the TAs were then invited to participate. Before the interview, each participant was informed

again about the research and the ethical aspects and signed an informed consent form. Interviews were individual and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were sent to each interviewed stakeholder to guarantee that their words correctly represented their perspective. Only comments on accurate vocabulary or expressions were returned. Nobody withdrew consent or asked to change content.

2.5. Data analysis

After transcribing all the interviews, an initial coding scheme based on semi-structured questions and existing research in the field was presented to the research team. The coding scheme drew together main themes, categories, and sub-categories and was applied to a preliminary content analysis of 10 interviews (4 teachers and 6 TAs) in order to gain an overview of the data. Emerging sub-categories were added inductively while analysing data with the Nvivo 11 pro software. Despite taking consideration of prior research as a measure of credibility, an inductive coding process was used in order to more accurately reflect stakeholders' voices as somewhat ambiguous themes —such as *openness*, *significance*, *inclusion*, *likability* (Schutz & Valley, 1992) or *rapport*, *hierarchy* and *shared challenges* (Biggs et al., 2016)— did not fully capture the meaning provided by the participants from this particular context.

Researchers agreed on the meaning of each category and sub-category; code and meaning saturation were reached (Hernández et al., 2006). Then, the 40 interviews were analysed, and a second researcher analysed each sub-category in the research data set. To complement this peer debriefing strategy of credibility, the level of agreement was tested. The Kappa coefficient illustrated excellent and good levels of agreement across experts in each category (*feeling at ease*, Kappa = .91; *trust*, Kappa = .84; *respect and value*, Kappa = .92; and *building partnerships*, Kappa = .78; with a 95% Confidence Interval) (McHugh, 2012). In addition to the thematic analysis with the identification of the reciprocity of concepts among the multiple perspectives (Larkin et al., 2019), less reported but highly descriptive information was also included. The coding provided exact counts of all the mentions of a given code (see Table 1).

3. Findings

This section is organised in four sub-sections which are consistent with the four main categories of analysis: *feeling at ease*, *trust*, *respect and value*, and *building partnerships*. The first three sub-sections describe TAs' and teachers' interpersonal experiences

Table 2
Sociodemographic data of participants.

School	Participant	Professional profile	Educational stage	Highest education level	Experience (years)	Pupils with SEN assigned	Contract
1	T2	Teacher	EC ^a	Tertiary education (teacher)	12	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	T1	Teacher	PE ^b	Tertiary education (teacher)	26	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA14	SEE	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (SIS)	4	4	full-time (37,5 h.)
2	TA1	Carer	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (administrative)	11	5	piece work (14 h)
	T3	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	13	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
	T4	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	20	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA15	SEE	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (PES)	16	10	full-time (37,5 h.)
3	TA2	Carer	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	15	4	piece work (20 h.)
	T5	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	24	3	full-time (37,5 h.)
	T6	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	4	4	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA16	SEE	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (psychologist)	16	12	full-time (37,5 h.)
4	TA17	SEA	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	3	7	half-time (31,25 h.)
	TA3	Carer	ECE, PE and SE ^c	Tertiary education (journalist)	11	10	piece work (18 h.)
	T7	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	22	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA18	SIS	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 ^d (SIS)	4	No assignment	full-time (37,5 h.)
5	TA4	Carer	ECE and PE	Vocational education-1 ^e (administrative)	13	3	piece work (25 h.)
	T8	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	9	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA19	SEE	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (SIS)	1	7	full-time (37,5 h.)
6	TA5	Carer	ECE and PE	Vocational education-1 (nurse assistant)	12	7	piece work (20 h.)
	T9	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	10	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
7	TA6	Carer	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (PES)	11	4	piece work (20 h.)
	T10	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	9	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	T11	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	3	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA20	PES	ECE	Vocational education-2 (PES)	4	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
8	TA7	Carer	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	2	1	piece work (10 h.)
	TA8-C	Carer	ECE	School graduate	17	3	piece work (15 h.)
	T12	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	16	3	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA9	Carer	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (psychologist)	1	7	piece work (25 h.)
9	T13	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	3	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA10	Carer	ECE and PE	School graduate	18	5	piece work (25 h.)
10	T14	Teacher	ECE	Tertiary education (teacher)	9	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA11	Carer	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	20	3	piece work (25 h.)
11	T15	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	21	3	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA12	Carer	ECE and PE	School graduate	5	3	piece work (25 h.)
12	T16	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	9	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA21	SEE	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (SIS)	13	6	full-time (37,5 h.)
13	T17	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	15	2	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA13	SEE	ECE and PE	Vocational education-2 (SIS)	8	11	full-time (37,5 h.)
14	T18	Teacher	PE	Tertiary education (teacher)	11	1	full-time (37,5 h.)
	TA22	SEE	ECE and PE	Tertiary education (social educator)	2	7	full-time (37,5 h.)

^a ECE: Early Childhood Education.

^b PE: Primary Education.

^c SE: Secondary Education.

^d Vocational education-2: ISCED-4, post-secondary non-tertiary education level (UNESCO, 2014).

^e Vocational education-1: ISCED-3, Upper secondary education level (UNESCO, 2014).

(research question 1) while the last one explains how they developed partnerships (research question 2). Table 3 shows the prevalence of codes for TAs and teachers per each sub-category.

3.1. What makes TAs and teachers feel at ease?

When two professionals are working together in the same space, they need to feel at ease and comfortable with each other. Half of the participants (12 TAs and 11 teachers) reported *affinity* as the most relevant factor to feel at ease with one another (see

Table 3
Categories, sub-categories, and frequencies (n) per profile of participant.

Category	Sub-category	TAs	Teachers	TOTAL
Feeling at ease	Affinity	12	11	23
	Open communication	12	10	22
	Sense of belonging	15	4	19
	Professional compatibility	9	9	18
	Autonomy	6	5	11
	Feeling welcome	5	1	6
Trust	Fulfilment of professional expectations	11	12	23
	Open communication	5	5	10
	Working as a team	2	6	8
	Inherent	2	5	7
Respect & Value	Role attributed	14	11	25
	Interpersonal treatment	10	5	15
Building partnerships		13	10	23

Table 1). Some described affinity as an intangible sensation or synergy of harmony, or chemistry between them. Teacher-15 specified that this can happen with any kind of school professional, and that it is not exclusive to TAs and teacher. There are people with whom one can feel 'good vibes', 'in tune' with or easily establish a bond. Teacher-8 reported:

Every person is different, as it is different with every teacher. In fact, in this school there are a lot of half groups and these are not the same with one teacher or another. It's the same, in the end, it's a personal affinity issue. It should not matter if there is affinity or not but matters. We should agree and work for and with children. [...] Sometimes someone with whom you feel at ease comes [into the classroom] and sometimes someone else comes and you feel more uncomfortable or it's harder to work with them.

Teacher-18 described how this connection made communication easier, as non-verbal interactions, such as a glance could convey meaning and information. Participants explained that mutual understanding emerged through working together over time. Some participants linked likeability of the other to being able to support each other professionally and personally. Having a collaborative and supportive attitude is described as relevant to achieving affinity.

Connectedness was perceived as a key factor for partnership that could be fostered through frequent and quality communication (Teacher-18). Ensuring *open communication* was key for partnerships. Most TAs ($n = 12$) and teachers ($n = 10$) deemed important to regularly talk about educational practices and address issues calmly together. As teacher-8 said, when the interactions are not flowing as they should, professionals should sit and tackle conflicts. In order to agree, partners should focus and keep in mind their shared professional goals.

Most TAs ($n = 15$) described the *sense of belonging* as fundamental to feeling at ease within the classroom. While this interpersonal factor was very relevant for TAs, fewer teachers ($n = 4$) stressed on this as an important factor for their partnership. As TA-11 put it, TAs need to be considered as professionals within classrooms, not feeling 'like furniture'. Teacher-17 explained that when the TA was in the classroom, she prepared the type of learning activities that she would be unable to carry out properly when the TA was not there. TA-17 reported that when she feels part of the classroom, she feels more comfortable. An example of feeling included are instances when teachers asked for her opinion and she felt heard. Feeling excluded from classroom processes prompted feelings of sadness, although she said she tried not to take it personally.

Participants reported that TAs can feel integrated into a classroom, but not the whole school, and vice versa. The school level is an important context for interpreting 'sense of belonging' as wider deployment conditions, such as the amount of time teachers and TAs spend together, their participation in meetings or opportunities for any kind of coordination, have an impact at the classroom level. TA-11 illustrated this point, describing how, if she had been hired at the same time as teachers (almost two weeks before the school term started), she would not have missed important information that directly informed her daily practices (such as a training on Fragile X syndrome).

TAs also described a need to be presented to the whole classroom group as professionals, and to *be welcomed* on a daily basis when they go into classrooms. For example, teachers saying hello when they arrive, showing interest in them, being attentive, etc. (e.g., TA-11, TA-16, TA-22). This factor, despite not being reported by many stakeholders was another factor to which TAs are more

sensitive than teachers (5 TAs contrasting with 1 teacher).

Participants reported that sharing perspectives on education, goals and agreeing on classroom practices were also important to their sense of feeling at ease with their partners. This *professional compatibility* included having a shared perspective on inclusive education and was highlighted by the same number of TAs ($n = 9$) and teachers ($n = 9$). Some TAs highlighted the importance of the teacher being fully involved with students with SEN and noticing when they are not in the classroom. For TA-16, it is 'hurtful' when the teacher overlooks a child and does not support them as she thinks they should. For TAs and teachers, professional compatibility is not only about individual character, but about their values and commitment towards education. Thus, achieving professional compatibility is easier when teachers and TAs share the same perspective on which are the milestones of education, how to better include students, share the same management style, and when both have high expectations on students.

Some TAs described wanting teachers to provide some general direction to their work, but preferred working with the teachers who allowed them some *autonomy*. TAs ($n = 6$) and teachers ($n = 5$) reference this factor in roughly equal proportions. Flexible teachers let them take the initiative, move around the classroom, and sometimes lead activities. TAs felt more comfortable when teachers provided them some room to use their discretion in decision-making.

3.2. What makes TAs and teachers trust each other?

Participants felt that they could trust their colleagues when they believed their practices and actions were in line with their own, and that they would have a positive impact, and *fulfil* their *professional expectations*. This is the most reported factor among TAs ($n = 11$) and teachers ($n = 12$) when delving into what makes them trust each other. Two teachers described that their trust in TAs was derived through the experience of working alongside them. As Teacher-2 put it:

I don't trust them because of their qualifications or professional profile. It's more the experience they have [...] the trust happens when they start to work and you can see how they work, doesn't it? And you see how they work with the child. If I see that the child is calmer with a TA, I will ask for her.

Seven participants (2 TAs and 5 teachers) said that trust should be automatic on the basis that their partner was a professional. Some participants also highlighted more trust when their partners transmitted security or self-confidence. Teacher-10 said this has a calming effect.

Participants, in a consistent proportion of TAs ($n = 5$) and teachers ($n = 5$), linked trust in their partners with *open communication*: the space and opportunity to talk openly about children, and to share opinions and feelings. Such talk was described as transparent and sincere, direct and unmediated by a third person (Teacher-2). Receiving and providing feedback about practices, negotiating and being able to suggest and refuse proposals was only possible when trust exists between partners. TA-3 remarked that open communication made her feel secure and more confident in the classroom. For teacher-10, trustworthiness was related to an individual's personality:

For me it's the personality. If you see that it is a humble and open person that wants to learn. You are with her and you feel the trust to say to her: look, the session hasn't worked. Let's learn about this ... If you can say this, you are in. If you don't have enough trust to say this, or if you feel that this person will turn

against you using your words or actions ... it would be difficult to work together.

Finally, participants described the complementary and reciprocal nature of *working as a team* as a contributory factor in increasing trust. However, more teachers than TAs mentioned this factor ($n = 6$; $n = 2$, respectively). This can be explained by perception bias as regards teamwork among teachers, since in Catalonia most TAs are not included in the teamwork (Catalunya, 2020a). Consistently, only two TAs mention teamwork when delving into 'trust'. Teacher-3 described how in working together one partner is able to see things that the other cannot. Teacher-18 said that she helped the TA and the TA helped her because they trusted one another. TA-13 additionally described that participating in leisure activities for teachers inside or outside the school helped to improve relationships, and to work better.

3.3. What makes TAs and teachers feel respected and valued?

Though two different concepts, participants associated feeling respected and feeling valued with the same aspects: the *role attributed* to them; and the *interpersonal treatment* they received. While both TAs and teachers associate the perception of respect and value to the roles and responsibilities that TAs assume in practically equal proportions, interpersonal treatment is a factor that concerns more TAs ($n = 10$) than teachers ($n = 5$). TAs belong to a lower employment category and have a worse status than teachers, so TAs might be more sensitive or be more affected by how others address and treat them.

TAs felt respected when teachers asked for their opinion and advice, and they felt listened to when their ideas were considered (TA-16). This was not the experience of all TAs, as TA-3 described:

In general, I don't feel respected professionally. For them you're someone who takes a problem off their hands, nothing more. I don't participate and they don't ask me to. It depends on the attitude of each form teacher, but you're like the refuse collector that comes to take away the garbage, yeah? [...] I don't care about attending the meetings or not, but they could ask you for written, spoken, recorder, telephone, information. And, once the meeting is over, they should give you a report of what's happened. Why? Because it has implications on the state of the kid, and you never know what happens; you're left behind.

TAs associated being included in meetings and participating and being heard with feeling valued. They also reported the responsibilities that teachers shared with them influence feelings of value. There was an indication that TAs felt more valued when the roles they undertook were more pedagogical in nature.

TA-18 explained that she feels respected when she feels she is treated like another professional, and that it is 'impossible to work without respect'. Respect implies that partners appreciate one another's work.

3.4. Building partnerships

Building an effective working partnership is a process that requires time and commitment. TA-1 explained it is a process that should flow and grow. Participants agreed that the dynamics were more established with partner they had worked with for longer. But effort is needed too, if a productive relationship is to flourish, as TA-10 explained:

I believe that when you begin a relationship with someone it's not the same the first year than the second, never mind the third. It can grow, or it can diminish, you decide. It's like when you start a romantic relationship. That is, in the beginning with the teacher I didn't know how to move, I didn't know her. One day she saw me pissed off and asked what's wrong, I told her my personal situation and she calmed me down and hug me. I believe it's the relationship between two people.

The process of getting to know each other evolves until both professionals start trusting one another, until they start fitting together as TA-21 details:

I believe that you don't have to just look at the child, you need to have some foresight and know who you're going to be with in the classroom. Then, somehow, you need to often know how to play more with the adult than the student, because you will manage more if you get to know how the adult works. A great deal of my job is more finding the terrain with the adult [...] You're not there to judge anyone. You should observe what they actually like, what they don't, everyone's a world of their own, their own quirks, their own hang-ups, and, in the end, you follow a path that sometimes is a little longer, but you have to follow this path to reach the student as well as the teacher.

Some teachers suggested that partnerships with TAs could be strengthened if TAs were not rotated around classrooms and stayed in the same room as much as possible. In this way, a 'co-tutoring' dynamic might be created. Teacher-5 added the following:

So, if it were two of us in the room, and we were always the same people, then it's very easy because then there's like a series of agreements, yeah? It just flows smoothly. But if there isn't even a referent, first someone comes in, then someone else and like this all day long, when you find a thing you don't know if you should say something, or not.

4. Discussion

Teaching assistants and teachers are meant to, together, carry out a huge variety of roles and responsibilities and deal with complex situations. To do it properly some interpersonal factors contributing to building favourable partnerships should be enhanced. Exploring how TAs and teachers describe their interpersonal experiences, the present investigation sheds light on what makes them feel at ease, trust, respect and value each other. These interpersonal factors (if favourable) lead to greater partnership experiences, having direct consequences on the educational support offered by those adults. In this section we discuss these interpersonal factors highlighting, in each one, their implications for practice. Finally, we list, as summary, the main implications and contributions of our study, its limitations and prospects.

One of the key factors that made participants *feel at ease* was *affinity*. Prior research on co-teaching broadly included this factor as part of compatibility, emphasising its relevance for the success of co-teachers' partnership (Scruggs et al., 2007). In contrast, in Pratt (2014) this personal agreement or sympathy between co-teachers can be considered within rapport. The novelty of the term affinity is that it is specific for the personal connection among TA and teachers, which was differentiated from the professional one. Consistently with Hall (2005) and Pratt (2014), we found that there are elements such as people's personalities and characteristics, gender, background, life stage, hobbies, attitudes, communication

style, and conflict style that can help to develop this close and good relationship. Thus, to ensure effective partnerships, school leaders should pair teachers and TAs considering their personalities and preferences. Despite its unintentional nature, affinity can also be worked on.

Hence, administrations should guarantee quality time in which TAs and teachers could get to know and understand each other to ensure collaborative and supportive attitudes. This quality time includes formal and informal school situations (e.g. regular meetings, spaces to provide and receive feedback, the coffee break, etc.) as well as leisure time (e.g. Christmas team-building activities). Therefore, school leaders should schedule compatible timetables for partners. Moreover, once time for meetings is guaranteed, it should be also structured to maximise it (e.g. Capizzi & Fonte, 2012 proposal).

Ensuring quality time is also essential to achieve an *open communication* between stakeholders. However, discrepancies within the workspace or relationships are usual, so administrations should provide training opportunities to jointly learn communication and collaborative skills (e.g. workshops addressed at raising assertiveness). This would help partners to proactively handle interpersonal problems rather taking offense. This skill is particularly relevant in TA-teacher partnerships since they have different professional backgrounds and responsibilities. As is stated for other interprofessional partnerships (Borg & Drange, 2019; Hall, 2005), TAs and teachers might have to overcome communication barriers due to profession-specific worldviews, different approaches and vocabulary or a lack of communication or common understanding. Individuals are not the only ones responsible in ensuring that their partnership flows smoothly, administrations and school leaders play an important role too.

Our study suggests that the *sense of belonging* and the perception of being *welcomed* are key to feeling at ease but they are more relevant for TAs than for teachers. In fact, TAs experience more barriers in this area than teachers. The insignificant proportion of TAs within Catalan classrooms, the model of deployment —TAs working across several classes with different teachers and multiple students (Jardí et al., 2021)—, and their working conditions, might explain why TAs are more sensitive to the sense of belonging at classroom- and school-level as well as to the perception of being welcomed. The sense of belonging to a classroom had more to do with the partnership quality, whereas to the whole school it was related to external factors. Thus, in addition to prior recommendations on including TAs in formal and informal situations, school leaders should foster TA participation in decision-making as well as in co-planification, co-reflexion and co-assessment as TAs are also involved in teaching and learning processes. Co-planification would also help teachers to include TAs in lesson planning, ensuring they are welcomed and included everytime they enter each classroom. To make TAs feel informed, welcomed, and valued as a part of the school staff, school leaders should democratically design a reception plan addressed at TAs (clarifying school principles, policies, and practices). They should also introduce TAs to the whole school-team showing their position and raising awareness of the importance of welcoming attitudes.

These recommendations should help to achieve *professional compatibility* since they should serve as professional growth spaces for teachers and TAs to together reflect, discuss and learn about education, inclusion, students, and their general practices. Partners should reach consensus on the methods, lesson plan, priority objectives, and learning philosophy as well as matching their expectations of roles. Partners' choices should not only be evidence-based and clarified at school level but also adjusted individually according to TA preferences, feelings, experience, and expertise. This support should help teachers to include and empower TAs

fostering their *autonomy* if they want to achieve a relationship of collaboration instead of a non-recommended 'master-servant' relationship (Quicke, 2003). To feel at ease, TAs need to perceive that they are supported but also that they have autonomy to carry out the agreed tasks, no matter the role attributed (e.g., clerical, educative, assistance/care).

Despite the need for autonomy, as early described by Giangreco et al. (2001), the role attributed does have implications towards feeling *respected* and *valued*. To achieve effective partnerships, partners should tackle this issue finding a balance between making TAs feel "undervalued" and "taken advantage of". Thus, administrations should support them in achieving this matching not only providing adjusted guidance and training on effective roles (informed by research) but also on skills to tackle the continuum of feelings and to build effective partnerships. In fact, another contribution of this study regarding feeling respected and valued is the stress on the *interpersonal treatment*. That is, even when the above-mentioned factors were favourable, to feel respected and valued TAs needed to perceive they were treated as relevant professionals. Despite having different roles and responsibilities, TAs and teachers are both education professionals that contribute in different ways to achieving the same goals. Everybody should be treated equally as every task is important for the students' learning and wellbeing. This interpersonal factor goes beyond the employment conditions, training opportunities and other important external factors because it is finally influenced by the partners attitudes and culture. Thus, this should be purposefully addressed at system-, school- and individual-level.

All these recommendations for adjusting roles also considering partners' feelings led us to take a stance on roles and responsibilities despite being widely discussed in prior research (Brock & Carter, 2016; Butt, 2016b, Sharma & Salend, 2016; Slater & Gazeley, 2018). Most TAs agree to performing a role that exceeds the mere assistance, because to ensure inclusive education not only should the presence of students be guaranteed, but also their participation and achievements. Performing an educative role rather than an assisting one would be consistent with prior research recommendations on role models if TAs are part of a network of support. These inclusive and interdependent roles based on evidence, partnership, and teamwork should not be confused with assuming teacher duties without adequate preparation, training, direction, or supervision since this was linked to feelings of disrespect and isolation (Giangreco et al., 2010). Overreliance on TAs should be avoided (Biggs et al., 2016; Butt, 2016b; Giangreco et al., 2005). Therefore, to ensure that the stakeholders are properly prepared to implement more interdependent and inclusive roles, also considering interpersonal factors, skill training and ongoing support addressed at both TAs and teachers would be necessary.

Regarding *trust*, participants described aspects that required time as opposed to unintentional or instant connexions for feeling at ease. Partners trust each other when they think they are professionally compatible, when they feel confident to share their thoughts without feeling judged, and when they achieve the complementarity and reciprocity that teamwork brings. However, our findings show that another barrier to trust is inequality; partners should perceive that they can complement each other, mutually rather than hierarchically (Slater & Gazeley, 2018). This parity helps to achieve a sort of fluidity in teamwork which is helpful in practice (Pratt, 2014), especially considering their careers, as teachers are not always the ones who know the most about something. Collaborative teams share responsibility for actions and take into account personal needs for autonomy, independence and reciprocity enabling them to be and become (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010), which is relevant for partnership formation. Nevertheless,

while working conditions and time for coordination do not improve, teachers should chip in to keep TAs informed about the most relevant issues as part of their tasks. TAs need not know everything about the students, only some useful aspects for their practices. In addition to the formal meetings focused on work, assertive and open communication as well as teamwork can be fostered in informal situations; leisure activities were recommended by our participants to establish bonds of trust.

Building a partnership is reported to be a long-term pathway, it is a process that should be purposefully fostered and adjusted through time. Partnerships are reported to grow with time, facing first impressions and checking and considering each other's working preferences and behaviours. Working together is challenging in itself (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). Our study suggests that achieving an effective partnership is as important as knowing how to support the child. To build an effective partnership TAs and teachers should work on the highlighted interpersonal factors that make them feel at ease, trust, respect and value each other. The resulting supportive relationship sometimes goes beyond the strictly professional. Most of the interpersonal factors detailed in our study can be fostered with proactive attitudes towards partnership as well as ensuring regular time for meetings, communication, reflection and collaboration (Capizzi & Fonte, 2012; Mowrey & King, 2019; Rytivaara et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, implications are not limited to what teachers and TAs can achieve on their own because, as mentioned, they need support from school leaders and administration as well. In Catalonia, the need for joint time and training contrasts with poor TA employment conditions: TAs are moving from classroom to classroom hired as specific support for some students with SEN, and, most, without remunerated hours for meetings, co-planning, teamwork or training (Jardí et al., 2021). In these itinerant models of deployment (Butt, 2016b) TAs work with several teachers having fewer opportunities to proactively work on their partnership. In addition, even the participation in meetings of those TAs that can (those hired by the Department of Education) depends on whether they are invited by teachers (Catalunya, 2020b). These conditions are barriers to achieving successful partnerships since the blooming of favourable interpersonal factors would be more difficult. Thus, administrations should foster models such as the teacher as facilitator models (e.g., Brock & Carter, 2016; Butt, 2016b) instead of assigning TAs to individual students. This might help to mitigate the 'velcro effect' between TAs and the students supported one-to-one described by Giangreco et al. (2005), as well as the double standards shown when using TAs as the primary educators of pupils with SEN (Webster et al., 2010). Finally, as to our study, these models of deployment ensure more time together to work on partnerships favouring educational support and school practices.

In short, the main implications are the following: 1) administrations and schools should seek to create stable and compatible pairings of teaching and non-teaching staff based on their interpersonal factors; 2) administrations and schools should also assign TAs to groups instead of to students with disabilities; 3) administrations should guarantee time for TAs (as support stakeholders) to fit their roles, co-plan, co-reflect, co-assess and build their partnership with teachers, including them in the school day-to-day; 4) schools should establish a reception plan to properly receive TAs; 5) administrations should support schools with ongoing training addressed at implementing effective role models that also consider how to achieve successful partnerships (e.g. a sort of team-teaching model) adjusted to TA responsibilities; and 6) In teacher colleges, universities and in initial TA training they should also teach and strengthen skills to build successful partnerships.

In addition to the highlighted implications for policies and practices, this article suggest to complement the WPR model

proposal (Webster et al., 2011) by adding the resulting interpersonal factors, thus contributing to theory. The interpersonal factors described should be understood considering the external factors that affect their deployment and practices. This even wider approach might help to discuss the impact of the support provided by TAs and teachers in future research. Moreover, this research informs of the deployment of TAs in a scarcely investigated context. From these 14 schools we can learn that despite meeting, at school level, the inclusion principles, the cultures, policies and practices are far from being inclusive for the TAs and, in turn, for the students that they support. We also learn that even not having the optimal conditions, successful partnerships can be built.

Findings should be contextualised and approached cautiously since qualitative research is often not as generalizable as results from large-scale research driven by, quantitative methods. The frequencies reported should only be used to see which interpersonal factors concerned each stakeholder profile of these particular schools. This study sought to provide depth via describing a range of experiences rather than finding a single truth. Thus, despite interviewing partners as inclusion criteria, participants were encouraged to refer to past partnership experiences contrasting them with their current ones. Finally, the analysis and interpretations were validated with a peer debriefing strategy instead of a second level of member checking as a measure of credibility (Brantlinger et al., 2005) which is a limitation in terms of ensuring that participant meanings are correctly interpreted.

Future research can quantitatively analyse the relationship between the factors that emerged and their impact on school practices. As relationships are social, they depend on the context where they take place (Slater & Gazeley, 2018), similar qualitative studies on the continuum of feelings and actions that help build more effective partnerships between TAs and teachers are needed to complement or expand the present one. Work on feelings within partnerships would be helpful itself as an introspective practice to self-knowledge and empowerment, to develop assertiveness between partners. Furthermore, to complement the interpersonal factors underlined, in future articles we will provide details on those external factors highlighted by TAs and teachers.

5. Conclusions

The education systems of many countries have attributed to TAs an important role for inclusive education. They are meant to work in close proximity with teachers, in a coordinated way to together achieve the same goals. Prior research highlighted important system- and school-level recommendations regarding TA working conditions, preparedness, and deployment. However, even when all these contextual factors are put into practice, there is something else in the relationship between teachers and TAs that contributes to a better or worse partnership. The present study contributes to this data gap describing the interpersonal experiences between TAs and teachers.

The stakeholders emphasised what does or does not help them feel at ease, trust, respect, and value the person with whom they support students. Participants provided details about personal affinity and professional compatibility with their partner, the importance of an open and honest communication, the sense of belonging to each class-group, feeling welcome every time they came in and experiencing autonomy when sharing about feeling at ease inside classrooms. To trust each other, participants pointed out the need that their partner fulfils their professional expectations, the importance of maintaining and open communication and working as a team. Finally, the key aspects that made stakeholders feel respected and valued depended on the perceived relevance of the role attributed to TAs and the interpersonal treatment

perceived.

These interpersonal factors that describe a quality partnership are not only ensured with favourable external factors (e.g., employment conditions, opportunities for professional development, time for coordination, appropriate supervision, and administrative support) which are the main recommendations of prior research (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco et al., 2010; Sharma & Salend, 2016). In fact, our findings showed that stakeholders built favourable relationships, even though the contextual factors were not the optimal. The interpersonal arena is even more important in TA-teacher partnerships since in this study stakeholders described factors such as interpersonal treatment, type of communication, the sense of belonging or the need for autonomy and mutuality in teamwork, which are linked to the perception of hierarchy, status differences and cultural barriers. Therefore, although we appeal to individual attitudes, efforts must also be made to change the culture of schools and communities.

A successful partnership is not something that just happens but something that teachers and TAs develop and improve together. Thus, schools should proactively address this relevant issue that directly affects support practices. In this article TAs and teachers explained how favourable partnerships can be achieved. Schools should consider what contributes to achieve positive interpersonal experiences and develop favourable partnerships to pair TAs and teachers. If the composition works, dyads should be maintained. Thus, administrations should not link TAs to students with SEN but to classrooms, as happens with teachers and ensure co-planification, co-reflexion and partnership-building time.

In addition to the implications for policies and practices highlighted, this article proposes a model to approach the specificities of the TA-teacher partnership which should be added to prior models that fail in considering and understanding the interpersonal factors that affect TA-teacher practices in order to achieve an even wider and more holistic perspective on TAs.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103523>.

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