How Special-Education Teachers Perceive the Attachment They Form with Their Pupils

Abstract

We ask how special-education teachers perceive the meaning of the attachment that they form with their pupils. In this qualitative study, thirty-nine female special-education teachers who teach in self-contained classrooms participate in in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview results yield three topics: the role of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in teachers’ choice of this class placement, the bond with pupils with SEND and its importance for teachers’ self-perception of their profession, and teachers’ expectations going forward. The findings attest to a process of attachment-formation between the teacher and her pupils and indicate that the experience of being attached to the pupils strengthens teachers’ willingness to practice this profession and continue to fill this post. Teachers go to lengths to create this attachment, and by so doing they empower both themselves and their pupils

**Key Words**

Special Education Teachers, Attachment, Pupils, Self-contained class

In Israel, homeroom teachers’ duties are central to educational values, administration, and organization of the school and of teaching in class. A homeroom teacher in this capacity coordinates the pupils’ needs with the education system (Fisherman, 2015).

Homeroom teachers in Israel are closely attached to their pupils. This level of rapport establishes an emotional and scholastic foundation for the pupils (Gosen, 2015). Due to their powerful attachments with pupils, teachers acquaint themselves with multiple aspects of their pupils’ lives (Timor, 2017).

The homeroom teacher’s role as the coordinator of her class may be especially important in a self-contained classroom because the combination of small class size and the pupils’ special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) entail personal support and coordination that places the treatment of their hardships in the center (Kurth et al., 2016).

It is also found that personal rapport with the teacher has far-reaching implications for the progress of a pupil with SEND (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, however, the specific attachment that takes shape between special-education homeroom teachers and their pupils has not yet been researched.

To gain insights about this relationship, it is necessary first to ask how homeroom teachers themselves view the relationship and the process through which it is built. Our goal in this study, then, is to gain insights into the way special-education homeroom teachers see the meaning of their attachment with their pupils.

Education in a self-contained special-education class

Special-education classes are still needed, mainly for pupils with significant disabilities (Kurth et al., 2016). Kauffman et al. (2018) suggest that special education outperforms general education in providing pupils who have severe deficits with teaching that matches their needs. In their assessment, effective education for pupils with acute developmental disorders sometimes requires a special education setting as well as special teachers.

A special-education class allows experts in this field of education to tailor their practice to the hardships of the pupils who have been placed in the class (Bettini et al., 2016;). Special-education teachers have special duties of several kinds. (Billingsley & Bettini., 2019).

מורים לחינוך מיוחד העובדים עם תלמידים עם הפרעות רגשיות ו/או התנהגותיות מגדירים את תפקידם העיקרי בקידום התנהגות התלמידים וצמיחתם האקדמית (

Bettini et al., 2019 .

One of the requirements of a teacher generally, and a special-education teacher particularly, is the establishment of a personal relationship with her pupils in view of the importance of the teacher–pupil connection in pupils’ advancement at large (Sointu et al., 2017)—and *a fortiori* for youngsters with SND (Sabol & Pianta 2012).

Insights into the importance of the teacher–pupil relationship

A teacher’s attachment to her pupils is a subset of interpersonal relations. Insights into this connection may be drawn from two theories, one relating to the ethics of caring and the other to attachment. Essentially, both theories see a child’s attachment with an adult as key in understanding parents’ and teachers’ behaviour. Both share the idea that children need the objective quality of an adult not only for their survivability but also for their experiencing of themselves and the world (Govrin, 2014). The need to be cared for is considered basic according to Bowlby’s (1988) theory of attachment. In school, teachers may be perceived as temporary or ad hoc attachment figures for children (Verschueren, 2015).

When a teacher takes a caring attitude toward her pupils, the latter accept the content of her teaching (Noddings, 2012) and fulfill their potential (Huang and Walters, 2019). Such an approach promotes pupils’ emotional, social, and behavioural growth (Mihalas Morse et al., 2009). Central in caring teachers’ pedagogical decisions are sensitivity, respect, and commitment to their pupils, individual support, and sincere interest and empathy (Gasser et al., 2018;). A caring teacher observes her pupils, sees them as they truly are, and understands their needs (Nilsson et al., 2015).

Caring interrelations between the teacher and her pupils are basic in pupils’ successful adjustment to the social and scholastic environment (Noddings, 2012). There is a connection between pupils’ sense that their teachers care about them and their self-esteem, well-being, and involvement in school activities and tasks (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). Therefore, a salutary pupil–teacher relationship is conducive to superior pupil attainments, development, and emotional and behavioural adjustment (Sointu et al., 2017)

Close interaction with teachers and a strong attachment to them may be especially important for pupils who have SEND (Huang & Walters, 2019;). These pupils are particularly sensitive and in need of explicit and direct support from a caring adult. When their teachers adopt this approach, they give pupils with disabilities equal opportunity to learn and fulfill their potential (Murray & Pianta, 2007), improve their academic and socio-affective functioning, and compensate for adverse effects of early experiences (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Grobler and Wessels (2020) report that when teachers invest time with learners who have mild learning difficulties learners feel valued and confident in their ability to learn and have a stronger sense of worthiness. These pupils’ difficulties, however, may diminish teachers’ ability or willingness to form a close attachment to them (Freire et al., 2020). In a review of studies on teachers’ relations with pupils with ADHD in inclusive classes at junior- and senior-high levels (Plantin Ewe, 2019), it is found that these pupils usually feel more distant from their teachers than do counterparts who do not have ADHD. Their teachers, in turn, experience greater emotional distance, less cooperation, and more conflicts with pupils who have ADHD than with others. Zee et al. (2020) find that relations between teachers and pupils with ASD and ADHD are typified by acute levels of conflict and lower levels of closeness than with pupils without disabilities.

**Attachment to pupils and teachers’ well-being**
Teachers who become attached to their pupils show enhanced well-being and are protected against burnout (Aspelin et al., 2021; Nilsson et al., 2015). When teachers are emotionally close to pupils with difficulties who have behavioral problems, however, they are likely to experience burnout (Hopman, et al., 2018; Inbar & Shiri, 2021). What is more, their burnout is more acute than that of teachers who eschew emotional involvement (Hopman et al., 2018). Still, closeness with pupils may have an additional benefit: When a teacher is able to bring about the advancement of pupils with whom she has a close attachment, her burnout is less intensive than otherwise (Kim et al., 2021).

These studies illustrate the importance of the teacher–pupil attachment. They also, however, reveal possible flaws in such an attachment with pupils who have special educational needs. For one thing, these and other studies indicate that the attachment that female teachers establish with their pupils is analogous to a mother–child relationship (Galea, 2017; Reid & Miller, 2014). This may be problematic because maternal rapport may clash with the teacher’s need to maintain professionalism, if not some distance from, individual pupils due to her responsibility for the entire class (Galea, 2017; Landeros, 2011).

The studies referenced above paid little attention to the way special-education teachers conceive the essence of their attachment to their pupils. This lacuna is typical of the situation in Israel, too. To the best of our understanding, not even one study on this topic has been undertaken in Israel—a puzzling finding in view of the widespread use of special-education classes and the centrality of women teachers in them. The study that follows attempts to fill the gap by examining special-education teachers’ relations with their pupils. Thus, the research question is: How do special-education teachers see the meaning of their attachment to their pupils?

Methodology

This is a qualitative study undertaken in a constructivist spirit. We chose this approach in order to investigate the phenomenon examined in-depth by consulting people who experience it (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Participants

Thirty-nine female special-education teachers who teach self-contained special-education classes in inclusive schools (Figure 1).

In Israel, pupils who are not mainstreamed attend special classes in general schools (self-contained classrooms) or special schools. Class size in these settings is commensurate with the type of class: five to twelve in a special-education school, six to fourteen in a self-contained classroom. The services these pupils receive depend on the type of setting (following the main disability profile of the pupils for whom the setting is intended) and include in-class aides, paramedical care, and an extended school day and school year (Weissblei, 2019).

The participating teachers were twenty-nine to fifty-six years of age and had one to twenty-seven years of seniority. Twenty-five participants had Bachelor’s degrees in special education; fourteen held Master’s degrees in that field. Each class had four to fifteen pupils. Four teachers taught in special-education schools and thirty-five in general schools. Thirty teachers taught in primary schools and nine in junior or senior high. Eight teachers taught pupils with EBD (emotional behavioural disorder), eight taught pupils with learning disorders, five taught pupils with autism, five taught pupils with cognitive disabilities, and five taught pupils with cerebral palsy.

Research tool

The research tool was a semi-structured in-depth interview. We chose it in order to allow the teachers to express their outlooks and describe their work as openly as possible even while we asked them specific questions of interest to us. Although the study focused on the importance of the teachers’ attachment to their pupils, the interviews elicited more general comments about the teachers’ work in order to examine their perception of this attachment within the comprehensive contexts of their jobs.

In the questionnaire items, the participants were asked to describe various matters, such as their choice of this profession (example: Why did you choose to be a special-education teacher?); the class (example: Describe the pupils with whom you work); characteristics of their attachment to their pupils (example: Tell us about your attachment to your pupils); the pupils’ emotional state (example: What are the advantages of being attached to your pupil?); creating trustful relations with pupils (example: Describe how trustful relations with your pupils are built); limits of the attachment (how are limits to the attachment applied?); job satisfaction (example: How satisfied are you with your job?); and expectations going forward (What are your future plans?).

Procedure

We conducted the interviews in the middle of the school year and off school premises, in the participants’ homes or in a café. Each interview lasted about two hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The teachers cooperated with us willingly. We analyzed their responses in three stages, following the grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the first stage—open coding—we established initial categories by giving each interview an initial reading in order to obtain a broad and inclusive orientation, followed by a more painstaking reading that included paragraph-by-paragraph analysis and marking of main themes of the paragraphs. In the second stage, axial coding, we subjected to an interviews in-depth analysis, continually comparing them until more structured theories took shape. We reinforced the internal validity of the findings by re-accessing the interviews to thicken the data associated with each category and by ensuring that the structures really exist within the reality investigated; we also found connections among the categories. At the end of the second stage, three categories of teachers’ perceptions of the meaning of their attachment with their pupils took shape: the importance of pupils with SEND in choosing the teacher’s role; the attachment to the pupils and its importance in the way the teachers perceive their profession; and the teachers’ expectations going forward. In the third stage, selective coding, we adduced the core category. This category yielded a theory about the meaning of homeroom teachers' attachment with their students.

**Rigor**. At each stage we first worked separately and then compared the findings obtained. Whenever disagreements arose, an external referee was consulted.

Both investigators train teachers in special education at the Bachelor’s and Master’s levels. By dint of our positions at teacher-training colleges, we visit schools and come into contact with teachers. Accordingly, we are well familiar with goings-on in this field of research. As non-teachers ourselves, we also maintain adequate distance from the research field.

**Ethics**. All participants in our study gave their written consent to being interviewed. We maintained strict confidentiality and kept all details of those involved secret. Investigator A’s college-level research committee approved the conduct of the study.

Findings

Choosing to Be a Special-Education Teacher.

Most participants claimed that they became teachers of pupils with SEND by chance. When they encountered such pupils, they realized that the position of special-education teacher was a good fit for them. The following remarks reveal the random nature of one participant’s enlistment as a special-education teacher and the importance of becoming attached to her pupils for her understanding that she had made the right professional choice:

It was … a mistake …that’s right; it was by mistake, I was a swimming coach. Lots and lots of kids with disorders and difficulties reached me—retardation and all sorts of things like those, for my swimming lessons generally. So I said, very well, since I’m already working with children from special education, I should teach it and understand it in order to work with them better and to do it right…. I went to get a Bachelor’s degree in special education because back then there were no other options. I wanted hydrotherapy, but hydrotherapy didn’t really relate to special education. So as I studied special education, I tried it out and I said, very well, let’s do the internship year even though I already wanted to wind it up by then. I began the internship year and fell in love with the kids and with the job (participant 24).

Another participant also explained that she discovered the meaning of the attachment between teacher and pupil by mistake: ''I didn’t choose it; it chose me. I went to do student teaching [and encountered pupils with special educational needs there]. It was hard for me but then I was enchanted by the pupils and I couldn’t leave''(participant 6)*.* These testimonies show that the participants discovered in their encounter with the pupils that they indeed enjoy being these pupils’ homeroom teacher immensely.

A minority of participants (12) became homeroom teachers in self-contained special-education classes by choice; they were searching for a position that centered on the advancement of pupils with difficulties. Below are two examples of participants who considered their work as a calling from the very outset: ''The truth is that I’d been dreaming about this ever since I was in school. I always knew I’d be a teacher; I always knew I’d be a special-education teacher'' (participant 7).

I chose to be a special-education teacher because I attended a small class when I was a girl and had an attention and concentration disorder that lots of teachers found very hard to accept. It put me in sensitive places. They threw me out of class over and over because I found it hard to sit, I talked, and I was a little hyperactive. So I get along great with my pupils. I wanted to give my pupils a different feeling. And I really hope that no child in the State of Israel will feel what I felt in school (participant 19).

Attachment to Pupils and Its Importance.

The attachment that the teachers created with their pupils became a main determinant in their work and their long-term commitment to the profession. Below we describe how it took shape and what it means to the participants.

**Creating an attachment.** Almost all the participants (37) attributed much importance to being attached to their pupils. Below are two typical examples: ''A personal attachment is the goal in a small class. That is to say, to reach them, you have to create a personal attachment with them'' (participant 26). ''Your attachment to your pupils is what counts the most; sometimes you have to put the scholastic thing aside and be there for them (participant 1).''

Given the profound importance that the participants attributed to this attachment, they strove to build it in a well-designed process that included generating trustful relations with the pupils, making themselves abundantly accessible to them, and creating a safe environment for them. Two examples follow:

I work mainly with young people, so that there’s lots of hugging and kissing. It’s still legitimate and it’s still okay. In the first stage, I think, I create an attachment with the children. It means giving them a safe environment in a safe place where they can trust me. We do it a great deal, in all kinds of personal conversations that I hold with them (participant 8).

The first week, I’m with them every moment. I stay with them in class even when subject lessons are taught. When there’s a recess, I go out with them. I don’t leave them for a second. So, they immediately turn to me with every problem. My aide and I are available for them at a very high level. . . . When they slowly realise that I really am the address that responds to their hardships, very slowly they begin to open up and cooperate more. Counting the month of the festivals, it takes about two months of very intensive and difficult work. But after those two months, you go to a class that’s on a straight path, with learning habits, with working habits (participant 8).

These accounts document the emotional rapprochement that occurs as the attachment is being built. The participants develop the attachment proactively, investing much effort in the cause. What they have accomplished this, they continue to strive, as illustrated in the following description of efforts to create an attachment with individual pupil who have especially perceptible difficulties.

I have a pupil, ummm, who’s challenged in lots of ways. Like, he expects something specific and something else happens and then he flies off the handle. It happens lots of times. But I think I managed to reach him in the end. It was a long way; at first it was intensive. I made a little effort to understand him: What causes this? How can he be helped when it happens? As in first to notice what doesn’t help and then to consider what would help. Finally, what worked for him was the personal connection that we developed(participant 28).

**Love and Falling in Love**: The foregoing descriptions show that creating the attachment entails patience and effort. Most of the participants stated that they did it successfully, establishing profound emotional rapport with their pupils. Most (30) described these relationships by using the word “love” as a noun or verb. Many spoke of a process of mutual falling-in-love.

It was very hard to create this connection at first. I think I managed to do it; my aide and I managed to create this bond. Once it took place, I ended the year with very big, very mutual love. I really, really love my pupils, every one of them. It’s a small class; we have a very personal attachment. I know them (participant 10)

I fell in love with this population. Wow. So I was assigned to this class, a communication class in a general school, and then, in my class, I combined the strategies, I stood up to it by the merit of my son. He has SEN, too. I think about my son every day, because it’s due to him that I went out and studied the thing that I love the most (participant 30).

It was very hard to create this connection at first. I think I managed to do it; my aide and I managed to create this bond. Once it took place, I ended the year with very big, very mutual love. I really, really love my pupils, every one of them. It’s a small class; we have a very personal attachment. I know them (participant 10).

**Educator as Mother*:***For most participants (26), the attachment to their pupils was essentially familial. Many likened it to a mother–child relationship; indeed, more than half (21) used the word “mother” to describe the gist of their role or the attachment that they formed with their pupils. Here is a typical example:"The pupils are called my children. Even my own children at home call them ‘your children. It’s an attachment that’s very, very motherly. Very"(participant 8).

The participants stressed the total and intensive quality of this motherly relationship

I think this classroom teacher is a very dominant and central figure in the child’s life and I’ll say it with this word: like a mother, the pupils’ mother. A mother who educates, a mother who loves, a mother who gives, a mother who also takes. I see everything in it, literally a mother. I spend many hours with them during the day. Sometimes I see them more than their mothers do. I feel that I’m very central and dominant in their lives. I feel it even when I go home. They’re with me all the time, talking with me about what’s happening, messaging me, I’m a very accessible teacher (participant 1).

These accounts suggest that not only did the quoted participants liken their role to that of a parent; they also treated the children as one would expect parents to treat their children. The descriptions evoke tremendous caring and communication. The powerful attachment also seems to reflect a powerful commitment on the teacher’s part. Many participants reported that their commitment to the pupils transcends a teacher’s simple undertaking to teach; it includes concern about their nutrition and strong availability away from school hours.:

You’ve spent three years with them, from seventh [grade] to ninth. I’ve taught all my classes from seventh to ninth. You’ve been with them every day for three years. Then you think that you feel much more responsibility because sometimes some of them also come from dysfunctional homes. Then you make it your business to look out for them. Sometimes things reach the point where you bring crackers or cookies to class and put them a cupboard because you know the kind of kids who come from homes that don’t have these things. So I think that, yes, I feel the special-education teacher has a slightly stronger sense of responsibility (participant 5).

And the thing I felt the very most was that they were my children and every mother cares for her kid, wants them to blossom, grow, rise, and develop. That’s how I cared for them. The scholastic thing was there, too. They came to learn, but the goals most emphasised were values: to live, to have a life, to respect, to know what the other is, how to accept the other. It came without thinking about it. Let’s say I go home like a general teacher who’d been in class, finished up the material, gone home, and that’s that, pushed everything aside. It’s not that way. It’s children who call me at 2:00 a.m., they’re frustrated and all of a sudden want their teacher to come, it’s children who make me feel that I’m obliged to them, obliged to be available to them around the clock (participant 9).

It seems, then, that these teachers’ concern for their pupils is associated with a clear sense of teacher-as-parent**.**

**Accommodating the Children’s Hardships.** All the participants described difficult situations that were rooted in the children’s hardships. Almost all (38) affirmed their willingness to accommodate these troubles understandingly. Their remarks indicate that this willingness owed its source to their maternal attitude toward the youngsters, prompting them to respond to problematic behaviour with restraint, compassion, and empathy:

I see these kids as though they’re my own: What I would feel right now if my child were sitting and shouting, and I didn’t know what he was going through? So just a moment: What would I do with my own kid? I’d stop, take a deep breath, even though I’d very much like to get upset because he’s screaming and not explaining himself. I did take a breath, stop, give a caress, a hug, and think: What’s the problem? I must understand what they want by using symbols, iPads, and gestures (participant 5).

I find it strange because I’m in this big pressure cooker at work but I’m much more patient. I come in the morning with a smile and whatever happens to me that morning doesn’t matter. As the years pass, I feel more accommodating, relaxed, at ease, more confident, more assertive with them. Lots of times I stop and think: Where do these pupils come from and what do they experience? And I have a lot of compassion and empathy toward them (participant 19).

These descriptions suggest that the participants made prolific efforts to bond with their pupils and felt passionately attached to them. Most (28) attested that they continue to interact with the children and their families after working hours, on days off, and during vacations:

It’s like one-on-one, like mother and child. You can’t disengage from them. For me, that wasn’t an option. I tell you, at late hours they literally called me on the phone, crying that something was bothering them or threatening them, having a bad day at home, things like that. It’s the strongest attachment you can have, like one between a mother and her son; you can’t turn it off (participant 9).

I like children very, very much, so right now I see them like a second mother. I don’t purport to be their mother or to replace their parents, heaven forbid, but from my standpoint, even after school and during summer vacation, when they have trouble at home, they call me and ask me to help (participant 10).

Thus, the profound teacher–child attachment, akin to a parent–child relationship, encourages the children to rely on their teacher even after class hours.

**Advantages for the Teachers**. Most of the participants depict the attachment they created with the pupils as central in their job satisfaction as teachers. In the examples that follow, only a few teachers attested to burnout as a result of their commitment:

I’m just saying that, ultimately, I really like my work. I come to work happy and I really like the kids whom I teach, I’m attached to them. I think that beyond what we have to teach them, we have what to learn from them (participant 20).

I think the bond that takes shape with the children and the pupils and the parents is an attachment, a very magical and special one that doesn’t exist in other teaching jobs. There’s nothing like it. It’s a very, very special connection. The job is not simple and it’s got lots of responsibility, but the satisfaction is tremendous (participant 26).

Thus, the participants seem to derive a reward from the very fact of their attachment with the pupils and, sometimes, with the parents. However, their close emotional bond with these pupils also caused them to find meaning in educating them. Most of them described the satisfaction they feel when their children, who are dear to them, make progress.

I want [to have this attachment] because it’s meaningful. I feel that it’s successful in helping them advance and making them happy, and that’s my job. It’s a job that shouldn’t be treated lightly; it’s meaningful for me. Even when I do all sorts of other things in life, it remains meaningful for me: to be there so that they can make progress the way they are. And … I also feel that I learned lots from that place and from them, and most of the time it’s an experience (participant 14).

But I just love being in class. I love the…. I feel totally committed to the pupils and I feel that my investment in them pays off. It’s fun: I don’t just pour my heart out. Rather, I do work that lets me walk into class and see improvement and change within a surprisingly short period of time. I get a kick out of it; it makes me happy. It’s a place where I’m happy to be; it gives me energy (participant 13).

These and other attestations shown that the attachment with the pupils enhances the satisfaction that the participants experience due to their investment in these pupils and heightens satisfaction with that they are making progress thanks to this investment. What they say indicates that despite the commitment to the intensive attachment, and perhaps because of it, the participants are not burned out.

**Disadvantage—burnout**. The foregoing descriptions show that even though the participants invested strenuous efforts in connecting with these pupils, few suffered from burnout. There were, however, several exceptions, as one of them explained:

It’s lots and lots of giving and there are lots of cases where I just feel they’re wearing me out because my emotional involvement is much greater. The situations from which they come are often not simple in terms of background in terms of type of disorder. There’s much more giving to do and then you empty out; it’s not simple. I’ll do it as long as I have the energy, I don’t know for how long (participant 26).

Advantages for the pupil. As the participants see it, the main advantage of bonding with the pupils is that it builds mutual trust—a condition for the kind of teaching that is needed to assure their advancement. ''The first thing, I think, is to create a relationship of trust: they should trust me and I should trust them, too. It’s also important for their development'' (participant 1).

Trust allows the teacher to mobilize them to carry out tasks. So in order to heighten their trust, you have to create a trusting relationship…. Just to give your heart, to give what you can, to listen to the children, to see if there’s something they need. I think the moment trust begins, the moment you successfully create some sort of trust, and they believe, they see that you believe in them, that they can, then the sky’s the limit (participant 21).

According to most of the participants, the profound attachment they have created also gives them the right kind of acquaintance with the children, enabling them to give individually tailored care. ''It’s different. You get to know people differently. You are both their teacher and their caregiver, and you can arrive at a relationship that’ll last several years. It’s different''(P14).

It lets me reach each pupil at their deepest levels. It seems to me what distinguishes this teacher from those who encounter pupils with special needs or the general pupil population is the concentration of information that you have about the pupil and lots of work with him, plus experience (participant 10).

These quotations demonstrate the participants’ conviction that the attachment facilitates teaching—a condition for their success as teachers and educators.

***Expectations going forward***

For these reasons, most of the participants (31) wished to continue serving as self-contained classroom special-education homeroom teachers for the next few years at least. By all appearances, the powerful attachment with their pupils figures very importantly in this decision.

When Participant 31, who stated that she wishes to stay on the job as a homeroom teacher, was asked why, she answered:

First, I love the children very much. Above all, it’s about loving the children, the families, helping the families. I feel I’m really contributing, not really like a teacher [in a general class], not that I disparage that; I appreciate teachers a great deal (participant 31).

Thus, the participants regard their contribution to the pupils and their families as a meaningful one that typifies their attachment with the youngsters and underpins their wish to remain in this profession. Some participants refuse to quit this post in the belief that they would make less of a contribution if they were to move on to other positions. I’m not in favor of becoming a coordinator or some such. I love this place dearly. They asked me to become a coordinator several times but it doesn’t speak to me. I just feel that even the responsibilities I’ve got now, as a program coordinator and a social-involvement coordinator, hurt me in terms of classroom time, and if I could toss them aside, I would. I don’t see myself taking on other duties because I really think it would hurt the class, that I’d be doing those other things at [the pupils’] expense. (4)

Only a few participants felt that they were burned out and, therefore, wished to relinquish these responsibilities promptly due to the intense commitment that the post requires.

The truth is that I’ve reached a crossroads and can’t make up my mind about what’s next. Probably I’ll keep going another year but I hope to find something else when the pandemic’s over. I don’t want to get to a state of total burnout (participant 11).

Discussion

The findings give evidence of an active process, in which the participants reach out and become attached to their pupils. Most of the participants stated that they had been referred to the post of homeroom teacher for pupils with SEND by chance and had not been familiar with this profession previously. As they made an initial effort, however, they formed an attachment with the pupils that ripened into an emotional bond. Previous study (Gavish, 2016) shows that trainee teachers who engage in special education do so by deliberate choice. The current study, in contrast, indicates that it was neither special education nor abstract ideals that attracted the participants to this role. Rather, it was the experience of an attachment with the pupils, discovered as they gained experience in the job, that had this effect. In other words, it was is this connection that made their profession rewarding to them.

Bonding as a Catalyst of Motivation

The findings suggest that the relationship between a special-education teacher and her pupils should not be seen merely as a professional exchange that should be assessed by means of professional metrics. The profound emotional bond that comes about between the special-education teacher in her pupils is reminiscent (Freire et al., 2020) of the emotional bonds that people experience in family settings (Bowlby, 1988) and suggest that teachers may be perceived may perceive themselves as temporary or ad hoc attachment figures for children (Verschueren, 2015).

Indeed, most of the participants reported having fallen in love with their pupils. The current study shows that the process of building this kind of attachment is guided by the teachers in gradual way that entails effort. The participants justified this effort by stressing its professional necessity. Many described this attachment as being typified by a motherly approach that, they suggested, improves their functioning as teachers. Teachers in various societies do need maternal characteristics in view of the commonly held belief that such traits are requisites for childcare (Galea, 2017; Reid & Miller, 2014). Similarly, teachers quoted in previous studies claim that the experience acquired in their personal role as mothers makes them better able to cope with the children’s difficulties in class (Hinchcliff & Newberry, 2021; Kang et al. 2020).

Treating a motherly approach as a requisite for teaching, however, has been criticised because it subjects the teacher to judgment on the basis of her gender traits and not her professionalism; thus, it may diminish her image (Galea, 2017; Reid & Miller, 2014). Such criticism is out of order, in the participants’ view. They regard creating an attachment that has motherly characteristics as evidence of their success on the job and, in turn, their empowerment. Much as in previous studies, the total maternal bond described in the interviews gave meaning to their lives. Even though the current findings are based on a small sample of participants, they correspond with those of many previous studies that investigated the importance of the teacher–pupil attachment and teachers’ confidence in their pupils (Galea, 2017; Grobler and Wessels, 2020).

The Homeroom Teacher and the Importance of Her Role

According to the participants, it is the intensity of the occupation of homeroom teacher in special education, the small class size, and the pupils’ paramount need for support that allowed them to create the close and crucial attachment with the pupils. Indeed, a homeroom teacher in a self-contained special-education class interacts with a very small number of pupils and spends many hours with them (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). As the person responsible for the class, she in charge of their advancement in all respects—emotional, developmental—and not only for their scholastic attainments, and she interacts with them intensively (Sointu et al., 2017).

In previous studies, it was found that teachers struggle to connect with pupils who have emotional and developmental problems even though such pupils need such rapport (Freire et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2021; Zolkoski et al., 2019). Our participants reported having very strong relations with their pupils. Perhaps it is the homeroom teacher’s role and her active construction of the attachment, as well as the effort that she invests in doing this, that made it possible to create the kind of attachment that sometimes fails to manifest in the work of a subject teacher whose role is of limited intensity.

Preventing Burnout

Most of our participants did not report being burned out. Burnout may occur when a teacher overinvests of herself (Maslach, 2017) and is associated with pupils’ behaviour (Aloe et al, 2014).

ממצאים אלו הולמים בחלקם ממצאים על נתוני שחיקה שנמצאו בקרב מורים לחינוך מיוחד העובדים עם תלמידים עם הפרעות רגשיות ו/או התנהגותיות, על פיהם המורים

had higher emotional exhaustion than a national sample, but lower depersonalization and higher personal accomplishment: The teachers felt overworked but engaged with students and felt proud of their work.

The participants traced their ability to withstand burnout to two factors: the emotional connection, which creates a reward vis-à-vis the pupils, and their sense of success and meaning in their work. It is the latter factor that prevails in their ability to see meaning in their craft. It seems that because the participants bonded with their pupils and loved them, then, according to their attestations, the pupils’ advancement seemed more important and meaningful to them. A similar phenomenon is observed among parents of children with autism. The parents, due to the intensive attachment with their children, consider the advancement of the latter meaningful even when it is limited (Fleischmann, 2005).

Summary and Conclusion

The findings described above are indicative of the importance of the role of homeroom teachers in small self-contained special-education classes. This role, applied in a small-class setting, facilitates a teacher–pupil attachment that enhances teachers’ satisfaction with their work and encourages pupils with SEND to cooperate with their teachers. In the participants’ view, however, merely being assigned to the role of homeroom teacher is not enough. Their reportage points to the need for a proactive approach to creating the attachment. It seems, then, despite invoking a metaphor of motherhood that based on their female gender identity, these teachers should be seen as not weak or passive figures but as they see themselves: people who take an assertive approach. Further research may investigate homeroom teachers’ creation of attachments in small classes and to compare in full-sized classes. Another possibility is an inquiry into how guidance in striving to create attachments may improve the functioning of teachers in special-education classes.

References

Aspelin, J., Östlund, D. & Jönsson, A. (2021). ‘It means everything’: Special educators’ perceptions of relationships and relational competence.’ *European Journal of Special Needs Education,* 36 (5), pp. 671–685. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1783801

Author, A (2005

Author, B. (2014).

Billingsley, B. & Bettini, E. (2019). ‘Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature.’ *Review of Educational Research,* 89 (5), pp. 697–744. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495>

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base.* Basic Books.

Brunsting, Nelson C. et al. (2022). Burnout of special educators serving students with emotional-behavioral disorders: A longitudinal study. *Remedial and Special Education 43*(3), pp. 160–171.

Govrin, A. (2014). ‘From ethics of care to psychology of care: Reconnecting ethics of care to contemporary moral psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, pp. 1135–1135. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01135

Fisherman, S. (2015) Emotional well-being as a function of professional identity and burnout among homeroom and subject teachers. *Research Journal of Education,* 1 (5), pp. 64-78. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285583483_Emotional_Well-Being_as_a_Function_of_Professional_Identity_and_Burnout_among_Homeroom_and_Subject_Teachers>

Bettini, E., Wang, J., Cumming, M., Kimerling, J., Schutz, S. (2019). Special educators’ experiences of roles and responsibilities in self-contained classes for students with emotional/behavioral disorders. *Remedial and Special Education* 40(3), pp. 177–191.

 Bettini, E. A., Crockett, J. B., Brownell, M. T. & Merrill, K. L. (2016). Relationships between working conditions and special educators’ instruction. *The Journal of Special Education,* 50 (3), pp. 178–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466916644425

Freire, Pipa, J., Aguiar, C., Vaz da Silva, F. & Moreira, S. (2020). ‘Student–teacher closeness and conflict in students with and without special educational needs.’ *British Educational Research Journal* 46 (3), pp. 480–499. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3588

Galea, S. (2017). ‘Becoming maternal: A genealogy of teachers as mothers in Malta.’ In R. G. Sultana (ed.), *Yesterday’s Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History* (pp. 133–145). Xirocco Publishing.

Gasser, L., Grütter, J., Buholzer, A. & Wettstein, A. (2018). ‘Emotionally supportive classroom interactions and students’ perceptions of their teachers as caring and just.’ *Learning and Instruction,* 54, p.p 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2017.08.003>

Gosen, N. B. (2015). *Different Role Perceptions and Student–Teacher Relationship Characteristics, Among High School Homeroom Educators and Subject Teachers: Results from a Qualitative Research.* Poznan, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.

Grobler, Hermanus B. & Wessels, S. (2020). ‘Hear their voices: Self-configuration experiences of learners with mild learning difficulties within the learner-teacher relationship.’ *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education,* 67 (3), 243–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2018.1499878

 Hinchcliff, E. & Newberry, M. (2021). ‘Teacher perceptions of student developmental needs: It’s all emotional.’ *The Australian Journal of Teacher Education,* 46 (9), pp. 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2021v46n9.4>

Hopman, J. A. B., Tick, N. T., Van der Ende, J., Wubbels, T., Verhulst, F. C., Maras, A., Breeman, L. D. & Van Lier, P. A. C. (2018). ‘Special education teachers’ relationships with students and self-efficacy moderate associations between classroom-level disruptive behaviors and emotional exhaustion.’ *Teaching and Teacher Education*, p. 75, 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.06.004>

Huang, C. L. & Walters, B. G. (2019). ‘Caring as a teacher virtue: Objections, responses, and affirmation.’ *Journal of Educational Research and Development,* 15 (3), pp. 59–92. https://doi.org/10.3966/181665042019091503003

Inbar, L. & Shiri, S. A. (2021). ‘Managing the emotional aspects of compassion fatigue among teachers in Israel: A qualitative study.’ *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 47(4), pp. 562–575. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1929876

Kang, M., Park, H, J. & Park, J. (2020). ‘Teachers as good mothers, mothers as good teachers: Functional and ideological work–family alignment in the South Korean teaching profession.’ Gender Work Organization, 27 (3), pp. 395-413. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12396

Kauffman, J. M., Felder, M., Ahrbeck, B., Badar, J. & Schneiders, K. (2018). ‘Inclusion of “all” students in general education? International appeal for a more temperate approach to inclusion.’ *Journal of International Special Needs Education,* 21 (2), pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.9782/17-00009

Kim, M., Santiago, J. A., Woong Park, C. & Roper, E. A. (2021). ‘Adapted physical education teachers’ job satisfaction.’ *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 38 (4), pp. 661–680. https://doi-org.mgs.achva.ac.il/10.1123/apaq.2020-0203

Kurth, J. A., Born, K. & Love, H. (2016). ‘Ecobehavioral characteristics of self-contained high school classrooms for students with severe cognitive disability.’ *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities,* 41 (4), pp. 227–243. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796916661492

Landeros, M. (2011). ‘Defining the “good mother” and the “professional teacher”: Parent-teacher relationships in an affluent school district.’ *Gender & Education* 23 (3), pp. 247–262. <https://doi-org.mgs.achva.ac.il/10.1080/09540253.2010.491789>

Lavy, S. & Naama Ghanayim, E. (2020). ‘Why care about caring? Linking teachers’ caring and sense of meaning at work with students’ self-esteem, well-being, and school engagement.’ *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 91, pp. 103046. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103046

Maslach, C. (2017). ‘Burnout: A multidimensional perspective.’ In Schaufeli, W. B., Maslach, C., Marek, T. (Eds.), *Professional Burnout* (pp. 19–32). Taylor & Francis.

Mihalas, Morse, W. C., Allsopp, D. H. & Alvarez McHatton, P. (2009). ‘Cultivating caring relationships between teachers and secondary students with emotional and behavioral disorders.’ *Remedial and Special Education,* 30 (2), pp. 108–125. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508315950

Murray, C. & Pianta, R. C. (2007). ‘The importance of teacher-student relationships for adolescents with high incidence disabilities.’ *Theory into Practice,* 46 (2), pp. 105–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840701232943

Nilsson, M., Ejlertsson, G., Andersson, I. & Blomqvist, K. (2015). ‘Caring as a salutogenic aspect in teachers’ lives.’ *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 46, pp. 51–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.10.009

Noddings, N. (2012). ‘The caring relation in teaching.’ *Oxford Review of Education,* 38 (6), pp. 771–781. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047

Plantin Ewe, L. (2019*).* ‘ADHDsymptoms and the teacher-student relationship.’ *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties,* 24 (2), p. 136. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2019.1597562

Reid, J. A. & Miller, A. C. (2014). ‘“We understand better because we have been mothers”: Teaching, maternalism, and gender equality in Bolivian education.' *Gender and Education,* 26, pp. 688–704.https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2014.961412

Roorda, Zee, M., Bosman, R. J. & Koomen, H. M. (2021). ‘Student–teacher relationships and school engagement: Comparing boys from special education for autism spectrum disorders and regular education.’ *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 74, p. 101277. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101277>

Sabol T. J. & Pianta, R. C. (2012). ‘Recent trends in research on teacher-child relationships.’ *Attachment & Human Development,* 14 (3), pp. 213–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2012.672262

Sointu, E. T., Savolainen, H., Lappalainen, K. & Lambert, M C. (2017). ‘Longitudinal associations of student–teacher relationships and behavioural and emotional strengths on academic achievement. *Educational Psychology,* 37 (4), pp. 457–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2016.1165796>

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory—Procedures and Techniques*. London, UK: Sage.

Timor, T. (2017). ‘Do teachers need to be leaders? Perceptions of educational leadership and management in the Israeli secondary educational system.’ *School Leadership & Management,* 37 (1–2), pp. 94–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1293636

Verschueren, K. (2015). ‘Middle childhood teacher–child relationships: Insights from an attachment perspective and remaining challenges*. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development,* 2015 (148), pp. 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20097

Weissblei, A. (2019). ‘The special-education system.’ Knesset Research and Information Centre [in Hebrew]. https://edu.gov.il/noar/minhal/departments/social-community/Pages/education-hour/educator-role.aspx

Zee, de Bree, E., Hakvoort, B. & Koomen, H. M. (2020). ‘Exploring relationships between teachers and students with diagnosed disabilities: A multi-informant approach.’ *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 66, pp. 101101–101112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2019.101101>

**Table 1: Participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Education4 | Level3 | Grade | Students | Kind2 | Academic | Age | Seniority | No. | No. |
|  |  |  | (N) |  | Degree1 | (years) | (years) |  |  |
| R | P | 5 | 15 | LD | 1 | 30 | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| R | P |  | 10 | EBD | 2 | 50 | 27 | 2 | 2 |
| R | P | 2-4 | 7 | ASD | 2 | 33 | 8 | 3 | 3 |
| R | JH | 10 | 15 | LL | 2 | 35 | 9 | 4 | 4 |
| R | JH | 7 | 14 | LL | 2 | 33 | 9 | 5 | 5 |
| SE | JH | 7 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 31 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| R | P | 3 |  | ASD | 1 | 35 | 3 | 7 | 7 |
| SE | P | 4 |  | EBD | 2 | 42 | 21 | 8 | 8 |
| SE | P | 7 | 8 | EBD | 1 |  | 1 | 9 | 9 |
| SE | P | 6 | 7 | EBD | 1 | 26 | 1 | 10 | 10 |
| SE | יסודי | 6 | 6 | ID | 1 | 43 | 9 | 11 | 11 |
| SE | JH | 7 | 8 | ID | 2 | 56 | 15 | 12 | 12 |
| SE | JH | 7 | 6 | ID | 1 | 47 | 17 | 13 | 13 |
| SE | P | 6 | 5 | ID | 1 | 37 | 15 | 14 | 14 |
| SE | P | 2 | 4 | ID | 2 | 48 | 11 | 15 | 15 |
| R | H | 10 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 48 | 4 | 16 | 16 |
| R | P | 3 | 7 | ASD | 1 | 31 | 5 | 17 | 17 |
| R | JH | 8 | 8 | ASD | 2 | 30 | 9 | 18 | 18 |
| R | JH | 9 | 8 | ASD | 2 | 31 | 4 | 19 | 19 |
| R | JH | 7 | 7 | ASD | 1 | 29 | 7 | 20 | 20 |
| R | P | 7 | 7 | EBD | 1 | 35 | 9 | 21 | 21 |
| R | P | 5 | 7 | EBD | 1 | 39 | 3 | 22 | 22 |
| R | P | 5 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 29 | 2 | 23 | 23 |
| R | P | 5 | 6 | EBD | 2 | 41 | 16 | 24 | 24 |
| R | P | 1 | 7 | EBD | 2 | 38 | 11 | 25 | 25 |
| R | P | 1 | 12 | LD | 2 | 45 | 18 | 26 | 26 |
| R | P | 4 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 30 | 5 | 27 | 27 |
| R | P | 3 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 30 | 7 | 28 | 28 |
| R | P | 3 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 29 | 8 | 29 | 29 |
| R | P | 6 | 8 | ASD | 1 | 47 | 14 | 309 | 309 |
| R | P | 4 | 8 | CP | 1 | 47 | 20 | 31 | 31 |
| R | P | 6 | 8 | CP | 1 | 34 | 10 | 32 | 32 |
| R | P | 4 | 8 | CP | 1 | 36 | 11 | 33 | 33 |
| R | P | 3 | 7-8 | CP | 2 | 37 | 10 | 34 | 34 |
| SE | P | 4 | 8 | CP | 1 | 40 | 16 | 35 | 35 |
| R | P | 1 | 13 | ASD | 1 | 45 | 20 | 36 | 36 |
| SE | P | 1 | 14 | LD | 2 | 34 | 10 | 37 | 37 |
| R | P | 6 | missing | LD | 1 | 34 | 10 | 38 | 38 |
| SE | P | 1 |  | LD | 1 | 36 | 14 | 39 | 39 |
| 1.. Academic degree: 1— B.A. or B.Ed., 2—MA or M.Ed.2.. Kind of class: LD—class intended for mild disorders, e.g., learning and attention disorders; EBD—class for emotional and behavioural disorders; ASD—class intended for autism spectrum disorders; CO—class intended for pupils with cerebral palsy. 3. Level of school: P—primary, JH—junior-high; H—senior high.4.Type of education in school: R—regular education; SE—special education |