Summary

The task of Dutch mainstream teachers has shifted since the 1990’s from referring students with special educational needs to special schools to adapting regular classrooms to meet their students’ needs. Though teachers generally recognise the need to implement these forms of adaptive teaching in their classrooms, meeting a range of student’s (special) educational needs is still a struggle for many teachers.

This dissertation argues that the traditional paradigm on special educational needs of diagnoses and deficits hinders teachers from fulfilling this task because 1) the teachers’ task is to address students’ additional support needs in terms of alterations within the classrooms and not their deficits and 2) teachers have a broader view on students in need of more support, rather than simply viewing students in terms of diagnosis. Therefore, another view on students’ needs is required: the additional support needs perspective. This viewpoint implies that students’ needs are viewed in terms of support needed in the classroom to attain set educational goals. These educational goals could pertain to a specific subject but also to a student’s social, emotional or behavioural development.

Although it is clear that this perspective is practice-based and internationally well established, there are—surprisingly—hardly any empirical insights on how these additional support needs are being perceived. If this viewpoint is to be taken seriously, and possibly implemented, we need to map teachers’ perceptions of students’ additional support needs.

Therefore, this dissertation explores characteristics of teacher-identified students with additional support needs and addresses their additional support needs, as perceived by teachers. The second aim is to evaluate these teachers’ perceptions, by exploring which student and teacher characteristics are associated with teacher-perceived students’ additional support needs. Third, this dissertation outlines whether teachers are able to meet perceived students’ needs.

Four empirical survey studies were conducted, all studying Dutch mainstream primary teachers and their students who were identified as in need of additional support requisite to attain set educational goals.

The first study (Chapter 2) explored characteristics of 151 teacher-identified students with additional support needs regarding school attainment, teacher-student relationship, behaviour in the classroom, cognitive processes for behaviour on school contexts and self-concept. It was observed that teachers perceive a heterogeneous group, including boys and girls, high and low achievers and mainly children without a clinical diagnosis. On average, teacher-identified students with special educational needs did not differ radically from the norm-referenced groups.
However, within-group analysis showed several significant differences between high- and low-achieving teacher-identified students, as well as between male and female identified students. Therefore, these students should not be regarded as a homogeneous group that can be defined categorically but rather as a group characterised by a spectrum of needs with many variations.

The second study (Chapter 3) studied teacher-perceived students’ additional support needs ($n = 114$), as addressed by 57 teachers. Results show that teachers discern four dimensions of teacher-perceived additional support needs of students: (a) the need for instructional support, (b) the need for on-task behavioural support, (c) the need for emotional support and (d) the need for peer support. Teacher-identified students scored significantly higher on all dimensions of additional learning support than non-identified students from the same classroom, indicating known-group validity of the dimensions. The views of teachers were related to the characteristics of students in terms of student attainment, teacher-perceived task-oriented behaviour of students, teacher-perceived (problem) behaviour in the classroom and teacher-perceived relationships with students.

The third study (Chapter 4) explored whether teachers’ perceptions ($n = 218$) of students’ additional support needs are biased by teachers’ characteristics, such as level of training, personality traits and self-efficacy beliefs. No effect was observed for level of training or years of experience in teaching. Moreover, none of the subscales of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs or personality traits were significant predictors of teacher-perceived students’ additional support needs. Thus, teachers’ professional views on students’ additional support needs surpass teachers’ professional and personal characteristics.

The fourth study (Chapter 5) explored teacher-perceived (in)capacities to meet their students’ needs and perceived sources of help or hindrance in meeting them among 108 Dutch teachers. These teachers perceive themselves as fairly capable of meeting students’ additional support needs, although least so when trying to meet peer and behavioural support needs, regardless of their level of training. Teachers’ own competencies (i.e., teacher level) are perceived to be helpful in all dimensions of students’ additional support needs. Factors at the school level are experienced as helping in three out of four dimensions, and factors at the student level are considered hindrances when trying to meet students’ behavioural support needs. These teachers’ sources of help of hindrance are likely to be more important when aiming to improve teacher’s capacities to meet students’ additional support needs than when aiming to improve teachers’ general self-efficacy beliefs.

To conclude, this dissertation demonstrated that teachers’ perceptions of students’ additional support needs could be viewed professional judgments, which are differentiated (i.e.,
reflecting a heterogeneous group; reflected in four dimensions of needs) and thorough (i.e., related to students’ characteristics, however not biased by teachers’ characteristics). The added value of this dissertation lies in finding empirically founded arguments to support the argument for the additional support perspective, in addition to the intuitive and practice-based arguments already established. The empirical building blocks, as presented in this thesis, have the potential to take this perspective on teacher-perceived students’ additional support needs in terms of alterations within classroom one step further. Hence, the radical change in direction from viewing students’ needs in terms of deficits to viewing students’ needs in terms of needed alterations within classrooms seems a worthy goal. This dissertation did not simply explore another view on students’ needs but provided the (first) contours of an alternative to identify and meet them.