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Israeli Teachers' Attitudes Assessment regarding Parental Involvement of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

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Benefits of collaboration between parents and teachers in general and parents of special needs children in particular seem allegedly obvious, but apparently the implementation of this concept in everyday life is rather complex. Interpretations regarding parental involvement (PI) and its applied implications might differ between parents and professionals. A questionnaire aiming to assess teachers' attitudes toward the involvement of parents of children with special needs in the inclusion in Israel was developed, based on three significant areas: teachers' attitudes toward the general implications of PI, toward the role of PI in decision making and toward the communication needed with the parents. 75 statements from various questionnaires were collected and analysed by experts. After this analysis, a pilot phase was performed (i.e. the questionnaire was administered to 58 Israeli teachers). The internal reliability measure was calculated to evaluate the level of correlation between each item belonging to the same dimension. Explorative factor analysis revealed internal dimensions that connect to each other. Finally, a questionnaire with 41 statements was compiled. The construction of the questionnaire is part of more extensive research, during which the reliability and the validity of the instrument will be re-examined on a larger sample of 138 participants.

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1. Introduction

Parental involvement (PI) in education and collaboration between professionals and families of children with special needs (SN) has been a widely discussed issue in recent decades. Researchers have

acknowledged the importance of such collaboration, and even policy and legislation in many countries have supported and anchored this collaboration as part of the education and treatment of children with SN (Murray, 2007; Dunst, 2002; Dempsey and Keen, 2008; Burke, 2012; Turnbull et al, 2015).

Over the years, numerous models pertaining to parental involvement and partnership with professionals have been constructed (Epstein et al, 2009, Dunst, 2002, Turnbull, 2015, Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2002), targeting the optimal social and academic development of children.

Epstein (2009) proposed a model of cooperation between families and schools which illustrates "three overlapping spheres" of influence with regard to students' learning processes: family, school and community. Epstein's model (2009) offers a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between teachers and parents in general and teachers and parents of children with SN in particular. Understanding each other's needs and perspective is the outcome of a partnership of individuals in the three spheres included in the model (Hebel, 2014).

Epstein (2009) rated the relationship between parents and school according to six levels of involvement that encourage children's development and academic success. These levels constituted the grounds for the construction of many programs for the development of relationships between the parents, school and community:

1. **Parenting** - This level pertains to the parents' role in the creation of optimal conditions which support learning at home (Epstein et al, 2009).
2. **Communicating** – school maintains and encourages formal or informal channels of communication with parents for purposes of informing them (Epstein et al, 2009).
3. **Volunteering** – this pattern encourages the parents to volunteer in school activities and recruits them for help, mostly in cultural activity.
4. **Extending learning at home** – the school equips parents with information and ideas how to be full partners in learning (Epstein, 2011)
5. **Decision making** – this pattern represents the parents' integration into the parents' participation in school decisions and encourages them towards educational leadership. School and the parents make decisions together and share roles in a wide array of subjects (Epstein, 2011).
6. **Collaboration with family** – in this case the partnership extends to other factors in the community such as associations of different sorts. Programs such as establishing a therapeutic animal petting corner, joint programs for children and the elderly and more (Epstein, 2009).

Epstein's approach connects theory and practice and proposes tools that may help all parties build a system of times that will benefit the students' development.

2. Involvement of Parents of Children with SN in their education

Whilst in regular education the concept "parental involvement" usually describes cooperation between school and family, in special education area, "family school partnership" is the common concept to describe this cooperation (Burke, 2012).

Turnbull et al. (2015) define family school partnership as a state where families and professionals reach a reciprocal understanding and recognition of the knowledge and judgment of others. They emphasize the parents' commitment that leads to a sense of sharing in planning and decision-making. Encouraging parents towards a sense of control over their children's education will result in better results for the child and, consequently, for the society (Turnbull et al, 2015)

Various studies have found several differences between regular and special education regarding the parental involvement. For example, in regular education, parental involvement is usually linked to progressing pupils' achievements, whereas in special education, it refers more to getting optimal service and safeguarding the rights of children with special needs. Cooperation with families of children with SN is anchored, contrary to family-school collaboration in regular education, in regulations and laws on which to base this partnership, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Burke, 2012).

Turnbull et al. (2015) tried to adapt Epstein's model (2009) to special education and reached the conclusion that the family-school partnership in special education differs from that in Epstein's original model, which focused on **communication** and **decision making**. However, researchers have found that patterns and levels of involvement of parents of children with SN comprise a great diversity of aspects of this collaboration. Often, parents of children with SN are more involved in transmitting and receiving information about their children and less in decision making (Hebel, 2014). Other findings have pointed to low parental involvement in school, in particular regarding the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Also, the issues of assessment and placement are the two issues where most cooperation between school staff and family occurs (Hebel, 2014).

The differences between parental involvement in regular education and that in special education, as well as the unique emphases of special education, constituted the grounds for constructing the questionnaire for this study. To these, the new reform implemented in Israel from 2011 was added, shedding new light on the role of parents of children with special needs in decision making in general and in inclusion in particular.

While Israel's Ministry of Education defines the child as its main client and subject to investment of many of its resources, there is also reference to the family at different levels: in the legislative framework (under the Special Education Law, 1988, and the 2002 amendment to Law), parents can influence placement, appeal and inclusion committees and determine the child's individual education program. Official documents such as the Ministry of Education's Director General Circular, "Parents' representation at school" (Director General Circular 2004-A), reflects the Ministry of Education's encouragement of ongoing communication between parents and teachers and regulation of the issue of parents' representation in the Israeli school.

The decision-making process and the family's right to choose is part of the family centered practice. Support of the decision making process and support of parents' choice was found to empower families and increase their ability to make informed decisions with regard to their children's needs (Bailey et al, 2004; Murray et al, 2007).

The Dorner Committee (2009) determined that the education of a child with SN is an ongoing process shared by many factors, including parents, educators and professionals, as well as education authorities. Involving the parents alongside the work of professionals is essential for improving

decision-making pertaining to the child. This sharing encourages parents to invest in education for the advancement their child (Dorner, 2009).

The placement committees and the stage of decision making with regards to the suitable framework for children with SN have constituted a significant and sensitive junction in the relationship with parents in Israel. At this stage, tension builds up between the ambition of parents to be involved in their children's education and influence the placement committee, and the professionals' attitude (Dorner, 2009).

According to the Israeli Special Education Law (1988), the placement committee determines SN children's eligibility to special education services and placement. Over the years, the parents' position has improved and their rights have been defined with regard to receiving information, reviewing documents, convening a placement committee, and the right to appeal. Still, the decision about the actual placement and the type of educational framework is in the hands a statutory committee and not in the parents' hands (Special Education Law, 1988, Director General Circular, 2007, Director General Circular, 2014). The Dorner committee has reached the conclusion that in the placement process it is better that the parents make the choice out of the possible educational frameworks, regarding the specific framework where their child will be educated – inclusive or segregated (Dorner, 2009).

Passing the right to choose onto the parents requires a re-examination of the role of the professional. Hence, the traditional role of direct treatment of the child has to expand, and the professional has to be trained for accompanying and supporting the family (Murray et al, 2007). We consider that for the change in the professional's role to succeed, it is important to understand their attitudes to this change and their perceptions of parental involvement and partnership in decision making.

Construction of the attitudes questionnaire is part of more extensive research that will examine teachers' attitudes (in special education and regular education) with regard to the involvement of parents of children with SN in Israel.

3. Process of constructing the questionnaire

As mentioned above, the literature with regard to family-professionals' partnership is quite extensive. The first process in constructing the questionnaire was to identify the significant areas of involvement of parents of SN children from different studies and choosing three areas for research that relate to the research questions, which are the following ones:

1. What are the characteristics of teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement in inclusion processes?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the attitudes of special education teachers and regular education teachers regarding parental involvement in the inclusion?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the attitudes of teachers from different regions (periphery and center) regarding parental involvement in the inclusion?

The literature cited above has identified two main significant aspects of family-professionals' partnership: communication and decision making. In addition, the researcher thought it was important

to investigate Israeli teachers' general attitudes regarding the contribution and implications of PI, and hence, the topics chosen were:

- a) Teachers' attitudes regarding the implications and contributions of PI;
- b) Teachers' attitudes regarding PI in decision making;
- c) Teachers' attitudes regarding PI and communications.

The following stage consisted of collecting 75 statements from various questionnaires that refer to these areas (Shamay, 2008, Hoover-Dempsey al, 2002, King et al, 2003, Ingber & Dromi, 2010, McAnuff & Gumbs, 2006, Burke, 2012). Initial classification and arranging of statements, as well as the wording corrections, reduced the statements to 60.

3.1. Pre-pilot - Experts Evaluation

The 60 statements were submitted to expert evaluators: 5 special education professionals were asked to sort the statements in accordance with the three areas identified above: Special Education Inspectorate at the Israeli Ministry of Education; Head of Special Education Department at Levinsky College of Education; Pedagogical instructor in special education classes; Head of a therapy center and instructor in the subject of motor disabilities and intellectual disabilities; Lecturer in Special Education program at Levinsky College, Israel. In the experts' evaluation, there was unanimous agreement about the area to which 48 of the 60 statements referred. One expert disagreed with the others with regard to 5 other statements. Seven statements were discarded because there was radical or partial disagreement between the evaluators with regard to where they belonged. 53 statements remained at the end of the process (14 in the area of parental involvement and communication, 22 in the area of parental involvement in decision making and 17 in the area of implications and contributions of parental involvement).

3.2. Pilot questionnaire

In order to check reliability and validity of the instrument, the pilot questionnaire was administered to 59 teachers (31 in regular education and 28 in special education in a city in center of Israel. The questionnaires were given to the lecturer in courses at the Pedagogical Center. Each lecturer chose at what stage of the lesson to distribute them to the class, and they were individually filled in (the duration of completion was around 10-12 minutes). The purpose was to examine the consistency and how well the answers represented the research areas. An exploratory factor analysis was undertaken in order to examine what the main dimensions were representing each research area about which questions were asked, and whether the items of every research body did indeed correlate with other items that belong to the same area. The internal reliability measure (Cronbach alpha) was calculated so as to evaluate the level of correlation between each item belonging to the same dimension. Firstly, we checked the internal reliability of every measurement after changing the direction of the items that were measured on a negative axis (for example Item no. 18: *Teachers have to invest a lot more time in involvement of parents with SN children than those without special needs*).

The following reliability standards were found:

- For the teachers' attitudes regarding the implications and contributions of PI measurement: alpha Cronbach 0.76
- For the teachers' attitudes regarding PI in decisions making measurement: alpha Cronbach 0.73
- For the teachers' attitudes regarding PI and communication measurement: alpha Cronbach 0.55.

These are reasonable levels of reliability with the exception of PI and communication. Examining the source of the low level of reliability did not indicate any items that resulted in a clear and sharp reduction and therefore, the next stage was dimensional testing of each measurement. In other words, with the help of an explorative factor analysis, in each dimension mentioned above, we searched for internal dimensions that connect to each other. In order to improve measurement, items that did not connect to this content world were removed.

After the above analyses, a questionnaire comprising of the three areas was compiled and internal dimensions were defined for each area as it follows:

- Attitudes regarding the implications and contributions of PI (16 statements): Effect of PI on school and other pupils who do not have special needs (e.g. SN children's parents involvement in school contributes to reducing disciplinary problems);
- Effect of involvement of parents of pupils with SN in different areas (e.g. SN children parental involvement advances their children's social achievements);
- Effect of PI on teachers' sense of self-efficacy (e.g. Involvement of parents of SN children is likely to harm teachers' sense of self efficacy);
- Effect of PI on the level of investment and training teachers need (e.g. Teachers have to invest a lot more time in involvement of parents with SN children than those without SN);
- Attitudes regarding PI in decision making (12 statements): Taking decisions with regard to choosing the type of education framework in which SN pupils will learn (e.g. Decisions with regard to framework in which SN children are placed should be a joint decision between professional teams and parents);
- Taking decisions with regard to building Individualized Education Program for special needs pupils (e.g. Parents are invited to IEP meetings in order to be partners in constructing their child's program);
- Teachers' attitudes regarding PI and communication (13 statements): Type of information passed from school to parents and vice versa (e.g. I update parents of SN children mainly when there are problems);
- Communication frequency and sequence between school and parents and vice versa (e.g. More meetings have to be initiated with parents of SN children than with those of non SN children).
- Professional language clarity in dialogue with parents (4 statements; e.g. I often find myself explaining to parents professional terms and concepts that they encounter);

**In the communication dimension there was a problem with variance in some of the statements (which was also expressed in low level of reliability). After rewording them, they were administered to six teachers (three from regular education and three from special education) over the telephone. Finally, a questionnaire with 41 statements was compiled.*

4. Research Limitations

There were difficulties in mobilizing the participants to fill out the questionnaire. First, the questionnaire was sent by e-mail and response rate was very low. Only after the questionnaires had been printed and administered in the paper-pen version, the response rate has increased and 59 participants returned the completed questionnaires (out of 80 administrated questionnaires).

5. Conclusions

Numerous studies have reached the conclusion that teachers' attitudes toward educational reforms including inclusion predict success in its implementation (Talmor, 2007). In recent years, there has also been a change in the parents' role in inclusion of their children. These changes have a direct influence on the roles of professional teams that work with SN students and their families (Ingber & Dromi, 2010).

In light of the changes and the new reform (Dorner, 2009), it is important to understand the attitudes of teachers toward these changes and their perceptions of PI and family-school partnership in decision making regarding the education of the children with special needs (SN). It is important to examine whether there is a gap between the inclusion policy and the attitudes of the professional teams who are responsible for applying it. We assume that the questionnaire that was compiled in this study will enable us to better understand these attitudes and to develop enriched teacher training programs with regard to PI in general and in inclusion in particular.

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