

**ERD 2021****9th International Conference Education, Reflection, Development****THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND HOMEROOM  
TEACHER IN SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ISRAEL**

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**Abstract**

The relationship between parents and homeroom teacher constitutes a crucial issue in special education, particularly in Israel where the homeroom teacher has a key role in the classroom and in the school system. Yet, no appropriate tool was found in the literature review for measuring this relationship in the Israeli special education system. The purpose of the study was to develop a questionnaire for both parents and teachers, to evaluate their relationship. The paper presents the instrument's stages of development. First, statements were formulated based on a theoretical foundation that views the relationship via four components involving the homeroom teacher: professionalism, availability, trustworthiness and empowerment. Second, a process of validation by experts was conducted, followed by a pilot study. Reliability was tested through Cronbach's alpha and a final version was prepared, for teachers and parents separately. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out after the development of the questionnaire had been completed, a section was added with reference to this period, in order to measure the relationship between parents and homeroom teacher in times of crisis. The discussion presents insights that arose in the process of developing the questionnaire (such as subject teachers' unawareness of the role of the homeroom teacher) and illuminates the possibility of utilizing the questionnaire in further studies on special education and in other countries.

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## 1. Introduction

This article presents the development of two questionnaires, examining perceptions of parents and teachers regarding homeroom teachers and their relationship with parents. The construction of the questionnaire was required since no appropriate questionnaire was found in the review of literature and the review of research tools. The existing questionnaires measure certain aspects of the relationship between parents and teachers, but they have two limitations: First, they focus on the general relationship between parents and teachers, but not specifically on the homeroom teacher. Second, they were not appropriate for special education, so it was necessary to adapt the statements of the existing questionnaires to special education.

### 1.1. The role of homeroom teacher

The homeroom teacher plays a major role in educational systems, including in special education. Unlike subject teachers, the relationship of the homeroom teacher with the students is not limited to a specific subject, but includes both emotional aspects and administrative aspects (Bakshi-Brosh, 2012; Notov & Hazzan, 2014). In the special education system, the homeroom teacher is more dominant, since classes are smaller and the students as well as the parents are more dependent on the homeroom teacher. In addition, the homeroom teacher in special education integrates the connection with many agents, such as therapists, psychologists, social workers, doctors, etc.

The literature shows that the role of homeroom teacher varies in different cultures (Liu & Barnhart, 1999; Lo, 2001; Rhodes, 1994). In some cultures, the role of homeroom teacher is limited to one school year, whereas in other cultures like Israel, the same homeroom teacher remains with the same group of students for several years. Consequently, the same group dynamics occurs along the years and the social role of the homeroom teacher is more salient, compared to the model of limited connection. The homeroom teacher is responsible for developing social skills and transmitting the social values of the wider environment (the state). In other Western countries, the role of the homeroom teacher focuses on the individual and on administrative needs (Zhenzhou, 2014). The role of the homeroom teacher in Israel can be viewed as similar to a mother who takes care of the emotional and physical needs of the students and creates an ecological connection with the community.

In view of this characteristic, the relationship of the homeroom teacher with the students and the family is less formal, they have the phone number of the homeroom teacher and feel free to call her whenever they want and with any problem, they face. In most other countries, the relationship with the homeroom teacher is formal: they contact the homeroom teacher via organizational mail, the subjects she deals with are more defined, and their connection is limited to the working hours. This specific pattern in Israel may be explained by the less formal and more intimate social climate of Israeli society. This climate is characterized by mutual commitment due to the stress and crises in Israel (Hertz-Lazarovich & Zelniker, 1999).

The dominant role of the homeroom teacher is stronger in special education, where the relationship with parents is more intensive and parents expect the homeroom teacher to help them with a variety of needs. In addition, unlike mainstream education, where the curriculum is common to all students, in

special education the homeroom teacher develops an individual plan for each student, tailored to their specific needs. This program should include various aspects - cognitive, emotional, social, mental, occupational and physical – in addition to the academic progress of the student.

### **1.2. Relationship between the homeroom teacher and the parents**

In view of the unique and complex role of the homeroom teacher in Israel, and based on the literature, two major dimensions may be important for understanding the relationship between the parents and homeroom teachers: professional and interpersonal. The professional dimension means that the homeroom teacher is expected to exhibit knowledge, skills and the ability to integrate the cooperation of many agents. She should apply these abilities in the construction of the individual lesson plan and in advancing the students in their life. However, the professionalism of the homeroom teacher is not sufficient to fulfil her duties. In view of the complexities and sensitivities of parents with children in the special education system, which differs from the mainstream system, the interpersonal skills of the homeroom teacher are crucial (Hillel Lavian, 2008). More specifically, the availability of the homeroom teacher and her trustworthiness are two major requirements. Availability is not limited to the instrumental / technical aspect but rather also refers to the psychological aspect (Munene & Ruto, 2015). Parents expect the homeroom teacher to be highly attentive, sensitive, patient and tolerant, as well as empathic to their needs. If the parents are disappointed by the availability of the homeroom teacher, they may respond by developing a hostile attitude towards her.

Trustworthiness is a crucial condition for developing a cooperative relationship between parents and teachers (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2016). Trustworthiness is particularly important in special education, since parents have many interactions with the establishment (e.g., national security) and many of them develop an attitude of suspiciousness and a militant approach, in order to obtain their rights. They adopt this approach in their relationship with the school, and they may view the homeroom teacher as a representative of the establishment. Thus, the homeroom teacher is expected to correct the negative experience of the parents and help them develop an attitude of trust. There are frequent discrepancies between parents and homeroom teachers resulting from the different perspectives, and these may trigger tensions and conflicts, which come at the expense of the welfare of the child, the parents and the homeroom teacher. In spite of the importance of the issue, there are few studies investigating the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers, particularly in special education.

## **2. Problem Statement**

- The homeroom teacher plays a major role in special education in Israel. One of the most important roles of the homeroom teacher is the relationship with the parents, since they constitute the major partner for advancing the student with special needs. This relationship can be described by three components: Professionalism, availability and trustworthiness. The perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the homeroom teacher are important for understanding the conflicts that often arise between them. Yet, no appropriate tool for measuring this relationship was found in the literature review.

### **3. Research Questions**

The present paper describes the development of a questionnaire measuring the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the homeroom teacher in special education. Two versions of the questionnaire were developed – one for parents and one for teachers. The questions are methodological, aimed at examining the quality of the questionnaire.

What is the level of reliability of the questionnaire?

What is the level of validity of the questionnaire?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to develop two questionnaires on the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in special education in Israel, as perceived by parents and teachers. This relationship is examined via three components: Professionalism, availability and trustworthiness. The questionnaires may be used in future studies to illuminate the similarities and the differences between parents and teachers and to suggest practical implications deriving from these future findings.

### **5. Research Methods**

The development of the questionnaire was guided by a standard methodological procedure: First, an initial version was constructed based on integrating various sources. Second, validation of the version was conducted via experts and a pilot study. Third, reliability was tested; and fourth, the final version was prepared based on the previous procedure. The final questionnaire included a section on the COVID-19 pandemic, which was not planned to be included. This section was added in view of the strong impact of the pandemic on the parent-homeroom teacher relationship. These stages are described in the next sections.

#### **5.1. Sources of data**

Four sources of data were utilized to develop the questionnaire:

- a. A literature review on the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in special education. The review yielded three major dimensions which characterize this relationship: 1. Professionalism: Knowledge and skills of the homeroom teacher in various aspects involving the student and the ecological environment (Fisherman, 2015); 2. Availability: The accessibility of the homeroom teacher in terms of time and emotional attention (Munene & Ruto, 2015); 3. Trustworthiness: The extent to which the parent feels that the homeroom teacher sees the student and the parent's needs (Deshevsky, 2009).
- b. A search for questionnaires: This search focused on questionnaires that measure the three dimensions and questionnaires measuring other aspects of the homeroom teacher-parent relationship. The questionnaires found were used to choose relevant statements for the developed questionnaire (Majerus, 2011; National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA), 2019)

- c. Personal interviews: The aims of the interviews were to examine what are the characteristics of the proper homeroom teacher as perceived by parents in special education. In addition, to clarify and exemplify the meaning of the characteristics as viewed by parents and by the educational staff. Ten interviews were conducted, with parents and with homeroom teachers. The issue of empowering the parents by the homeroom teacher emerged in the interviews, so it was decided to add this aspect to the questionnaire.
- d. The researcher has experience of more than 20 years. During this period she was a homeroom teacher, coordinator of a grade level, and member of the management team. She has rich experience in dealing with parents' requests in a variety of issues regarding their children and the relationship with the homeroom teacher. Based on this experience, the researcher concluded that measuring the relationship with the parents should include a holistic perspective, in addition to the three components. Following this insight, another section was added to the questionnaire, entitled "General evaluation". This section included statements such as: "Generally, my relationship with the homeroom teacher is good" – Statement 2; "When I think of the homeroom teacher, I feel that my child is in good hands" – Statement 1. (This statement appeared in the survey conducted by the National Authority for Measuring and Evaluation, with regard to teachers in general).

## **5.2. Development of the questionnaire**

### **5.2.1. Initial version**

On the basis of the sources described above, two initial versions were constructed - one for parents and one for teachers. The two versions were almost identical.

The initial version of the questionnaire comprised the following sections:

#### **5.2.1.1. Background characteristics**

Characteristics of the parent, such as gender, education and family status, and characteristics of the child, such as gender, age and type of disorder. Characteristics of the teacher included items such as gender, age and education.

#### **5.2.1.2. Dimensions of the relationship**

This section comprised the four dimensions:

**Professionalism** was comprised of 14 statements, such as "The homeroom teacher has a great deal of professional knowledge concerning special education".

**Availability** was comprised of 10 statements, such as "When I experience personal distress, I feel comfortable contacting the homeroom teacher".

**Trustworthiness:** This section was comprised of nine statements, such as "I feel safe sharing personal issues with the homeroom teacher".

**Empowerment:** This section was comprised of eight statements, such as "I feel that the homeroom teacher sees me as a partner in the work and in advancing my child".

Some statements were written in a reverse direction, such as "The homeroom teacher strongly restricts her time and I am unable to contact her". These statements should be recoded in the analysis of the questionnaire. The list of reverse statements is presented with the entire questionnaire in the Findings section.

#### **5.2.1.3. General evaluation**

This section included four statements measuring overall satisfaction with the homeroom teacher, such as "When I think of the homeroom teacher, I feel that my child is in good hands".

#### **5.2.1.4. COVID-19**

This section was added after the outbreak of the pandemic and comprised six questions, such as "During the COVID-19 period, the homeroom teacher provided me with emotional support".

**The statements in the structured part of the questionnaire** (sections 2, 3 and 4) were measured via a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### **5.2.1.5. Narrative question**

The participants were requested to openly describe a meaningful event: "Please recollect a meaningful event related to a joint encounter you had as a parent, with the homeroom teacher, and describe it".

### **5.3. Content validation of the questionnaire**

Validation of the questionnaire consisted of two steps: Validation by experts and validation by participants (parents and teachers). First, two experts evaluated the initial questionnaire from a methodological perspective. Both of them were not only experts in methodology, but also had experience in special education and psychology. The other experts were senior professionals in the special education system. The experts were requested to comment on the methodological aspects (structure, scale), on the content of the statements and on the clarity of the language.

Two revised versions were prepared on the basis of the comments made by the experts. The structure of the questionnaire was changed, so that the items of the four components (professionalism etc.) were not presented as clusters related to each component, but were randomly mixed.

#### **5.3.1. The pilot study**

The two versions were administered to 89 participants (48 parents and 41 teachers in special education). They were requested to complete the questionnaire and to comment on the content of the statements, the language (e.g., clarity) and the structure of the questionnaire.

In view of their comments, the following changes were made:

Another category was added to the scale for each statement ("irrelevant" or "I do not know")

Another change in the narrative question was adding the possibility of encounters by Zoom and not only face to face (due to COVID-19).

### 5.3.2. Ethical issues

The participants who took part in the research - experts in the validation process, the parents and the staff members who commented on the first version of the questionnaire – gave their informed consent to take part in the study.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Participants

In order to examine the reliability and the validity of the questionnaire, 89 participants (48 parents and 41 teachers) were requested to complete it. The characteristics of the parents are presented in Table 1 and the characteristics of the teachers – in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Background Characteristics of parents (N=48)

| Characteristics     | Category           | Percentage |
|---------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Gender              | Female             | 86         |
|                     | Male               | 14         |
| Education           | Less than 12 years | 17         |
|                     | 12 years           | 25         |
|                     | More than 12 years | 58         |
| Marital status      | Married            | 86         |
|                     | Not married        | 14         |
| Gender of the child | Female             | 40         |
|                     | Male               | 60         |
| Birth order         | First              | 40         |
|                     | Second             | 28         |
|                     | Other              | 32         |
| Type of disability  | Emotional          | 8          |
|                     | Behavioral         | 11         |
|                     | Cognitive          | 14         |
|                     | ASD                | 51         |
|                     | Sensory            | 11         |
|                     | Physical           | 5          |

Mean age = 64.13 SD=5.60

**Table 2.** Background characteristics of the teachers (N=41)

| Characteristics | Category    | Percentage |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|
| Gender          | Female      | 83         |
|                 | Male        | 17         |
| Education       | B.Ed        | 34         |
|                 | M.Ed        | 66         |
| Marital status  | Married     | 71         |
|                 | Not married | 29         |

|                 |                |    |
|-----------------|----------------|----|
| Role of teacher | Subject matter | 28 |
|                 | Homeroom       | 66 |
|                 | Therapist      | 6  |
| Type of school  | Primary school | 20 |
|                 | High school    | 54 |
|                 | Both           | 26 |

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Mean age 44.3 SD = 11.47 Range 25 - 60  
 Mean years of experience 16.73 years SD = 11.82 range 2-40

## 6.2. Reliability of the questionnaire

To examine the reliability of the questionnaire, internal consistency was calculated, using Cronbach's alpha. The coefficients were calculated for each dimension: Professionalism, Trust, Empowerment, Availability, Satisfaction during COVID-19 and general evaluation of the relationship between the parents and the homeroom teacher. Reliability was calculated for the entire sample and for each group – parents and teachers – separately. The results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Reliability of the questionnaire

|                 | Parents | Teachers | Total | Excluded items |
|-----------------|---------|----------|-------|----------------|
| Professionalism | 0.88    | 0.81     | 0.87  | None           |
| Availability    | 0.94    | 0.54     | 0.88  | A3 A8          |
| Trustworthiness | 0.94    | 0.63     | 0.87  | TR4            |
| Empowerment     | 0.88    | 0.46     | 0.79  | None           |
| Total           | 0.86    | 0.88     | 0.94  |                |
| COVID-19        | 0.70    | 0.88     | 0.83  | None           |
| General         | 0.83    | 0.79     | 0.80  | None           |

Table 3 shows high levels of reliability for the components of professionalism, availability, trustworthiness and empowerment. As shown in the table, three items were deleted because they lowered the reliability. As for COVID-19 and the general evaluation, the Cronbach's alpha values are also high, as can be seen in the table.

In view of the high reliability, general measures were calculated for each of the following parts: Professionalism, availability, trustworthiness, COVID-19 and general evaluation. The measures were calculated by the means of responses to the statements included in each part. The score could range from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

## 6.3. Distinctive Validity

In order to examine whether the four scales of the relationships between parents and homeroom teachers – professionalism, availability, trustworthiness and empowerment – are distinctive, we calculated Pearson correlations among them. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Correlations between the four dimensions

|                 |                     | Availability | Trust  | Empowerment |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|--------|-------------|
| Professionalism | Pearson Correlation | .280**       | .628** | 0.75**      |



|              |                     |      |               |               |
|--------------|---------------------|------|---------------|---------------|
|              | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .008 | .000          | .000          |
| Availability | Pearson Correlation |      | <b>.600**</b> | <b>0.72**</b> |
|              | Sig. (2-tailed)     |      | .000          | .000          |
| Trust        |                     |      |               | <b>0.79**</b> |
|              |                     |      |               | .000          |

The results in table 4 show a significant coefficient of 0.28,  $p < .001$ , between professionalism and availability; a significant coefficient of 0.60  $p < .001$ , between professionalism and trustworthiness; and a significant coefficient of 0.62  $p < .001$ , between availability and trustworthiness. These results indicate that the three scales are connected, but the level of connection is not too high, meaning that they belong to the same theoretical concept but each scale has unique meaning. As for empowerment, the high correlations between this dimension and the other three mean that empowerment is not sufficiently separated, so it was excluded from the questionnaire.

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. Insights from the study

The process of developing the questionnaire included a stage of content validation by experts and a statistical stage of examining the reliability. The analysis of reliability showed that the empowerment section did not reach satisfactory level of reliability among teachers, and it was decided to exclude this section from the final versions of the questionnaire. This decision was supported by another finding, showing that the distinctive validity of empowerment was not sufficient. This finding probably reflects a lack of consensus among teachers regarding the role of the homeroom teacher as an empowering agent for parents. It should be noted that the questionnaire focused on empowering the parents, and it seems that not all the teachers agree that homeroom teachers should empower parents as part of their role.

Another insight emerging from the process of testing the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, concerned the familiarity of the subject teachers with the role of the homeroom teacher. Many subject teachers faced a difficulty when responding to the questionnaire because they are not aware of the various aspects of the role of homeroom teacher, such as contact with the social services. This finding is surprising, because we expect members of the school staff who work daily with the homeroom teacher and participate in meetings on individual learning programs for students to be familiar with the role of the homeroom teacher. In view of this finding, it was decided to add a category of "irrelevant" to the questionnaire for teachers.

### 7.2. Contribution of the study

The questionnaire that was developed in the present study may be helpful for researchers in special education, who focus on questions regarding the relationship between parents and staff in special education. In addition, the questionnaire may be suitable for countries other than Israel, with required adaptations to the social and educational characteristics of these countries. Moreover, the questionnaire may be applicable to the mainstream educational system, after making adaptations, and may be applied in other domains that involve serving clients, such as social workers and physicians. Professionalism,

availability and trustworthiness are also relevant for the relationship between physicians and patients, and not only for homeroom teachers and parents.

Another contribution of the questionnaire developed in the current study pertains to the part added following the COVID-19 pandemic. This part examined the relationship between the parents and the homeroom teacher during the COVID period – did the homeroom teacher assist the parents with practical issues and psychologically, did the special circumstances of the COVID period affect the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the parents, and so on. The part dealing with COVID makes it possible to expand and more extensively understand the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers, as well as characterizing it as an exceptional situation where interactions take place not face-to-face but rather on Zoom, with involves a social distance. Theoretically, such an examination might contribute to understanding the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers not only in the daily routine but also rather also in times of crisis. The questionnaire can be used also in future studies dealing with the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in times of crisis.

A limitation of the study is its focus on quantitative data, which has limitations for intensive understanding of the phenomenon. One strategy for coping with this limitation is including a narrative question in the questionnaire.

### 7.3. Recommendations

- A. It is recommended to use the questionnaires developed in the current study for future studies examining various aspects of the relationship between parents and homeroom teachers in special education, as well as to adapt them for mainstream education and other systems that involve a relationship between service providers and clients.
- B. In light of the little knowledge of subject teachers in special education regarding the role of the homeroom teacher, it is recommended to include this topic in the training program for subject teachers in special education.

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