Perceptions of Special Education Homeroom Teachers by Parents and Teachers in Israel

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Abstract	
Keywords: special education, homeroom teacher, parent-teacher relationship, professionality, trustworthiness, availability, empowerment	Homeroom teachers in special education make outstanding efforts and are extremely devoted to their work. However, they must contend with frustrated parents who are disappointed with the inability of these teachers to meet their needs and expectations. Accordingly, it is of great interest to examine parents' perceptions of the role of the homeroom teacher in special education. The current study examines these perceptions regarding four dimensions of the homeroom teacher's functioning versus the parents: Professionality, trustworthiness, availability, and empowerment. Parents' perceptions were examined in comparison with those of teachers at special education schools. The sample included 100 parents and 101 teachers in special education schools. The data were collected by a questionnaire constructed by the researchers in a previous study. The questionnaire includes four parts, examining the dimensions mentioned above. The teachers' questionnaire was identical, but they were instructed to refer to the relationship between the homeroom teacher and the parents. The findings show that the parents gave significantly lower evaluations than the teachers on all four dimensions: the homeroom teacher was perceived by the parents as less professional, less trustworthy, less available, and less empowering than evaluated by the teachers. The findings have practical implications for the training of special education teachers and for the professional development of teachers and also for coordinating expectations and defining boundaries that might help both homeroom teachers and parents form a constructive relationship.

Zusammenfasung	
Schlüsselworte: Besondere Bildung, Klassenlehrer, Eltern-Lehrer-Beziehung, Professionalität, Vertrauenswürdigkeit, Verfügbarkeit, Empowering	Klassenlehrer in der Sonderpädagogik leisten hervorragende Arbeit und sind äußerst engagiert bei ihrer Arbeit. Allerdings müssen sie sich mit frustrierten Eltern auseinandersetzen, die von der Unfähigkeit dieser Lehrer, ihre Bedürfnisse und Erwartungen zu erfüllen, enttäuscht sind. Dementsprechend ist es von großem Interesse, die Wahrnehmung der Eltern hinsichtlich der Rolle des Klassenlehrers in der Sonderpädagogik zu untersuchen. Die aktuelle Studie untersucht diese Wahrnehmungen in Bezug auf vier Dimensionen der Funktionsweise des Klassenlehrers im Vergleich zu den Eltern: Professionalität, Vertrauenswürdigkeit, Verfügbarkeit und Empowering. Die Wahrnehmungen der Eltern wurden im Vergleich zu denen der Lehrkräfte an Sonderschulen untersucht. Die Stichprobe umfasste 100 Eltern und 101 Lehrer an Sonderschulen. Die Daten wurden mithilfe eines Fragebogens erhoben, den die Forscher in einer früheren Studie erstellt hatten. Der Fragebogen besteht aus vier Teilen, in denen die oben genannten Dimensionen untersucht werden. Der Fragebogen der Lehrer war identisch, sie wurden jedoch angewiesen, sich auf die Beziehung zwischen dem Klassenlehrer und den Eltern zu beziehen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Eltern in allen vier Dimensionen deutlich schlechtere Bewertungen abgegeben haben als die Lehrer: Der Klassenlehrer wurde von den Eltern als weniger professionell, weniger vertrauenswürdig, weniger verfügbar und weniger befähigt wahrgenommen als von den Lehrern bewertet. Die Ergebnisse haben praktische Implikationen für die Ausbildung von Sonderpädagogen und für die berufliche Entwicklung von Lehrern sowie für die Koordinierung von Erwartungen und die Definition von Grenzen, die sowohl Klassenlehrern als auch Eltern dabei helfen könnten, eine konstruktive Beziehung aufzubauen.

1. Introduction

Parents' involvement in schools has steadily increased in recent decades and has received a great deal of empirical attention. Studies show that parents' involvement can be a valuable source of instrumental and emotional benefit but can also trigger tensions and power conflicts (Johnston, 2015). Empirical evidence is needed in order to develop constructive communication between parents and educational staff, by revealing the enhancing and hindering factors for developing a positive relationship. The current study focuses on the system of special education, in which parents' involvement is particularly complex due to the high dependence of parents on the educational staff. In view of the major role that homeroom teachers play in special education in Israel, the study examines parents' perceptions of homeroom teachers on four dimensions – professionality, availability, trustworthiness and empowerment – and compares them to the perceptions

of teachers. These dimensions were chosen because they constitute the major components of the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in Israel.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. The homeroom teacher in special education

The role of the homeroom teacher is described as in charge of a group of students who meet daily in a specific room at school and of that physical room as well (Zidkiyaho et al., 2008). (Alternative terms are "classroom teacher", "form teacher" and "primary teacher" for teachers in primary schools). In most western countries the homeroom teacher's role combines administrative, educational, and pedagogical duties (Nutov & Hazzan, 2014; Bakshi-Brosh, 2012). Additionally, primary teachers are responsible for teaching basic learning habits and skills and for immersing the children in the educational environment (Stone, 2022).

Homeroom teachers in special education schools serve children with unique educational needs. Aspiring to open equal opportunities for their students, they need to adapt contents, methods and tactics to meet these special needs so that the students will acquire appropriate skills and overcome difficulties (Al-Yagon & Margalit, 2001; Hampton & Chow, 2022). The demanding conditions of special education compel homeroom teachers to work harder than teachers in mainstream education. They need to develop deep understanding of their students and implement special skills and non-routine methods to teach them. They are also required to develop personal learning programs for each student (Ministry of Education, 1998). Research shows that special education teachers often experience fatigue and burnout because of these daily hardships (Hillel Lavian, 2015). One of the major concerns in the role of homeroom teachers is the relationship with the parents.

2.2. Parent-teacher relations in special education

The parent-school relationship can be conceptualized within a few theoretical perspectives. The ecological theory presents parent-teacher interactions through the social environmental context. The child's environment is described through 4 circles: the microsystem – close family, friends and daily teachers; the mesosystem – including subject teachers and the school; the exosystem; and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Tudge et al., 2016). Social exchange theory explains the motivations of parents

and teachers for engaging and cooperating for the benefit of the children and focuses on the balance of profits and costs of each party (Blau, 1986/2017; Homans, 1961; Kozloff, 1967/2021; Mahmood, 2013; Pek & Mee, 2020). Epstein's partnership model presents parent-school relations as a multidimensional partnership that includes six domains, each with its unique fields of responsibility and desired results for the child: Parenting, communication, volunteer work, learning at home, decision making and community (Epstein & Sanders, 2002).

The quality of the relationship between the parents and the homeroom teacher can be manifested in both positive aspects and negative aspects. Good relations between parents and teachers positively impact student achievements, goal attainment and social behaviour in mainstream and special education schools (Sheridan et al., 2012; Wilkinson, 2013). Causes for conflict between parents and teachers in special education, however, might be somewhat different. Such causes are the lack of congruence regarding student needs and abilities and the provision of services to students; the lack of resources; communication difficulties and the lack of knowledge for solving problems; power struggles; parent feelings that they are not appreciated by the teachers; trust and mistrust (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Nonetheless, compared to mainstream schools, both parents and teachers in special education were found more accustomed to two-way communication (Leenders et al., 2018). In Israel, collaboration between staff and parents in special education schools was found to include structural, organisational, and social aspects. Relationships between parents and homeroom teachers were found to be especially close, warm, and familial (Manor-Binyamini, 2003).

A few components are of value in evaluating the role of the homeroom teacher: professionality, availability, trustworthiness, and empowerment.

2.2.1. Professionality

Many studies have indicated a positive correlation between teacher professionality and student achievements (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Wenglinsky, 2002; Nye et al., 2004; Goe, 2007; Dodeen et al., 2012). Primary teachers from England and New Zealand perceived teacher professionality not only as professional skills but as including love for working with children, altruistic concern for their growth and welfare, and the desire to make a difference. They also saw professionalism as the experienced tension between autonomy and accountability regarding

curriculum and exams, and 'good teaching' vs. performance and achievements (Locke et al., 2005; Browes & Altinyelken, 2022). The professional identity of teachers might develop during their academic studies or through continuous professional training (Zeevi & Cretu, 2020).

Homeroom teachers in special education need to expand their professional skills to be able to assist students, help parents deal with various situations, calm them down sometimes and direct them according to professional principles (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The professional identity of special education teachers in China was defined as a sense of belonging to a profession and seeing it as part of the personal identity, associated with self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2020). Professional teachers in special education should have the ability to modify the curriculum and assignments and to adapt teaching to individual needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020).

2.2.2. Trustworthiness

A key element of parental involvement, partnership and good relations with teachers is parent-teacher mutual trust (Ogg et al., 2021). According to social exchange theory, trust is "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712). Parental trust in teachers is the confidence of parents that the teacher's actions will benefit their child's success at school or the parent-teacher relationship. Improving home–school communication was identified as a primary way of enhancing trust, and parents who present higher levels of trust in teachers were found to be more involved in school (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Houri et al., 2019). Trust in teachers was highest among parents of children in primary school, especially among mothers (Penttinen et al., 2020). It was positively related to students' academic progress and negatively to behavioural problems (Santiago et al., 2016; Ogg et al., 2021).

2.2.3. Availability

According to the attachment theory, parents' availability for their child means their emotional availability, while offering a 'safe base' for the infant and allowing a supportive atmosphere, consistency, and responsiveness to the infant's signals (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

It seems that the literature deals more with the psychological and emotional availability of teachers for students (for example, Spilt et al., 2010), but lacks research about teachers' time availability for students and parents. Indeed, in many countries, teachers' working hours are formally defined; in Israel, however, parents may contact the homeroom teacher all day long and not only during the official working hours. E-mail correspondence was found useful in increasing teachers' availability for parents (Thompson, 2008). In recent years there has been growing use of the WhatsApp application that allows parent-teacher communication but requires an awareness of the need to set boundaries in order to protect the teacher. (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017). Although technology may enhance parent-teacher communication, overly intensive digitized communication may raise parents' expectations that teachers are available to them at any time (Beilmann et al., 2020).

2.2.4. Empowerment

Empowerment is a theoretical concept that connects between the strengths and skills of individuals and systems, ultimately manifested in pro-active behavior of those involved (Rappaport, 1984). Regarding homeroom teachers in special education this means placing the child and the parents at the center of the learning process in order to generate synergistic cooperation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These relations in special education focus on the abilities of the parent and child rather than on their absence; on strengths and not on weaknesses; on hope and not on despair. The purpose of empowerment is to reach a situation where the parent can cope independently with the tasks, difficulties, and pressures and to arouse the parent's awareness of not being merely a passive recipient of decisions reached by others (headmasters, teachers) rather a person who takes an active role with a sense of self-control (Conor & Cavendish, 2018). The special importance of parent empowerment is associated with its ability to improve the scholastic achievements of the students, in addition to their emotional well-being (Korosidou et al., 2021; Beard & Thomson, 2021).

Decker et al. (2022) reviewed 73 articles dealing with professional ethics in the preparation of special education teachers and identified a lack of empirical studies examining the subject. It seems that there is a lack of empirical research on parental perceptions of special education teachers in general, and hardly any

research on professionality, availability and trustworthiness of teachers as perceived by parents.

Considering the literature review and the lack of empirical evidence on parents' and teachers' perceptions of homeroom teachers in special education in Israel, the purpose of the present study was to compare parents and teachers regarding their perceptions of homeroom teachers in special education, on four dimensions: professionality, availability, trustworthiness, and empowerment. The research hypotheses deriving from the research purpose are based on the professional literature concerning the parent-teacher relationship in special education.

The research hypotheses are:

▪ Parents' perception of the homeroom teacher's availability will be lower than teachers' evaluation.

▪ Parents will perceive the homeroom teacher's trustworthiness as lower than will teachers.

▪ Parents' perception of the homeroom teacher's empowerment will be lower than teachers' evaluation.

These hypotheses are based on the claim that the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in special education is unique: Parents in special education are more dependent on homeroom teachers to meet their needs, than parents in the regular education, and they need continuous assistance and support, sometimes on an immediate basis. Consequently, they may be disappointed and frustrated, and perceive the homeroom teacher as less trustworthy and less available than do teachers (Bryk, & Schneider, 2002; Adams & Christenson, 2000; Dashevski, 2009; Vladovsky Yuval, 2018; Hillel Lavian, 2012). No hypothesis was formulated regarding professionality because the literature does not provide enough evidence to offer such a hypothesis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research population

The sample was comprised of 201 participants, 100 of whom were parents of students in special education (87% mothers, mean age 45.10, SD 7.60). As for the students, 73% were male, mean age 12.81, SD 4.3. The types of disabilities were emotional problems, behavioural problems, cognitive impairment, learning disabilities ASD and sensory-motor disabilities. The second part of the sample was comprised of 101 teachers in special education schools (85% women, mean age 41.65, SD 11.96).

The participants were recruited during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to parents and teachers was limited, such that most of the data gathering from teachers was done via the "snowball" method (Gliner & Leech, 2009). The initial group of questionnaires were sent on the basis of personal acquaintance and with a request to send them on to colleagues. The parents were recruited through social media and WhatsApp groups of parents with children in special education. Owing to this method of data collection, the final sample was more varied than the initial plan and comprised a larger variety of schools and geographical districts.

3.2. Research tool

Data were gathered via a questionnaire developed in a previous study (Weidberg & Ceobanu, 2021). The questionnaire measures perceptions of parents and teachers regarding homeroom teachers on four dimensions: Professionality (example of a statement: "The homeroom teacher has a great deal of professional knowledge concerning special education"); trustworthiness (example of a statement: "Sometimes it appears to me that the homeroom teacher acts on interests that are not in the child's favour"); availability of the homeroom teacher as perceived by parents and teachers (example of a statement: "When I experience personal distress, I feel comfortable contacting the homeroom teacher"); empowerment (example of a statement: "I feel that the homeroom teacher strengthens me"). The agreement with the statements was measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly agree). Two versions of the questionnaire were used – one for parents and one for teachers. The reliability of the professionality, availability, trustworthiness, and empowerment was measured by Cronbach's alpha and yielded values of .93, .74, .94 and .92, respectively, among parents, and.83, .73, .75, and .81, respectively, among teachers.

3.3. Procedure

The study was approved by the ethical committee of the university. The anonymous questionnaires were sent to the participants in an online version. The responses were sent directly to an online site, with no intervention by the researcher.

4. Findings

4.1. Comparison between parents and teachers on perceptions regarding the homeroom teacher

To examine the questions and the hypotheses, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was

conducted, with group (parents / homeroom teachers) as the independent variable and perceptions of the four dimensions as the dependent variables. The analysis yielded an overall significant effect of group ($F(1,198) = 46.10$, $p <.001$). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and the results of the univariate analyses. The means are also presented in Figure 1.

Table 1: Results of MANOVA comparing parents and homeroom teachers on dimensions of the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers (range 1-5)

	Means (SDs)		F (1,199)
	Parents	Teachers	
Professionality	3.75 (0.79)	4.37 (0.44)	46.91***
Trustworthiness	3.55 (1.06)	4.13 (0.49)	38.94***
Availability	3.96 (0.94)	4.34 (.45)	13.11***
Empowerment	3.50 (0.99)	4.20 (0.48)	40.45***

*** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Comparison between parents and teachers on perceptions of the homeroom teacher
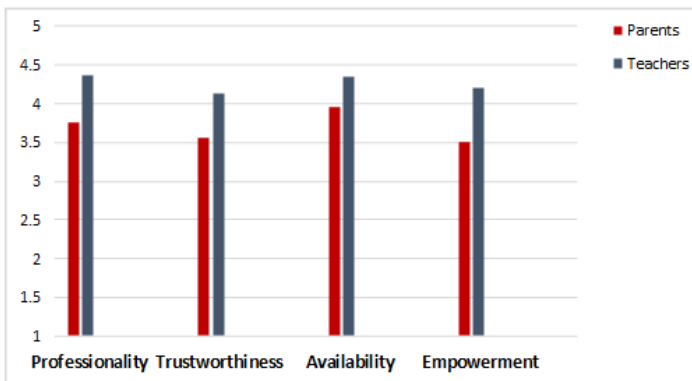
The findings reveal that parents perceive the homeroom teachers' availability, trustworthiness, and empowerment as significantly lower than do teachers. These results support all three

hypotheses. In addition, the homeroom teacher's professionality is perceived by parents as significantly lower than by teachers.

4.2. Comparisons between the four dimensions of the relationship

The findings presented so far focused on comparisons between the two groups (parents and teachers) regarding perceptions of the four dimensions. Beside this comparison, an analysis was conducted to examine differences between the four dimensions. A two-way ANOVA was conducted, with group (parents / teachers) and dimension (trustworthiness, availability, empowerment, professionality) as independent variables, and evaluation of the homeroom teacher as the dependent variable. The analysis yielded a significant main effect of dimension ($F(3,594) = 33.01$, $p < .001$). Post hoc Tukey analysis ($p < .05$) revealed that availability and professionality are perceived as higher than trustworthiness and empowerment. The means are presented in Figure 2. The findings presented in the Figure are based on the two groups together – parents and teachers.

Figure 2: Perceptions of the four dimensions among parents and teachers
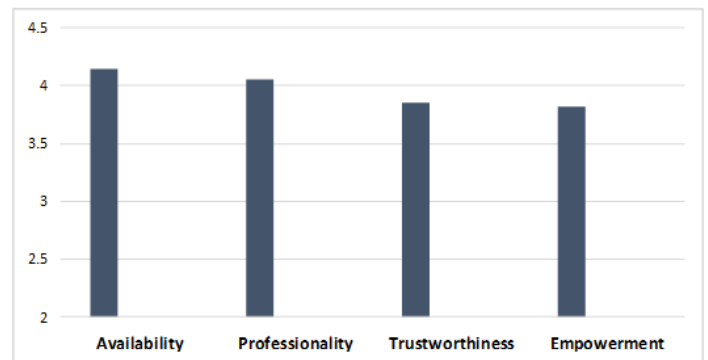
Up to now, the focus was on the comparison between parents' and teachers' perceptions of homeroom teachers. Although the parents' perceptions were lower than those of the teachers, a look at the absolute values of parent perceptions (on a 5-point scale) discloses that they were not low. For example, homeroom teachers' availability was perceived as high (with a mean of 4 on a 5-point scale) and perceptions of their empowerment, trustworthiness and professionality were medium-high (means of 3.5 and higher on a 5-point scale). The significant differences resulted from the high perceptions of the teachers, rather from the low perceptions of the parents.

5. Discussions

The research findings reveal that the parents perceived the homeroom teacher as less available, less trustworthy, less empowering, and less professional than did the teachers.

It seems that these findings are somewhat inconsistent with the findings of other studies conducted in various countries, indicating high appreciation of special education teachers by parents, regarding devotion, professionality, and other

dimensions (Manor-Binyamini, 2003; Hillel Lavian, 2015). A closer examination, however, shows essential differences between the homeroom teacher's role in Israel and in most other countries, which probably affect parental appreciation (Romi et al., 2013). The role of the homeroom teacher in Israel is more intensive than in other countries, and homeroom teacher - parent relationships are less formal and more friendly. Parent-teacher relationships in other places are characterized by a larger status gap and distance than in Israel (Manor-Binyamini, 2003).

Furthermore, previous studies focused on teacher perceptions or parental perceptions of the relationship between parents and the homeroom teacher (for example, Adams & Christenson, 2000; Houri et al., 2019). The current study illuminates the two perspectives – of teachers and parents – within the same research.

Another possible explanation of the current study's findings stems from the different way parents and teachers perceive the efforts of special education teachers to invest in parent-teacher relationships. While parent-teacher communication in mainstream education takes place mostly during the workday, in special education it takes place later, when the massive demands of the workday are over. It seems that teachers are more familiar with the homeroom teacher's efforts, and therefore they may project their own perceptions on the parents and contend that parents too see homeroom teachers as available, trustworthy, and empowering. Moreover, special education teachers made exceptional educational efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic (Gilat et al., 2021); perhaps this also contributed to the higher teacher appreciation for their colleagues.

The unformal, close, and warm parent-teacher relationship in Israel creates a culture of familiarity (Noy, 2017), which may encourage parent expectations of continuous support without boundaries. When the homeroom teacher in special education must set boundaries nonetheless – parents sometimes respond with disappointment, frustration and even anger.

The findings show that homeroom teachers' availability and professionality were perceived as higher than teachers' trustworthiness and empowerment by both parents and teachers. This might be explained by the major importance of teacher availability for parents, especially in special education where homeroom teachers tend to allow parents to approach them during most of the day, assuming that

this is part of their job and commitment. This high availability also stems from the belief that in this way a deterioration of problems handled by parents could be prevented. The relatively low appreciation of teachers' empowerment and trustworthiness might be a result of a lack of awareness by parents and teachers to the time, efforts and physical and emotional involvement of the homeroom teacher.

The current study has several limitations. The study was conducted in Israel, so its findings are valid for the Israeli educational system. Since the homeroom teachers operate in Israel's unique social-educational culture, designed over the years in correspondence with the nature of Israeli society, it is not clear to what degree the findings can be generalized to other countries as well.

Another limitation relates to the methodology – the current study utilized a quantitative approach. This type of approach makes it possible to reach statistical generalizations and to compare between groups but is limited in its ability to reach a thorough understanding of the processes that occur within the studied phenomena.

For this purpose, further qualitative research, which may reach respondents' inner world, would be useful. Further studies may include comparative, inter-cultural research that will compare parents' perceptions of homeroom teachers in different cultures and investigate common and culturally dependent patterns. Another suggestion is a study that will compare the perceptions of homeroom teachers in special education and in mainstream education.

6. Conclusions

The lower evaluations of homeroom teachers by parents, compared to teachers, may lead to tensions: Parents may develop unrealistic expectations and the homeroom teachers may not be aware of these expectations. One practical way of coping with these tensions involves teacher training. It is highly important to raise the awareness of future teachers regarding the four dimensions that affect the relationship with parents: professionality, availability, trustworthiness, and empowerment. An additional recommendation is to clarify the mutual expectations of parents and homeroom teachers regarding their cooperation in the mission of providing a supportive and nurturing environment for students.

Authors note:

Rakefet Weidberg is currently a Ph.D. student enrolled at the Doctoral School organized by "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University in Iași, Romania, and a lecturer at the Gordon Academic College of Education in Haifa, Israel. Rakefet is also a homeroom teacher in a special-education school in Israel. Her main interests are the relationships between parents and teachers in the educational system, particularly in special education. She is also interested in the domain of educational staff in special education, focusing on the role of homeroom teacher.

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