

Communication between Parents of Students with Disabilities and the Homeroom Teacher during a Classroom-Based Social Cohesion Program

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Abstract

Parents of children with disabilities are key partners in their child's education. However, their communication with teachers is often limited and shallow. This qualitative study explores the nature of communication between teachers and parents of children with disabilities. Here, seven teachers – all of whom are graduate students – implemented a social-emotional learning program and maintained weekly reflective journals on their interactions with parents. In addition, 84 WhatsApp messages sent by parents to the teachers over a six-week period were collected and analyzed. Findings reveal that the majority of the communication occurred with mothers, far less with parents as a unit and never with fathers. Most interactions were conducted through written messages rather than phone calls or face-to-face meetings. The content predominantly focused on requests, notifications or urgent matters. In some cases, the quality of communication evolved, particularly when improvements in the child's functioning became evident. Mothers began initiating contact with the teacher, rather than merely responding to messages. Attaching photographs of the children to the correspondence enriched the interaction and enhanced the

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quality of the relationship. The discussion analyses the dynamics of these reciprocal communication patterns and illustrates how proactive engagement on the part of the teacher fosters greater parental involvement.

Keywords: parents, teacher, preschool teachers, communication, social cohesion, educational integration.

Literature Review

The purpose of the article is to document and analyze the ways parents of children with disabilities communicate with their educators. We will first observe parents' involvement in their children's education. The review will then focus on communication patterns and ultimately on a smaller group of parents of children with disabilities. We will conclude by emphasizing the importance of the relationship and cooperation for the benefit of the child.

Parental Involvement

Parents are welcome partners in their children's education. Many studies have pointed to the positive effects of this involvement on the development, functioning and achievements of their children in the education system (Froiland, 2021; Ma et al., 2016). Parental involvement involves a wide range of activities (Gross et al., 2020; Noy, 2014; Yariv, 2018) and has aspects related to organization, such as preparing for the school day (breakfast, clothing, transportation), collaborating with the preschool or school teacher on pedagogical issues (dealing with problematic behavior, preparing materials for activities), assisting with studentship issues (purchasing books and educational equipment, preparing a bag) or dealing with urgent problems (collecting a sick

child from preschool). Parents are also responsible for the administrative aspects of studies (registration for preschool or school, regular attendance, payments, membership of the parents' committee). They are also expected to participate in events and celebrations that the school or preschool teachers organize (Parents' Day, Hanukkah, lectures).

Researchers conceptualize parental involvement across various dimensions (Green et al., 2007). For example, Friedman (2011) categorizes these patterns along a continuum that begins with parents as passive partners, uninvolved observers and also parents as service providers (partial involvement). At the most active level, parents are involved in the educational process, including setting goals and policies. Dayan (2004) also points to three different perceptions of cooperation. In the first one, there is a separation between the home and the preschool. The child moves from one environment to the other, and the relationship between the preschool teacher and parents is limited and focuses mainly on exchanging information. The parents are not involved in what happens at preschool and the preschool teacher is not involved in what happens at home. In the sharing perception, the relationship is expressed in the exchange of information and interest in the child's well-being at home and in preschool. However, there is not always agreement regarding where the activity takes place: does it take place only at home (help with homework), only at school (such as accompanying trips, being present in the child's classroom) or both? (Fantuzzo et al., 2013). Are these actions the joint responsibility of the parents and the educator, or does each party have specific areas of responsibility? Are the parents active or passive? Is the focus on relationships with teachers and the school or on promoting the children's learning? (Goodall

& Montgomery, 2023). In the integration perception, interactions exist on various levels, not necessarily in the context of the parents' individual child. Parents are involved and help with activities in the preschool or classroom and the preschool and school teachers visit homes.

The review deals with the parents' relationship with homeroom teachers; however, it is worth paying attention to the impact of the pedagogical and organizational structure of the preschool and classroom on mutual relationships. Unlike the limited contact with teachers at school, parents of preschool children have intense, daily involvement; for example, when they bring the child to preschool every morning and talk to the preschool teacher. Unlike the tendency of school teachers to handle all problems themselves and distance parents from involvement in their children's functioning in the classroom (Inbar-Furst et al., 2023), parents are involved and cooperate with the preschool teacher on many matters. This close collaboration sometimes also constitutes a threat to the preschool teacher's autonomy and professional authority (Remer & Gilat, 2021). Alongside the feeling that relationships with parents are important to the preschool's functioning, stories also emerge about a narrow-minded focus solely on the welfare of their child (Hedlin, 2019), a lack of appreciation for the preschool teacher's functioning and complaints to external parties even about minor issues (Edri, 2021). Among parents, we find a similar pattern: the parents are highly satisfied with the preschool teachers and their work with the children, but are less satisfied with the communication with them. They are also troubled by tensions and conflicts, the result of a clash between their expectations and demands and the preschool teacher's ability to meet them (Gilat et al., 2023).

The numerous studies on parental involvement examine a variety of aspects: demographic variables and their impact on the characteristics of involvement (Bengio, 2021; Castro et al., 2015; Greenbank & Bengio, 2021; Hattie, 2023), the development of relationship patterns throughout the preschool and school years (Murray et al., 2015), preschool and school teachers' perceptions of the desired type of relationship (Edri, 2021; Greenbank & Agam Ben-Artzi, 2020), the degree of congruence between the parties' positions (Minke et al., 2014) and the benefit that arises from this involvement in promoting their children's achievements (Zablaevsky & Shapiro-Lishchansky, 2018).

Regarding methodological aspects, most studies are conducted in schools and fewer in preschools (Wilder, 2014). Most of them are quantitative and the 'soft' characteristics of communication between teachers and parents have been less researched; e.g., communication barriers resulting from immigrants' partial language proficiency, asymmetric power relations, cultural differences, and disputes (Norheim & Moser, 2020).

Relationships and Communication Between Parents and Teachers

Parental involvement can also be characterized through the relationships parents have with preschool or school teachers, for example, the degree of mutual agreement, support, backing, and acceptance or disregard (Leenders et al., 2018). A different conceptualization examines the feelings of trust, warmth and communication between parents and preschool or school teachers. Interpersonal communication is essentially based on giving mutual attention to the needs and circumstances of individuals, while conveying messages and building a personal connection (Solomon & Theiss, 2022). Communication is a

dynamic, reciprocal, ongoing process intended to produce shared results. Many researchers include communication as a central dimension of relationships – who addresses whom, the messages the parties convey, the communication channels (online, face-to-face), the frequency of message transmission, the degree of willingness to listen and express oneself, and more (Andoni et al., 2022). Learning to master communication plays a central role in shaping relationships. For example, Inbar-Furst et al. (2023) identified four levels of teachers' communication with parents: (a) one-way updating of parents, without dialogue, usually through online channels; (b) updating with dialogue (such as a phone call, correspondence or text messaging); (c) providing instructions for implementation; (d) teachers inviting parents to educational collaboration. In another study, researchers assessed parental involvement in four dimensions: (a) frequency of contact between parents and teachers; (b) quality of interactions between parents and teachers; (c) participation in educational activities at home; and (d) participation in activities at school (Izzo et al., 1999).

The Relationship Between the School and Parents of Children with Disabilities

In recent decades, a revolution has been taking place in the Western world that aims to ensure the rights of adults and children with special needs and enable them to live full, fair, and equal lives in the community. Of all students in Israel, approximately 11% have some kind of disability, and of them, almost two-thirds study in regular settings (NBS, 2021). Half have been diagnosed with specific learning disabilities of varying degrees and the rest have other, rarer disabilities: autism, severe mental disorders, severe physical disabilities, cognitive developmental disabilities, etc. Following Amendment No. 11 to the Special

Education Law (Special Education Law, Amendment No. 11, 5778 - 2018), parents in Israel now have the right to choose their child's educational setting – regular or special. Most parents choose to integrate their child into regular classrooms, where they are supposed to receive pedagogical and therapeutic services that will meet their needs (Weisblay, 2023). This is the social and organizational context within which the research was conducted – integrated classrooms in regular preschools and schools.

Parent-teacher partnerships have important benefits for all students, and can be especially beneficial for students with disabilities. Thus, parents and teachers can monitor the child's performance, synchronize the learning and therapies they receive at school and in the family and also contribute to mutual support between the home and the educational setting. For their part, parents strive to have ongoing, transparent and available communication with the school or preschool teacher, relations of openness, listening and partnership, professional teaching accompanied by guidance and reliable information, and also acceptance and integration of the child (Greenbank, 2024). Parents in South Africa noted how important it is to “have the teacher and principal on your side” to ensure that their child with a disability in an integrated classroom receives dedicated care and is not harmed by alienated teachers (Swart et al., 2004). Indeed, parenting children with complex disabilities is sometimes characterized by “negative energy.” Some parents feel lonely, vulnerable, “marked” with a negative label or threatened by unequal power relations with teachers. Sometimes when professionals seek to guide them, they tend to deny their children's disabilities and reject professional guidance on the pretext that they do not understand their children's teaching and learning processes

(Hadjiyiannakou et al., 2007). According to a study that examined the attitudes of parents and teachers in Israel to the integration of children with intellectual disabilities, teachers believed that parental involvement and the relationship with the parents was extremely important. However, they complained that they did not have sufficient tools or knowledge to teach students with such disabilities. The parents were also convinced that the integrated classroom gave their children an opportunity for social and academic integration, but they felt that the teachers taught in a routine format and did not invest in advancing the children (Heiman & Avissar, 2022). A study conducted on the obstacles in parent-teacher relationships in integrated high schools found that parents experienced poor communication and a lack of trust on the part of teachers (Gilmore et al., 2022). In contrast, teachers often perceived parents as demanding, needy people who do not value or acknowledge their contributions to their children.

Few studies focus on schools' communication with parents of children with disabilities, and even fewer examine this sharing from an ongoing ethnographic perspective. This is the subject of the current study.

The Research Questions:

1. What characterizes the communication channels used by parents and educators?
2. What characterizes the content exchanged between them?
3. Was there a noticeable development in communication patterns during the program?

The Research Method

The present article emerged from action research conducted by a group of seven graduate students (including the first author). The students, all active school or preschool teachers, built a curriculum based on social-emotional learning (SEL) that they taught in their classrooms (Yariv et al., 2024). The program "We Are All One Human Fabric" focused on the social group and was intended to foster awareness of the relationships within it. The program did not teach social skills, nor was it intended to help individual pupils, but rather to increase the awareness of all pupils of the essence of the social group, the differences and diversity in the characteristics of its members and the need for an equal and respectful attitude to all. The program consisted of seven double lessons (each of them an hour and a half long) taught twice a week for four consecutive weeks. The teaching methods and content were uniform for all classes, but slight adjustments were made for pupils of different ages (4 to 12 years old). The students also collected quantitative data and analyzed the performance of the integrated pupils and the rest of the class. The research follow-up began a week before the program and ended a week after, for a total of six weeks. The study found that the program contributed to improving the social engagement of the integrated pupils. Throughout the intervention, there was a gradual increase in cooperation, mutual assistance, sharing and giving and consideration for others. There was also a change in academic engagement – paying attention in lessons, completing assignments and participating in class discourse increased (Yariv et al., 2024).

The current study examines a specific aspect of this project – the communication between parents of a child with a disability and the educators

during the period in which the program was conducted. Most studies on teacher-parent relationships are conducted in a quantitative paradigm, usually using questionnaires administered to teachers (Dawson & Wymbs, 2016); however, the parents' voices have rarely been recorded. To monitor the communication channels and content transferred between educators and parents, it was decided to use qualitative tools. The main research tool chosen for this was a journal. Each of the preschool and school teachers (hereinafter, the educators) documented weekly, for six weeks, her communication with the parents before and during the program and two weeks after its completion. Another tool was WhatsApp messages, which were used primarily to back up the information written in the journals. It is worth noting that during the program, no activity was carried out with all the parents of the class or with the parents of the integrated child (except for obtaining their consent).

Participants

The study was conducted by a group of seven educators who teach in urban communities in the south of Israel. Three of them are seasoned teachers (mean, 16.6 years) and four are new (mean, 5.25). Two work as preschool teachers and the rest teach in state elementary schools. In purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2017), one integrated pupil was selected in each class, for a total group of seven pupils. The inclusion criterion focused on pupils who had undergone a diagnosis and were determined by the placement committee to be eligible for special assistance. It was decided in advance that if there was more than one pupil in the class, a lottery would be held, and if there was no pupil who had been formally determined to be eligible, the one with the most severe

functional difficulties would be chosen. Of the seven integrated children, two were girls. The children's ages ranged from 4 to 12 years (mean 8.8 years, standard deviation 1.23). Most of the children (4 out of 7) were diagnosed with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) and the rest with a specific learning disorder or an emotional disorder. The pupils' parents, seven mothers, with whom the educators had contact, ranged in age from 32 to 41.

The Research Tool

The information was collected using two tools. The first was a journal that the educators wrote during the program held in the classrooms. Writing a journal is a common tool in qualitative research and has many advantages: flexibility, heterogeneity and the potential to yield rich qualitative data. Unlike methods that rely on retrospective memory, the journal ensures that reports are arranged chronologically and reduces the likelihood of forgetting feelings or events (Mackrill, 2008; Milligan et al., 2005). To increase the reliability and validity of the data, it was decided to structure the tool so that each researcher was asked to answer the following questions on a fixed day each week during the program: (a) description of a response to a proactive update from the homeroom or preschool teacher; (b) phone calls you received from the parents of the integrated child; (c) general conversations and an unusual event that occurred this week; (d) how you felt during the week in terms of parents' reactions to your actions or management of unusual cases, if any. The weekly report also enabled them⁴ to monitor developments in relations with the parents.

The second tool – WhatsApp correspondence between parents and educators – was intended to provide backup for the information collected in the journals.

Use of the cellphone messaging app has also become popular among researchers due to the widespread availability of the messages and the ease of collection and also because they represent authentic social phenomena (Rosenfeld et al., 2018). Social networks offer types of information that were not available through traditional research methods. Virtual communication can be monitored between people who are geographically distant from each other, who communicate under unusual circumstances, at unusual times or in unusual periods, for example, during and after the coronavirus pandemic (Mwanda, 2022). In the current study, the educators uploaded screenshots of correspondence with the parents of the integrated child to Google Drive once a week. They were also asked to indicate messages that were not understood or that aroused strong emotions. On average, the mothers sent between one and three messages each week (emojis, written or recorded messages, photos). A total of 84 such messages were collected.

The Research Process and Research Ethics

The research was conducted by the school and preschool teachers, who were the students who taught the SEL program in their classrooms and also collected information about its impact. First, a conversation took place with the parents of the integrated pupil, in which the program was explained, and a letter was sent requesting consent for data collection. Second, each researcher wrote a journal on a fixed day each week during the intervention program. Third, at the end of the program the researchers uploaded screenshots of correspondence with the parents to the program's website, without any identification of names or details. The study's authors received approval (No. 11) from the college's

Research Authority Ethics Committee, as is customary in action research. The students' parents were assured of complete anonymity and privacy. All parents gave verbal and written consent after receiving an explanation. Because the students (including the first author) were students of the second author, it was decided to write the article a year after they had all finished writing their final theses, received a grade and a degree and there was no longer any relationship of authority between them and the lecturer. The article was written with the consent of all of them.

Data Processing

The content analysis we carried out on the journals was conducted in several stages (Shkedi, 2003): (a) repeated readings of the journals, with the analysis unit focusing on the content written in them each week; (b) locating the communication channel (correspondence/telephone call/face-to-face meeting). To this end, the words and phrases used by the educators to describe acts of communication were examined. For example, "I called" indicates a telephone call and "I wrote" indicates a written message. The action "I sent a photo to my mother" also took place on WhatsApp. However, there were cases where the educators wrote in the journal "I informed the mother," wording that may be suitable for both communication channels; (c) who initiated the contact (educator/parent) according to the manner of reporting in the journals; (d) monitoring the development of the relationship between the educators and parents was carried out using two methods of content analysis. One was holistic – reading all the accumulated documentation and identifying trends (such as the types of content, the tone of the wording: positive/neutral/negative). The

second involved focusing on passages written in the journals during the first and last weeks and comparing them.

Findings

A wealth of material was collected from the journals and correspondence. We will first present the characteristics of the collected materials. We will then illustrate the relationships formed during the program, through a case study with a complex pattern of communication between a preschool teacher and parents. We will then use content analysis to describe the characteristics of the communication patterns and the content that the educators sent to the parents and vice versa.

Characteristics of the Collected Materials

The preschool and school teachers used two methods to document their relationships with parents. Every week they wrote a journal, usually in short paragraphs (weekly average 43.7 words, mean 11.8), on four aspects: (a) Description of an initiated update. For example: "I sent a message to the parents in the group that I had managed to get the student additional NLP emotional therapy at school. The mother was happy and wrote, '*There's no one like you,*' the father responded, '*Thank you for you*'"; (b) Calls that the educators received from the parents of the integrated child. For example: "The mother called me and thanked me for the meeting we (the psychologist, the preschool integration teacher and the preschool teacher) had with her, in preparation for L.'s application to the placement committee. Thank you very much, it was very important"; (c) General conversations and also

reporting on unusual events, if they occurred that week. For example: "At the end of the school day, I went with the student to his parents who came to pick him up and reported to them that he had spat on the floor in the classroom"; (d) Summary of the relationship with the parents, their response to the pedagogical work in the classroom, management of exceptional cases and similar. For example: "I felt the parents accept what I said, and they understand what I'm talking about." The wide variety of topics included in these reports makes it possible to understand the scope of the relationship, the developments that occurred in it, unexpected mishaps and also the general sentiment that prevailed in the mutual relations.

In the second research tool, the educators collected their correspondence with parents in the WhatsApp app. This communication included, according to the accepted conceptualization (Solomon & Theiss, 2022), messages with content (written messages), the expression of emotional expression through an emoji (symbol) and sometimes more complex messages of text and images, usually of the student in happy circumstances and situations, which were attached to the messages. Most of the messages were written and a few were recorded. As is customary in this channel, the messages were short and carelessly worded, sometimes with spelling errors and no punctuation. For example, "Hi [teacher's name], can I redeem [student's name]'s coupon tomorrow?" He said you promised him." Due to the ease and immediacy of transmitting messages, correspondence sometimes took place on the move, with the addition of the words "you're right," "leave it," "we'll manage," "everything's fine." It is worth noting that the correspondence was sparse, sometimes one or two messages a week, sometimes a burst of correspondence to address an urgent problem

and sometimes prolonged silence. The contents were random and it is impossible to build a clear picture from them about communication and mutual relations; at most, they can be used as backup for the journals.

A Case Study: Ronnie

To illustrate a relationship in its entirety, we present a narrative with thick description (Geertz, 2008) that combines journal excerpts and quotes from WhatsApp correspondence. For six weeks, a preschool teacher documented her communication with the mother of Ronnie (pseudonym), a 5-year-old boy with undiagnosed signs of autism. We present the matters with the necessary omissions, with a chronological rewrite of the content written in the journal, to which the excerpts of correspondence have been added.

In the first week, the preschool teacher asked the mother to bring a diagnostic report that was conducted on her son two years ago. She explained to her about the program "We Are All Human Fabric" and also reported that Ronnie is withdrawn, isolated and does not let others play with him. The mother thanked the teacher for her efforts and told her that at home too her son is quite fixated on one game and resists variety. She asked for tools and guidance to help her son. The next day she sent another message: "I managed to obtain some of the documents, I am continuing to search and I am sure that at the beginning of next week I will send you everything."

In the second week, the teacher reported to the mother: "Something is the matter with him today. He entered the preschool room agitated, wanders around without a clear purpose, refuses to sit, hides from the children and laughs loudly, talks to himself a lot and is unwilling to cooperate. The mother

replied: "Yes, he's going through something emotional. He doesn't usually act like that. As if he doesn't understand the meaning of the things he said to the children." The mother tried to tone down his words to the children, "I'll cut you," by saying, "Oh, he must have been confused. I bring him salad to cut at home and that's probably why he said that." The teacher, in response, asks her to talk to her son about what he said.

In the third week, the teacher described how curious the child is about the things being taught in preschool. He is always touching and examining and has difficulty waiting his turn and joining in the activity. The mother responded: 👍

+ ❤️. In the fourth week, the teacher reported on the progress of the program and her son's involvement, with the first signs of emotional and social progress.

The mother responded: 🙌 + "Thank you very much." In the fifth week, the teacher told the mother that Ronnie has managed to form relationships with two or three children in the class and even offered to help his friend who was sad. He still has trouble maintaining continuity of the relationship. The teacher praised the child and asked his mother to do the same. The mother responded: Thank you + ❤️.

Communication Initiated by the Mother

In the first weeks, the mother only responded briefly to the teacher's messages. Starting from the third week, she informed the teacher that her son tells her about his games with children in preschool and even mentions their names. Another time she wrote: "Ronnie tells me about things that happened in preschool, he constantly sings me a song about rain and clouds, he told me about a sports lesson with Eli, where you have to hop on one leg, which was

fun." The kindergarten teacher responded happily. In another message, the mother wondered: "Sometimes he says things and I'm not sure they're true. That someone hit him. He's an insecure, sensitive child, he's not someone who hits." The teacher denied it and the mother was reassured by these messages. In the fourth week too, the mother reported an improvement in her son's functioning. He had stopped throwing objects and seemed calmer and more composed. "Everything you tell me about his behavior greatly helps me to understand and support him at home. I'm really glad the program is helping him." That same week there was an incident that the mother called to inquire about, in which the eurhythmics teacher hurt him and the assistant helped him. The teacher immediately asked everyone involved, and they denied the incident and also said that every time children pass by Ronnie and touch him randomly, he breaks out in screams. The mother was reassured and thanked the teacher. In the fifth week, the mother wrote that Ronnie told her he had fun at preschool, he played with Nir, Shir and Alex (pseudonyms). The teacher sent her a thumbs-up and said she was glad he was telling her.

This report points to several characteristics in the relationship between the teacher and the mother. At first, the teacher initiated the communication and informed the mother, who was content with short or long responses, depending on the issue, sometimes accompanied by an emoji. Starting in the middle of the program, there was a significant improvement in the child's functioning. The communication pattern between the mother and the teacher also changed. The mother took the initiative more, she told the teacher about progress and also about failures, and the kindergarten teacher was the one who happily responded to the good news.

Communication Characteristics

a. The Communication Channels

Analysis of the journals and correspondence shows that most communication was with the mothers. Only a minority of the communications were directed to the parents, but never directly to the children's fathers. There was occasional contact with the grandmother, who was supposed to receive the child upon his return from school. Although the documentation does not allow for details of the types of contacts, it is clear that most communication in the preschools took place in face-to-face conversations. In schools, written correspondence was more common on the part of homeroom teachers, while mothers preferred a phone call when an urgent matter needed to be resolved. It is worth noting that at the beginning of the program, the mothers mainly responded to the educators' inquiries and requests. Over time, they began to initiate communication and, in the educators' opinion, they probably felt more relaxed, even when discussing topics unrelated to school, for example, describing the student's behavior at home. It is difficult to estimate the exact percentage of use of each channel or development of the communication pattern because there was no detailed documentation of each contact.

b. The Contents of Mutual Communication

Most of the educators' correspondence with the mothers was written in a matter-of-fact and "lean" tone. They dealt with requests (such as sending documents), information (such as changes to the schedule) or announcements about events ("I have sent you an invitation to an evening at the local support center in Rehovot") [the center that accompanies the education system in the

implementation of the Special Education Law]. More rarely, they sent updates on the child's performance, mainly in situations of behavioral regression or extraordinary improvement: "I contacted the mother and asked her why M. hadn't come to school? She said he didn't have the right clothes [the child has difficulties with sensory regulation and usually only wears clothes that don't bother him]. The mother thanked me for contacting her"; "I sent the parents his photos from the activity we did in class and they were very happy."

The mothers' correspondence style was also generally short and to the point, reflecting a respectful relationship, but sometimes mothers contacted the teacher when they were worried or angry, and there were a few instances of a flattering style ("Alon wishes you a good night," "Good morning, you amazing woman, I want to tell you something, speak to me when you have a few minutes... it's not urgent.") The content was diverse and included requests, updates and consultations, questions and inquiries.

"The mother called from abroad to ask how the child was doing in class." I explained that it was noticeable that she was not at home and the child was allowing himself not to study; that he was less cooperative. I also told her that lately he had been playing with his eyes, squinting ... and she said she didn't know what to do about it"; "A phone call. The mother asked why H. wasn't in the picture that the assistant took and sent to the group. I explained to her that her child had chosen not to participate in the activity. The mother said that this was unacceptable to her";

A phone call in the morning, before the school day starts. The mother was seeking help because her daughter had been acting violently, received a suspension and did not want to go

to school. The mother suggested promising her daughter that I would not suspend her. I refused and she ended the call. Needless to say, the girl was uncooperative all day following the mother's promise and my refusal;

"The mother called me and thanked me for the meeting we (the psychologist, the kindergarten integration teacher and the kindergarten teacher) had with her, in preparation for L.'s presentation to the placement committee."

Although most teachers reported respectful, brief communication, rooted in a specific context, there was one mother who flooded her with messages and calls, even at unacceptable times. For example, towards the end of summer vacation, she called twice at 8 a.m. and sent a message to inform the teacher about a minor traffic accident that occurred during the birthday party of one of the students in the class. Although the teacher felt uncomfortable, she called to find out what had happened. She then wrote in the journal: "She (the mother of the integrated student) expects me to be a part of their lives instead of respecting my free time."

c. Development in Communication

The third research question examined the development in communication patterns during the program. Was there a change in language (formal versus personal) or types of contact? To this end, we read all the reports and compared the content of the communication reported by the teachers in the first week with the content in the last week. For example, the case of Ronnie shows that in the first few weeks there was tension between the parents and the preschool teacher due to their refusal to admit their son's difficulties. As the program

developed, they saw the program's contribution to their child's functioning and their trust in the teacher grew, but they still denied the signs of autism.

The general impression is that it is evident that in six out of seven cases the relationship between teachers and parents was positive. For example, a teacher concluded in the first week: "The parents accept what I say" and in the second week: "I felt great [this week], there is cooperation between the staff and the parents. They are very involved and there are no unusual surprises." In three cases (as in Ronnie's case), improvement was evident and mothers began to initiate contact with educators and also felt comfortable sharing more 'sensitive' topics. For example, one of the preschool teachers reported three events in her journal. In one, "The mother suggested that we talk to S. at the occupational therapy clinic and hear from her how she works with L." In the second, she thanked the teacher, and in the third, the teacher asked the mother to deal with a violent incident that had occurred at the preschool ("I informed the mother and asked her to talk to L. at home"). The context reveals symmetry in involvement and initiative. Although the preschool teacher is a professional authority, the mother felt free to offer professional suggestions and direct her daughter's care. The teacher also felt comfortable asking the mother to intervene in unpleasant events her daughter was involved in. Thus, the one-way communication became two-way over time. The tone of communication becomes enthusiastic when there is a noticeable improvement in the student's performance. A teacher reported: "I sent the mother a picture of me and her son. She was happy and said that one day we would get married..." The mother, it seems, fantasizes that the teacher will become a family member in the future. Another teacher noticed that her relationship with the mother was becoming

closer: "It seems that the mother is more open to cooperation now. She speaks to me more about her concerns after the diagnosis, and also about the child's other behaviors that I don't see at all in the classroom. For example, the frustration he feels [when he doesn't manage read]."

However, in one class, the teacher reported that the parents were distant from her and indifferent to the program she taught in the classroom: "It feels like the parents are constantly looking for someone to blame. Every time something happens that they don't like, they scold and blame me." The educator's journals indicate that communication remained one-way and sometimes the parents did not answer at all, or responded in a disappointing manner. For example, the teacher wrote in the journal: "I sent a picture of the student to her parents in the shared group. I took a photo of her in an active learning class. The mother responded, "She's so beautiful!" The teacher felt that the mother had ignored her contribution to her daughter and her willingness to involve them. A week later, the teacher sent a picture of the student writing in a notebook, without mentioning the parents' response. Later, the teacher did not send pictures but told the parents about the emotional therapy their daughter was receiving and about her learning in class.

In summary, most of the teachers' communication was with the mothers, mostly through written messages rather than phone calls or face-to-face meetings. The content predominantly focused on requests, notifications or urgent matters. Attaching photographs of the children to the correspondence enriched the interaction and enhanced the quality of the relationship. In general, communication in most cases was positive, except for one case where the relationship was characterized by mutual anger and alienation. In half of the

cases, a change was evident, especially when improvement in the children's functioning began to appear. From the middle of the period, the mothers began to initiate contact with the educator, rather than merely confirming messages sent to them. The mothers were grateful for the educators' actions on their behalf and for their children.

Discussion

The current study grew out of action research in which an SEL program for social cohesion was conducted in the classroom (Yariv et al., 2024). Even during the research planning stage, it was decided to document the relationship and communication between the educators and the parents during the program. No advance instructions were given (such as updating parents weekly), nor were there any prior assumptions about whether and how the program would affect existing communication patterns. The discussion will examine what can be learned about the communication patterns between teachers and parents during the program.

Communication Channels

The study shows that communication between parents and teachers takes place through a variety of channels – face-to-face conversations and telephone calls, as well as sending messages on social networks. But because the data is based on written evidence, it does not document nonverbal communication (such as eye contact, gestures), partial or censored message transmission, such communication behind backs (gossip) or by a third party (the child telling their parents what the teacher said). As it is not possible to cover this broad

field in a short article, we will focus on one active and dominant channel in the communication of educators and mothers.

Sending Messages on WhatsApp

Since the app was launched in 2009, it has gained great popularity due to the availability and immediacy of two-way transfer of documents, photos and audio clips, especially voice and video calls. The world of education has also embraced the technology (Suárez-Lantarón et al., 2022), including in teacher-parent communication. This communication has characteristic types of content, language and styles of expression, for example, the use of emojis. However, the quality of this communication and its characteristics vary from group to group and culture to culture (Mayangsari & Aprianti, 2017).

To paraphrase the iconic phrase, "The medium is the message," coined by philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1964), the massive use of social media shapes communication patterns between teachers and parents. In place of the "communication notebook," which has apparently become obsolete, a pattern is emerging of sending messages in a brief, matter-of-fact style, in plain language, sometimes with abbreviations and emojis. The content deals with announcements, requests or updates. But the interesting finding concerns another feature of this medium – sending photographs. From time to time teachers and mothers attached pictures, usually to report on a positive activity in which the child was involved. The images provide rich visual information centered on the child (Booton, 2018). Thus, the mother observes her beloved child through the teacher's eyes, from the same camera angle, with (perhaps) the same meaning that the teacher intended to convey. The photos not only

draw attention to the child's presence and inform the mother of their condition and functioning (Shlita et al., 2011). The mothers' happy reaction expresses the feeling that the teacher "sees" their child, with an empathetic and loving gaze (since it is not customary to photograph children in negative circumstances). A reverse example occurred when a mother was angry with the teacher because her daughter was missing from a group photo.

Although the communication was respectful and matter-of-fact, there were also exceptions; for example, a mother who called the teacher early in the morning to update her on her son's condition. This harassment, which stems from the availability and immediacy of online communication, is a well-known phenomenon that exists in quite a few parents' groups in Israeli schools (Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017).

It also became clear that during the program, the pattern of correspondence changed in several ways: the content became more diverse, including personal content that had previously been avoided; and the tone was more emotional and positive. In addition, a month after the program began, the parents began initiating WhatsApp messages and phone calls to the teacher. Open and flowing communication made it possible to find solutions to the students' difficulties, with the educational staff and parents working together for this aim.

Relations with Parents of Integrated Students

Teaching and educating integrated students is a very complex matter. Other professionals are often also partners in treatment and teachers are required to invest in the student's advancement and maintain closer contact with parents. In general, the tone evident in the relationship was matter-of-fact and sympathetic.

Differences were evident in the approaches of the two parties: the teachers expressed themselves calmly in their messages, with a professional and sympathetic approach. The mothers showed great emotional involvement, while identifying with their children. For example, rallying around whenever they seem hurt or in need of help. This finding is less consistent with studies that indicated an ambivalent, sometimes critical, perception of parents towards teachers and vice versa (Edri, 2021; Gilmore et al., 2022).

In his book, *Influence, New and Expanded: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Cialdini (2021) cites studies describing how acts of giving increase the willingness of the recipient to acknowledge gratitude and contribute something tangible or symbolic in return. The current findings well describe this dynamic: The integrated children's functional difficulties intensify parents' concern and their desire to help their children. The educators provide emotional support and become pedagogical partners. For example, Ronnie's mother called the teacher and explained that her son didn't want to put on the new outfit she had bought him or go to preschool with her. "He insists on wearing only his familiar outfit, which is now in the laundry," she added. In her frustration, she asked the teacher for tools to deal with his stubborn behavior. The teacher explained to her that her son has difficulty coping with changes (a possible sign of autism) and that it is important to prepare him in advance, to involve him in choosing clothes before he goes to bed. She also volunteered to talk to the child. A week later, the mother warmly thanked the teacher for her efforts and the "magic" of her intervention.

The seven educators invested in the academic and social development of all their students and also reported on initiatives and events in the classroom. They

were appreciated by the parents, who in turn thanked them and increased their involvement in communication with the teachers and the school (Gross et al., 2020). The most instructive example occurred when the teacher took a trip with the children and their parents and then held a bar mitzvah evening. The parents sent her excited messages about how proud and happy they were with the event. They also shared these messages in wider circles. Indeed, teachers' pedagogical investment contributes to their relationship with parents.

It also appears, according to the conceptualization of Inbar-Furst et al. (2023), that the educators' communication mainly included three of four levels – (a) one-way messages to update parents, without dialogue; (b) information with dialogue (such as a telephone call or written correspondence); (c) providing instructions for implementation, more on the part of the educator and less on the part of the parents. Although the “We Are All One Human Fabric” program focused on relationships within the classroom, many SEL programs include a component of family engagement and parent guidance (Garbacz et al., 2015). Some distribute information and give advice or tips, provide guidance on how to enhance content taught in the classroom or even hold lectures for parents. Korem (2024) found that great benefit comes from investing in the social advancement of the children in the class and their parents: fostering good communication, providing practical advice to parents and leading a positive change in the relationship between the children and their parents, for example, through advice and guidance that educators gave to mothers.

The fourth level of inviting parents for educational cooperation was documented in few cases: mainly around consultations and completing bureaucratic procedures for placing a child with a disability, but there were also pedagogical

collaborations, for example between Ronnie's mother and kindergarten teacher and educators' requests for parents to talk to their children about their inappropriate behavior at school.

Contribution to Educational Staff-Parent Relations

The signs that informing parents about educational programs, especially those that directly or indirectly contribute to their children, increases their involvement, mark an encouraging direction. To create a meaningful partnership, it is necessary for teachers to inform parents not only about the program, but also about its specific contribution to their child. Today they are assisted by effective technologies for disseminating information. It is essential that teachers enable parents to communicate with them without fear. The study illustrated the great contribution that a reciprocal relationship of information sharing and consultation can make. It is also be an opportunity for teachers to find out about the child's functioning at home, their successes and also the problems and dilemmas that the parents experience, and to enhance the education that the parents give to their children. In addition, it is necessary for teachers to consider responding to parents' requests, especially in irregular circumstances. For example, the mother of one of the students sent the homeroom teacher a picture sent by another teacher showing her son sitting in the corner of the classroom, angry. The teacher called the student over and asked what was bothering him, then told the mother how she had handled it. The mother thanked her warmly. In her reflection, the teacher was convinced that despite the mother's irregular request, her decision to intervene and help was justified

in the circumstances, even though it contradicted her policy of setting limits for parents.

In conclusion, the current study reveals a relationship that is rarely observed: the contact between educators and parents of a child with a disability. Over the course of six weeks, aspects of the communication patterns and content that characterize these relationships were examined. The research findings are encouraging; however, much more work is needed to substantiate them. First, further research is needed to determine whether the quality of communication between parents of a child with a disability and the teacher is indeed related to the program's design and whether it is also influenced by the introductory period, the educators' proactive communications or other factors. It is recommended to conduct a classic intervention study, which includes experimental and control groups. Second, the groups of teachers and parents who participated in the study were not homogeneous – the educators were preschool teachers and school teachers (for different ages of children) and the group of parents also had children with several types of disabilities. Indeed, sometimes researchers, and we among them, operate under various constraints. For example, in a study conducted in South Africa with two focus groups of parents, one was homogeneous, only parents of children with Down syndrome and the other included parents of children with several types of disabilities (Swart et al, 2004). The type of disability a child has may affect the nature of the relationship between teachers and parents. For example, teachers were found to rate their relationships with parents of adolescent students with ASD more positively compared to their relationships with parents of students with learning disabilities (Pham, 2018). To obtain generalizable insights, further

studies need to make an effort to work with homogeneous groups. Third, it is necessary to expand the sample to include parents of students without disabilities, including those who belong to diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Fourth, it is recommended to monitor emerging relationships over longer periods. Finally, to increase the validity of the findings, it is recommended to conduct research with more homogeneous populations, for example, only with groups of kindergarten teachers or groups of school teachers and also with groups of children with specific types of disabilities.

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