Perception of Goals in Pro-SEL Teaching

Abstract

Amid the global COVID-19 crisis and the transition to distance learning, the switch to distance teaching that the crisis necessitated has been discussed in many studies. Few papers, however, related to teachers’ pedagogical responses and the changes they have introduced to their teaching methods due to the transition to distance learning during the crisis.

In this study, teachers’ pedagogical responses to the crisis are examined through a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with thirty teachers. The findings show that the changes to the participants’ pedagogy essentially applied to two main aspects: teaching goals and the strategies the teachers applied to attain them. Two primary categories emerge from the findings. The first is a revised perception of the goals of teaching in the direction of pro-SEL pedagogy that includes five main aspects: developing the ability to cope with states of pressure and anxiety, positive self-confidence and -perception, enhancing learning motivation, developing autodidactic skills, and strengthening positive relations among pupils. The second primary category is the use of emotional and organizational pedagogical strategies to attain the goals of the first category, such as pedagogical changes in the direction of cooperative and small-group teaching, gamification and inquisitive learning, changes at the personal affective level that create space for a reciprocal emotional discourse, caring, giving a personal response, and using emotional language, and also changes at the organizational level and flexibility in scheduling. The teachers made these pedagogical changes during the COVID-19 crisis on their own and at their own initiative and volition. The findings also point to a significant correlation between the teachers’ perception of teaching as a profession and the pedagogical changes they made during the crisis.

**Keywords**: SEL, teaching goals, teaching strategies, e-learning, Covid-19, teaching as a profession.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated global detrimental impacts and unprecedented shifts in education and pedagogical strategies worldwide. As a result, education systems were immediately geared to address the new reality. Akhoundi et al. (2020) maintain that Covid-19 has caused both unmatched disruptions and massive changes to education. Similarly, Zhao & Watterston (2021) contend that Covid-19 outbreak has opened door to matchless and real changes in education. Due to the pandemic wide-ranging and ubiquitous effects, educators have been urged to reconsidering the prevailing obsolete and rigid education systems. In this respect, Kamanetz ([2020](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10833-021-09417-3#ref-CR15)) argues that these systems acted immediately advocating online teaching to address students’ emotional and social needs despite the fact that teachers lacked relevant digital competencies and even more, they were poorly equipped in terms of pedagogical resources and unprepared in terms of the rigorous demands placed on them. The rapid changes and disruptions imposed by Covid-19 created uncertainties and confusion, but simultaneously necessitated rapid responsiveness of schools to reorganize their plans and teaching strategies, reassign their resources, enhance their digital skills, and upgrade their technological knowhow.

Despite the drawbacks prompted by Covid-19, Gibbs (2020), asserts that the pandemic paved the way to positive results refurbishing and rejuvenating the curricula, and integrating psychological care as a means to nurture students’ wellbeing.

Along these lines, lockdowns usually trigger creativity and managing stress boosts one’s positive emotions during pandemics (Fischer et al., 2020; Karwowski et al., 2021). In an attempt to harness the deleterious repercussions of the pandemic for education, numerous ministries of education around the world have pushed for reforms revamping and updating their curricula, making them more receptive and more responsive to students’ skills, attitudes, and needs (Yao, 2020; Azorín, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Gul, & Khilji, 2021). In China, despite the shortcomings pertaining to the sudden online teaching, the Ministry of Education has helped teachers upskill their digital competences and remodel their teaching strategies to fit into the novel situation (Li et al., 2021). Another study (Jijun et al., 2020) revealed that during the pandemic, Chinese teachers were trained to assume a new effective and productive role, leading and accompanying their students rather than just transmitting knowledge. Reacting to Covid-19 pandemic, Pakistani policy makers and stakeholders remodeled their curriculum framework adapting alternative approaches and modalities (Gul & Khilji, 2021). In Indonesia, a new administration was established to endorse and bolster the school system incorporating innovative teaching strategies to the curriculum while considering students’ emotional and social needs (Lestiyanawati, 2020).

Policymakers’ Attitudes

In recent studies that surveyed teachers’ responses in various countries during the Covid-19 crisis, an especially important aspect of teachers’ conduct stood out: they were forced to imagine and re-envision their personal connections and relations in order to facilitate their students’ learning process. The crisis brought two definitive determinants to the fore. First, pedagogical revisions proved necessary; therefore, teachers had to adjust their working methods and act creatively to keep their pupils involved at a time when every home became a classroom and, at times, multiple classrooms, without providing a learning-supportive environment. Second, the new situation underscored the need for flexibility and interactions between students and teachers and among students (Ahmad et al., 2021; Instituto-Península, 2021; Anderton, 2021; Huang et al., 2020).

According to a survey by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank in 2020, nearly 90% of countries that responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 supported teachers by emphasizing the importance of giving pupils feedback and maintaining continual communication with them. Costa Rica, for example, developed a digital toolkit containing pedagogical resources such as a manual for autonomous learning. The São Paulo State in Brazil set up frequent talks between the Secretary of Education, Rossieli Soares, and teachers by means of a mobile application developed by the state. The state’s support of its teachers and the establishment of open lines of communication with them in order to hear them out and understand their concerns allowed the teachers to revise their role with greater celerity.

Remarkably, many of the aforementioned changes espoused by governments and educators pay homage to the principles of the Social-Emotional Learning Framework developed by CASEL two decades ago (CASEL, 2021) and that was henceforward deemed as part and parcel of the educational curricula in many schools and educational institutions. The Framework advocates five core competence areas for the development of learners’ skills within the contexts of family, caregivers, schools, and communities. These contexts are directly connected to classroom climate, instruction, policies, and culture. The competence areas involved are self-awareness (emotions and prosocial behavior), self-management (managing emotions and demonstrating self-motivation), social awareness (recognizing diversities and showing empathy), relationship skills (establishing healthy and compassionate rapports), and responsible decision-making (identifying solutions with respect to personal and social challenges) (CASEL, 2020).

**Practical Changes in SEL during the Covid-19 Outbreak**

In its response to the Covid-19 crisis just a few months ago, CASEL (2021) readdressed and remapped its SEL guidelines to align them with a post Covid-19 emergency, taking into account the recent shifts during and post the pandemic outbreak from in-person to remote learning and vice versa. Particularly, the novel guidelines aimed at “building developmental relationships during the COVID-19 Crisis” (p. 5). Moreover, many schools and education institutions have initiated teaching the current Covid-19 social-emotional skills among which recognizing modes to support students emotionally at a distance, overcoming learning loss, helping students adjust with the new social norms and assessing the perils associated with maintaining or altering prevailing activities are the main goals. In this respect, Departments of Education and schools in the United States and worldwide, have refocused their SEL models to conform to the new situation. A newsletter issued on March 2021 by the California Department of Education offered resources that develop student creativity and SEL. Likewise, as part the Broward County Public Schools vision in adopting the SEL model, Dillard High School has set an evidence-based SEL action plan for 2020-2021 academic year that satisfies their SEL aspirations and objectives that tend to students socially and linguistically. As promising as these plans sound, not all schools have advocated such changes. Hadar et al. (2020) view Covid-19 as VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) and offer alarming results affirming that the teacher-training curriculum does not equip student-teachers with professional SEL knowhow and resources essential for tackling pandemic-related predicaments.

The current study addresses teachers who were in direct contact with students during the Covid-19 pandemic. In view of the existing literature, these teachers were asked to reflect on the pedagogic changes they had to implement in their teaching when their contact with the children changed from direct and unmediated to technology-mediated. The study is novel in two respects. First, although there is a plethora of field studies pertaining to online teaching during the Covid-19 outbreak, little research encompasses variables such as teachers’ first-hand experience of the changes they implemented.

Method

Goals of the Study

This study examines the pedagogical responses of teachers to the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the entire education system was shut down and teaching had to switch from the physical to the online classroom. The study focuses on analyzing the changes that the teachers made in pedagogical-educational terms and in the essence of their teaching work.

Context of the Study

The study centers on teachers in the Arab community in Israel, which numbers 1.85 million people including 578,000 children and youths aged 5–18 and attending K–12. The proportion of children and adolescents in the Arab population is 31%, exceeding the corresponding rate in the Jewish population (23%). Furthermore, Arab children and adolescents—in the 5–18 age group—make up 27% of the country’s population within this age group, surpassing that of the Arab population in Israel at large (21.1%). The size of this population segment makes the topic of education in the Arab community all the more important (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Notably, Israel’s Arab society has unique social and economic characteristics in that its members live in homogeneous, outlying localities that rank low on the socioeconomic index. The separate nature of this society from Jewish society is manifested in the very wide gaps between them. The differences are also reflected in the Arab education system and stand out in the form of exceedingly wide digital disparities (Haj-Yahya, 2017).

The importance of education in the Arab sector as a cornerstone of its development, along with its digital, economic, and social challenges, are the key factors driving the need for the current study, which focuses on teachers’ pedagogical responses to the significant changes that occurred in the Arab education system following the global coronavirus pandemic. The study took place between March 2020 and February 2021; most of the interviews were held while national lockdowns were in effect.

The Participants

Thirty teachers from various regions in Israel—north, center, and south—took part in the study: six men and twenty-four women, aged 25–53, who teach mathematics, science, and languages including Arabic, Hebrew, and English. It is noteworthy that these are core subjects, on which schools focused during the distance-teaching period, in addition to one homeroom hour. Five of the participants were also homeroom teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from three to twenty-one years. Thirteen of them held bachelor’s degrees and twenty-one had earned master’s degrees. Fourteen taught in primary schools, seven in junior-high, and nine in high schools.

Table 1: Itemized details of the participants

| **No.** | **Teacher’s name** | **Gender** | **Teaching subject + post** | **Seniority** | **Age** | **Degree** | **Type of school** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Ayman | Female | English | 3 | 26 | Bachelor’s | Jr. High |
| 2 | Rahma | Female | English + homeroom and subject coordinator | 15 | 51 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 3 | Yasmin | Female | English | 10 | 32 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 4 | Zina | Female | English | 5 | 27 | Master’s | Primary |
| 5 | Zalia | Female | Arabic | 12 | 29 | Bachelor’s | Sr. High |
| 6 | Hala  | Female | Science | 7 | 33 | Master’s | Primary |
| 7 | Majid | Male | English | 5 | 27 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 8 | Rana | Female | English | 12 | 32 | Bachelor’s | Sr. High |
| 9 | Halla | Female | Science + homeroom | 10 | 34 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 10 | Hani | Male | Arabic | 27 | 50 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 11 | Filastin | Female | Arabic | 10 | 42 | Master’s | Primary |
| 12 | Marwa | Female | Hebrew | 10 | 41 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 13 | Maram | Female | English | 5 | 26 | Bachelor’s | Sr. High |
| 14 | Jamila | Female | Mathematics | 10 | 33 | Master’s | Jr. High |
| 15 | Khaled | Male | Electricity + coordinator  | 19 | 43 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 16 | Sumih  | Female | English | 10 | 34 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 17 | Sondos | Female | Arabic | 11 | 35 | Master’s | Primary |
| 18 | Ayyat | Female | Math +coordinator | 14 | 38 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 19 | Rima | Female | Mathematics | 6 | 30 | Bachelor’s | Jr. High |
| 20 | Lubna | Female | Arabic + homeroom + educational counselor | 13 | 34 | Master’s | Jr. High |
| 21 | Anwar | Female | Hebrew + homeroom | 3 | 26 | Master’s | Sr. High |
| 22 | Ahmad | Male | Arabic and religion | 13 | 38 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 23 | Tarek | Male | Arabic and religion | 8 | 32 | Master’s | Jr. High |
| 24 | Suhad | Female | Science + homeroom | 21 | 43 | Master’s | Primary |
| 25 | Sumiya | Female | Mathematics | 4 | 25 | Master’s | Jr. High |
| 26 | Rasmi | Male | History + homeroom | 3 | 26 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 27 | Marah | Female | Arabic | 18 | 40 | Master’s | Primary |
| 28 | Rim | Female | Mathematics | 14 | 39 | Master’s | Primary |
| 29 | Asil | Female | Science | 20 | 50 | Bachelor’s | Primary |
| 30 | Hala | Female | Science | 9 | 53 | Bachelor’s  | Jr. High |

The participants were selected by means of the snowball method, starting with teachers whom the investigators knew from their work in teacher training. Subsequently, a participant would suggest another teacher whom they knew and who remained fully active in teaching during the pandemic era, and so on until the group of participants represented schools at different levels and different geographic regions: 80% from the central region of the country, 9% percent from the south, and 11% percent from the north. Although the sampling method was not representative, it ultimately yielded a population of teachers that was diverse and inclusive of representative demographic characteristics among teachers at large.

Data Collection

The data collection was based on open-ended in-depth interviews. The interviews took place after the investigators contacted each participant by means of electronic mail, obtained his or her consent to take part in the study, and set a date for the interview. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and all were recorded and transcribed. The main question in the interview concerned the teacher’s pedagogical response when the entire education system had been shut down and teaching had gone online during the pandemic period. Additional questions arose in the course of the interviews as conversations for clarification and elucidation took place. The researchers asked the participants to give examples where necessary.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on grounded theory (Shkedi, 2011, Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, open coding of the information was performed, yielding a division into primary categories. Initially, each researcher defined the categories on their own; then the categories that each researcher defined were compared. After the researchers agreed on the primary categories, an integrative process of defining broader categories ensued. Again, each researcher produced her own definitions, the two researchers’ definitions were compared, and a consensus was reached.

Findings

This study examined the pedagogical changes made by teachers within Israel’s Arab community when the pandemic forced them to switch to distance learning. The findings point to two major aspects for which changes were reported by the teachers: the goals of their teaching and the strategies they applied to attain them. These two aspects are the primary categories of the study. Interestingly, even though the teachers were asked about pedagogical changes, the revision of teaching goals proved to be the point of departure for the changes in teaching methods. The change in teaching goals focused on shifting the emphasis to developmental teaching including five sub-categories: (1) developing the ability to cope with situations of stress and anxiety, (2) developing self-confidence and autonomous learning competence, (3) SEL and enhancing learning motivation, (4) developing autonomous learning skills, and (5) strengthening positive relations among students. The second primary category centered on the application of relevant teaching strategies to attain the goals of the first category. This category comprises three sub-categories: (1) pedagogical changes in the direction of cooperative teaching, small-group teaching, gamification and inquisitive learning, (2) changes at the personal-emotional level and creating space for reciprocal emotional discourse, caring, giving a personal response, and using emotional language; and (3) changes at the organizational level, chief among them flexibility in scheduling.

Changes in Teaching Goals

The analysis of the data indicated that the eruption of the pandemic and the transition to distance learning induced the teachers to revise their teaching goals. The essence of the change was a shift from cognitive goals of knowledge acquisition, understanding, and thought development to social-emotional goals, reflected in the following sub-categories:

Developing the ability to cope with situations of stress and anxiety

In their interviews, the teachers stated clearly that one of the main goals they stressed at the time was developing their students’ ability to cope with situations of stress and anxiety. Sumih, for example, related to this goal explicitly, emphasizing the change in the direction of goals focusing on developing ways to accommodate negative emotions such as fear, worry, and anxiety among her students: *“In our situation right now, the most important thing for me is to accommodate the students and give them emotional support until they weather the crisis safely. The students’ emotions and mental state are more important than any scholastic material, in my opinion.”* Jamila, a math teacher, referred to similar goals:

*It matters less to me how much material and exercises I manage to fit in; I have to cope with new situations of fear and anxiety. How can I teach her math?! Teaching math doesn’t even matter now; what matters is to keep the pupils sane and calm, so they’ll emerge from the crisis with as little psychological damage as possible. They’ll learn math later on.*

The teachers noted the importance of responding personally to their pupils’ needs in the learning process and stressed the strong mitigation of pupils’ stress that they can induce by expressing concern for these needs. Developing teachers’ concern for the pupils’ needs and the pupils’ concern for the needs of the others in their group became a central goal. Rahma, the coordinator of English at a primary school, stated emphatically that, for her, being a teacher who cares about all her pupils’ needs is cardinal in teaching generally, and in distance teaching during a crisis in particular:

*I understand all the pupils’ needs, I treat the pupils courteously and relate to them on two levels: fairness and caring. For example, some pupils have special needs, they’re slow and need more time to carry out the assignments. We have to find a way to solve this, like giving extra time after class to finish up or placing them in the school’s room on Zoom. So when I detect a specific need […] I study it and respond by doing better.*

Rahma identifies specific needs among her pupils and, by saying “we have to find a way to solve [them],” she transforms her actions into a purpose that guides what she does.

Rasmi, a homeroom and history teacher, spoke about the teacher’s alertness and ability to identify a pupil in distress or under stress. *“I developed methods to identify a pupil who’s having difficulty, a pupil under stress, I can tell behind the mask who’s stressed out and who’s doing fine. It was important for me to relate to students who fell into states of stress, pressure, or anxiety.”* Another teacher reinforced this point: *“The pupils are our responsibility; we’re responsible for them even when they’re far away. We have to look out for them and communicate with them. Especially when some of them feel anxious and insecure in this situation, we as teachers have to aid them and help them to emerge from it. Grades and material are the least important things to me right now.”*

Many teachers referred repeatedly to mitigating stress and anxiety as educational goals. The need for this change evidently surfaced as the result of the teachers’ interactions with their pupils and the experiences expressed in them. Developing goals as the outcome of educational frontline work, in the context of teaching and learning, is an uncommon and especially interesting phenomenon. Developing educational goals in the course of teaching and in response to changes may be a particularity of times of crisis.

Enhancing self-confidence and empowering autonomous learning

In addition to coping with situations of stress and anxiety as a pro-SEL goal, the teachers mentioned self-confidence as a basis for developing emotional abilities. Improving pupils’ self-confidence is a goal that the participants expressed clearly, particularly as social distancing caused pupils who were used to functioning scholastically within a group to lose their focus behind their masks because they were unable to follow the material and the assignments. This situation undermined their self-confidence: *“I noticed that I was losing some of the pupils, who didn’t dare say a thing, didn’t have a camera, and just wrote a few words in the chat. I decided to take a deep breath and work on improving their self-confidence. I was sure that their* *self-confidence and positive self-perception behind the masks was the most important thing then.”* Zina also considered this an important goal: *“My job as a teacher is to support the students, encourage them, and boost their self-confidence all the time. It’s important for developing their personal and social abilities.”*

As part of enhancing self-confidence, some teachers referred explicitly to their students’ self-capacity. Rana, for example, said: *To improve self-capacity, I give online assignments which everyone can do successfully: clear and easy assignments. It’s important for them to experience success; it strengthens their belief that they really are capable.”* Zina agreed about the importance of bolstering her pupils’ self-capacity: “*Today more than ever, pupils have to believe that they can achieve, that they can work in a group. I give questions that seem difficult but they can answer them after they make a certain effort. It helps them believe in their ability next time.*”

Additional teachers thought it important to instill the faith in their pupils that this difficult and vague period would blow over so that they would be confident in themselves. Ayman explained:

*I realized that my students had to feel confident before they took up any scholastic material. Sometimes their inner confidence was upended. They didn’t believe in themselves, didn’t believe that the crisis would end. I tried to maintain an internal balance between teaching the material and maintaining camaraderie that would strengthen them on the inside.*

Ayman added: “*The ambiguous and strange period we’re living through requires us to become autodidacts. We encounter lots of new things and we can’t wait for someone to come along and teach us. This is what has to be strengthened in our pupils: to be independent learners.*”

Thus, during the period of distance learning, many teachers identified the need to develop their students’ ability to learn on their own. Most of the teachers made it their goal to help their students progress toward this goal by boosting their self-confidence and their faith in their learning abilities. As part of this, some teachers referred to the importance of bolstering their pupils’ self-capacity. The goal of reinforcing self-confidence and learning ability may have stood out due to scarcity of teaching hours in distance learning, the limited nature of interactions in online lessons, and the need to make up missing material independently.

Enhancing motivation to learn

The teachers saw motivation as the cornerstone of effective learning. Therefore, they noted, enhancing motivation is an objective toward the attainment of scholastic goals. Motivation ties into emotion and helps students to cope with difficulties in their studies and their lives at large. Hala remarked:

*It’s important to make note of their motivation. As a teacher, you have to find ways and methods to keep their morale up as the lesson proceeds. It’s not easy; it takes lots of energy and effort on the teacher’s part. As a teacher, I’m always searching for those ways and methods. [...] We have to attract the students and raise their motivation.*

For Majid, the goal of enhancing motivation is cardinal:

*I think encouraging the students to come to class and do so with motivation even though it’s remote is fundamental in the scholastic act. If the teacher fails to set this in motion, he’ll lose his students and his teaching will be worthless. The most important goal for a teacher is to encourage his students to come to him, to every class, with positive energies.*

Due to the transition from human interactive teaching in class to learning apart in private rooms, many teachers stated that one of their goals was to attract the students to the lesson and raise their motivation to attend and focus during it.

Reinforcing positive relations among pupils

The teachers stressed the importance of strengthening relations and proper communication among their students as a prerequisite for SEL. Rana, a high school English teacher, spoke about this: “*My goal is to strengthen relations among the students. I make sure they listen to each other, respect each other. [...] It’s very important to me. It’s not child’s play! Respectful and attentive relations are the basis of good learning, and that’s the goal of every teacher who’s into distance learning.*”

The teachers spoke about the importance of creating room for emotional discourse among the students, allowing them to express what they are missing and reinforcing their interrelations. Rasmi said:

*The pandemic and the lengthy lockdowns made the students miss each other, their classroom, playing together, and even quarreling. So it’s important for me to make room for all this. I invite them to talk in pairs and small groups about what they’re missing and the hardships they’re going through. I took advantage of a life skills class to create a space for open personal discourse. I allotted time for free conversation and let them decide what to talk about. They chose topics that interested them, like a computer game that they played together or the coronavirus and family quarantining, and so on. It helped them to stay in touch. I also noticed that new relationships developed behind the masks.*

Continuing, Ayman emphasized the importance of social relations among the students as friends: *“Reinforcing social relations among the pupils as friends and peers can alleviate the stress, strengthen social learning, and enhance the self-confidence of each of them.”*

In addition, Rana, an English teacher, spoke about the importance of building stronger social relations among the pupils under the teacher’s watchful eye:

*In class, they sit next to each other and talk. Now we’re on Zoom. The students don’t converse as much because the whole class is in one conversation and there’s no room and time to converse together every second. There are no breaks between classes and no school hallways! So I made the matter of social relations a central goal in my life-skills and class-management lessons. I divide them into rooms on the basis of their friendships and go from room to room like a minder and an “auditor.”*

Many teachers repeatedly referred to building strong relations among pupils as a socio-educational goal. The need for this change seems to have emerged from the educational discourse that took place in remote classes, where pupils spoke of what they were missing and expressed the need to return to the physical classroom space and human contact. That the teachers developed this goal as the outcome of frontline educational work, in the context of teaching and learning amid social distancing and an ongoing crisis, is an especially interesting phenomenon.

Revising Teaching Strategies

Revision of teaching methods is the second primary category that emerged from the data analysis. To attain their self-defined goals in distance learning during the pandemic, the teachers changed their teaching methods and focused on integrating new teaching strategies. The centerpiece of this change was a transition from frontal teaching strategies, in which teachers talk and students listen, to strategies centering more on sharing, empathy for the other, and accommodation. These are perceived as teaching methods that promote SEL and help to attain the new goals. The changes are reflected in three sub-categories, as follows:

Changes in pedagogy

All participants in the study confirmed that they had made pedagogical changes in their teaching. They brought in more processes of cooperative teaching, small-group teaching, gamification of learning, the inverted classroom, inquisitive learning, and decision-making. They found these pedagogies of service in attaining some of their self-defined goals.

Many participants reported having employed a cooperative-teaching strategy in small groups as a way to strengthen their students’ social and emotional skills. Cooperative group work makes it possible to bolster positive relations among students, acceptance of the other, acceptance of criticism, and interpersonal listening skills. Marwa, a teacher of Arabic in a primary school, related:

*I emphasize small-group work in the course of the lesson. I continually remind the pupils that it’s important to listen within the group, treat the group members’ views respectfully, and accept criticism. I demand that they continue meeting in their work groups even after class (on Zoom, of course, under the lockdown circumstances). Now and then I ask them how things went within the group. Were there problems? I also pay attention to things that can happen among them when there’s a teacher in attendance. But if it’s the development of social and emotional skills that we want, and if strengthening positive relations among them matters to us, then this is the way to do it, and I strongly believe it’ll happen in the course of their work in the group.*

For small-group work and also in the larger classroom group, all participants mentioned introducing digital or motion games at home in the course of online lessons as an important strategy that serves several purposes. By gamifying some of the learning activity, they say, two goals may be advanced: enhancing self-confidence and improving learning motivation. Rahma, for example, who coordinates English at a primary school, emphasized the importance of gamifying study as a way to reinforce self-confidence: *Games are the tipping point in my work, especially today, when you can give the pupils a game with scores that they themselves can check and correct. It’ll bring them to a situation where all the answers are correct; it strengthens them and encourages them to keep on playing.*”

To pursue the goals of developing autodidactic ability and strengthening students’ interrelations—two crucial competences in SEL in terms of the five-ability CASEL model (Weissberg et al., 2015)— the teachers employed an inquisitive learning strategy that required students to ask, seek appropriate knowledge, read and understand on their own, be part of a research group, and communicate with their peers. Majid, a high-school English teacher, reported:

*It’ll help the student to progress if he can learn on his own. In my class, the students are given a text to read independently. After they read it, they prepare questions that they bring to class and they start to ask them. I’m in no rush to give the answers; I hold my silence and wait for one of the students to answer. I try to encourage them to acquire this skill. I let them work on their own. It’s a skill.*

Hala, who teaches science, and Rana, who teaches English, emphasized inquisitive learning as a way to develop autodidactic abilities and strengthen interpersonal communication. Hala notes:

*Encouraging the students to investigate, think, make decisions, and draw conclusions— that’s what counts in teaching science. Right now, it’s also important to let them work together in research groups. It narrows the social distance that they’re living in. Research assignments in groups of friends give them something to celebrate.*

Continuing, Ranastressed the importance of developing autonomous capabilities: *“Giving assignments that require self-learning, research, searching for information they need, discovering and acquiring new knowledge: that way I put together a good lesson and help the pupils to continue to learn on their own after class, too.”* Khaled, who teaches electricity and holds the position of grade coordinator at his high school, said that the inquisitive-learning approach improves self-confidence: *“It’s very important to give the students assignments that they’ll research on the internet, on various sites, in books, in order to gain experience in high-order thinking. It challenges them and develops their intellect, so they’ll also be more self-confident.*”

Some participants linked autodidactic ability with problem-solving and decision-making capabilities. To their way of thinking, the ability to cope with a question or a problem that involves decision-making corresponds to an autodidactic skill that supports the development of SEL. The participants reported that they emphasized learning via problem-solving that leads to making decisions by presenting relevant problems in class. Yasmin and Zina, two English teachers, for example, spoke about outcomes that surprised them in terms of their pupils’ ability to make decisions after they were given problem-solving assignments. Yasmin reported:

*I handed out assignments where the students had to think about a scientific problem. They worked in pairs. I gave each pair a certain dilemma or problem that was suited to their age and asked them to understand it, investigate it, and find as many appropriate solutions as they could. Then they had to evaluate each proposed solution, determine its advantages and drawbacks, and ultimately decide which decision was the most suitable. They had to present the problem or the dilemma to the class and describe the solution they had come up with. I say that’s what we ought to do if we want good learning to happen.*

For Zina, learning by decision-making requires creativity and imagination; therefore, she gave her students time to present their outcomes. Amazed by what she found, she shared her excitement with the students, gave them reinforcement, and boosted their self-confidence:

*I gave my students an assignment where they had to discover knowledge that was new to them, then to write creative texts with original thoughts and ideas that they expected no one to have thought of before, and finally to make a specific decision on the basis of the research they had done. They surprised me! They wrote compositions that were imaginative and sometimes funny, too. Some even drew their ideas on the back of their texts and managed to arrive at intelligent decisions. As a veteran teacher, I sensed something special in their ability to imagine. You wouldn’t believe how creative they were. They stunned me. Reading their compositions gave me this thrill, this wonderful feeling!*

Other participants employed the “inverted classroom” strategy to attain the same two goals—enhancing self-confidence and relations among students—that are considered important for intrapersonal and interpersonal SEL. Noticing that the students found it hard to spend lengthy periods in front of their screens, the teachers gave short lessons (half the usual length) and supplemented them by means of the inverted classroom, in which material is assigned to be prepared before the lesson and a complementary reflective discussion takes place during the lesson. This method helped the teachers to make up missing material and helped students to improve their self-confidence because they had read, understood, or enquired about the material themselves. Ayyat, a math teacher, commented:

*One of the things I brought into distance learning was the inverted-classroom method. Students attend the lesson after they’d gone over the material and gotten acquainted with it on their own. Then they come to the lesson with questions and exclamation points and have to understand, put their thoughts in order, and organize the material better and more easily. That’s very important for understanding math. In the course of the lesson, I give them roles and responsibility for small portions of the material, and then peer learning takes place. I’m amazed by the students’ mathematical way of thinking. I get emotional when I hear them speaking the language of math. They express themselves mathematically; they cope with difficult mathematical questions. So all of a sudden, I’m teaching the best class in their grade.*

Sumiya dealt with the pandemic crisis by integrating humor into learning as a way of coping with stress and anxiety. Using humor as part of the lesson, she said, can pull students out of their stress, allow them to laugh together, and attain emotional relief:

*Because the students are at home or in their room, they can get bored and float around in their own world. For some students, it can cause stress and anxiety. They’ve got enough stressors right now: vagueness, illnesses, death, quarantine, and distancing. I found a way to cope with all of this ... humor! I start the lesson with a joke, I laugh along with them; I laugh at myself. In some lessons I’m more a stand-up comedian than a teacher.*

Changes at the personal emotional level

The participants found the period of distance learning associated with the pandemic an acutely challenging time emotionally, personally, and interpersonally. Therefore, they used their lessons as a space for a reciprocal emotional discourse, enhancing concern and empathy for the students and among the students toward each other, personal and social responsiveness, identity, and speaking emotionally—all in the service of their pro-SEL goals.

One way the teachers coped with their pupils’ fears, they said, was to allow the group to generate a personal emotional and social discourse. Teachers might have facilitated the discourse themselves or set aside lesson time for unrestricted conversation among the students in small groups. Hani, a teacher of Arabic, gave an example:

*I invite my students to converse with each other while I observe and listen. I encourage them to ask each other how they’re doing and anything else they feel like asking. I set a time for it and listen in. They use the time to talk about how they miss each other, miss the classroom, the school, and the normal lives they used to lead before the pandemic, and they share things like their difficulties with distance learning and their fears. I usually make the free conversation oral, but sometimes I turn it into a written activity by means of a digital device like a tablet or a WhatsApp group.*

According to Hani, the discussion lets the students share their personal and family ordeals and their emotions and fears. It likewise gives these fears a kind of legitimacy and provides encouragement, support, and ways of coping even when the students are in their personal space. Rana, an English teacher, shared another example of how this space might be provided: “*It’s important to begin the lesson with an emotional question so there will be an emotional and experiential discourse. I track their participation in the discourse and identify those who aren’t sharing, and I ask them a question about something they’re interested in.*” The need to give the pupils space also resonates in the remarks of Lubna, an educational counselor: *“I search for topics or events that attract [people] their age and draw them to the class.*”

In addition to space where an emotional discourse can take place in the course of a lesson, many teachers carved out space for feelings about the lesson itself. These teachers set aside a specific time at the end of each lesson to ask the students how they felt during the lesson, what they found more or less pleasurable, and what they would like to add to the next lessons in order to get more out of them. Thus, for example, Yasmin, an English teacher, reported: “*I make sure at the end of the lesson to ask each student for their opinion about the lesson itself: Did they like it? Why didn’t they like it? Did they feel at ease? I learn a lot from their answers.*” Rim, a math teacher, added:

*At the end of the lesson, I ask them, too, to evaluate how they think the lesson went. [...] In my next lessons, I add things and change things according to their comments for improvement; I show them that their opinion matters and that I take it into account. That way they dare to communicate more and feel more self-confident.*

Some teachers reported that while teaching remotely due to the pandemic, they had devoted entire lessons to personal, emotional, and straightforward discussions during which students could express themselves, tell stories, and share their personal and family ordeals. Where necessary, a parent attended these encounters in order to encourage the student and support him or her by creating a three-way teacher–student–parent conversation. Dahlia, a Hebrew teacher, elaborated:

*I start the session with an emotional heart-to-heart talk and leave enough time for everyone to say something. [...] At first it was hard for them to get onto Zoom; they were afraid. I talked it over with them on the phone, I visited some of them at home, and that way, very slowly, they got into Zoom because they missed each other. From there we went on to synchronic encounters.*

The space for emotional discourse was maintained on a reciprocal basis: teachers shared their personal and emotional experiences with their students, telling them how they and their families were coping with this difficult period. Rahma, the English teacher, related:

*I shared my difficulties and how I coped with them with my pupils. It enabled me to develop their personal skills and serve as a role model. On the one hand, I stressed that as an adult I have hardships, too; on the other hand, I described ways and means of coping that they could also use, like doing sports when I felt down, visiting my closest friend, or watching a comedy film. I suggested several things.*

The teachers used this reciprocal sharing to legitimize and justify their students’ experiences and emotions. Marwa, a veteran Arabic teacher, recalled:

*In one of my lessons, I told the students that I was waiting for them to turn on their cameras and it was important for me to see them because I missed them. One girl answered: I can’t because I’m sitting in the kitchen. I replied: I’m sitting in the kitchen just like you. Look! So then she turned on her camera.*

Reciprocal sharing of personal experiences and emotions was also a way to encourage reticent and less participatory pupils to be more forthcoming about their feelings. The teachers saw themselves as role models. Ayman, the English teacher, spoke of having approached her students by adopting a personal tone: *“My dear students, I know distance learning is hard. It’s hard for all of us, myself included. It’s new to all of us and we share this hardship.”* Lubna, the counselor, added: “*That’s my way of empathizing with them, soothing them, and alleviating their stress.*”

Suhad, who teaches science and does homeroom duties at a primary school, chose the strategy of maintaining an empathetic and caring relationship with her students:

*The most important thing is to accommodate the student, to take attendance and record absences, and to communicate regularly with their parents, because my basic assumption at this time is something may not be okay with this student. So I’ve got my finger on the pulse at all times, checking who’s here and who’s not, and asking about those who aren’t here. It takes a lot of energy and time but I feel it’s more important than anything else.*

Lubna also shared:

*Some pupils feel more appreciated when I call and take with their mothers and tell them that I want to know what’s up with their son and want to speak with him. I talk with the pupil and ask: How are you? How are you spending your day? I want to see you, speak with you, hear your voice. Everyone misses you; everyone’s asking about you. It makes him feels truly appreciated. I really ask and keep track of every pupil and leave no one out.*

Managing relations, following up, and maintaining communication are among the basic SEL skills that promote a healthy and fruitful pupil–teacher relationship. Students who have adequate management skills can cope with social pressures and negotiate and handle a constructive and effective discourse. Khaula, a science teacher at the primary level, noted emphatically:

*It’s very important to listen to our pupils, very important to call them by name individually. It’s good to give them the feeling that I’ve approached them personally, as in “How are you this fine day? I was pleased to hear about your experience, etc.” It helps to strengthen my relationship, as a teacher, with my students. It’s a point that I emphasize strongly in my lessons, and I do it on purpose, of course. I never forget to provide group encouragement; that’s no less important that individual encouragement. [...] In addition to following up and communicating with parents and pupils on WhatsApp and over the phone, it’s good for us to communicate via Zoom meetings, too. You have to communicate with the parents and follow up in order to make the mothers feel secure. It’s a skill that I’ve practiced a great deal as a teacher. Communicating with pupils and parents was very helpful in releasing pressure and stress. I communicate with parents and pupils by texting or over the phone in order to strengthen the bond. These things are very helpful in the distance learning that we’re doing at this surprising and unusual time.*

This tripartite (teachers–parents–students) process of follow-up and communication topples the distance barrier and gives pupils a sense of intimacy and companionship even as they learn remotely. At this stage, it is very important for teachers and parents to collaborate in the educational process because it facilitates teaching and learning and helps to attain objectives and success. Ayyat, a high-school mathematics teacher and subject coordinator, emphasizes as much:

*We as teachers, we as parents, have to be partners. Not everyone can work apart. If we work like a linked chain, we will have control. Control over the difficulties is what I mean. We have to cooperate and help the students, ourselves, and the parents. There are certain devices that I use throughout the lesson, like dialog or starting a math lesson with a challenging question that lets me develop a conversation with the group. If there’s a student who doesn’t communicate, I turn to him with a comprehensible and easy question. I also take a direct look at the student’s hardships. How do you feel at this stage about the topic? Are you comfortable with it? [...] I do more than give him information; I also try to get information from him as a person and as a student who’s also under stress. [...] I’m always in contact with parents and students and I always ask about them.*

Rima, a primary-level mathematics teacher, expressed much the same thing:

*For some pupils, the phone call can last an hour or an hour and a half. As for others, I asked them to stay on Zoom after the lesson and had a personal talk with them. It was hard for some to turn on the camera, and others preferred that I communicate with them on WhatsApp. So there were differences among the pupils in terms of being comfortable with how I communicated with them. [...] Most pupils preferred WhatsApp because they wanted it to be private and personal.*

Ahmad, who teaches Arabic and religion at a primary school, added: “*Sometimes I communicated with pupils personally and sometimes with their parents in order to make them part of the lesson.*”

A reciprocal emotional discourse enhances self- and social awareness and makes it easier to analyze a given case, piece of information, or experience from different points of view, to show empathy, valorize a range of ideas and differences, and respect the other.

Changes at the organizational level—Flexibility in scheduling

In response to the need to stimulate learning motivation and deal with situations of stress and anxiety, the participants reported that they had been willing to be flexible in scheduling their lessons and to hold additional lessons beyond those required, especially for students who lacked self-confidence and needed encouragement and support. These students did not participate in the regular full-group lessons, but when invited to a small-group lesson at odd hours of the day, they marshaled the courage to speak up, share, and express themselves. Ayman, a veteran English teacher, was one of the participants who engaged in this practice. She relates:

*I try to impart information to my students and, especially, to instill educational values more effectively by bringing in personal examples. [...] So I said, let’s set up a separate Zoom meeting and you choose the time. My goal was to break the ice and their fear of English “as the fourth language that they’re learning,” and also to deal with their bashfulness, which stems from inability to keep up with the group. Thus, I had several separate meetings with these five students. We spoke about matters that were interesting, personal, and inspiring to them.*

Alongside this flexibility, the teachers found it important to respect the students’ time so that they could manage their days effectively and avoid becoming confused. For example, Rahma, an English teacher and subject coordinator at the primary level, said:

*You have to respect the pupils’ time. So, both as teachers and as parents, we have to work on dividing up their time during the day and respecting the time they spend on Zoom learning and not bothering them with other things. We shouldn’t bother them even when they’re at play. Even though we’re in the midst of a period of distance learning and lengthy lockdown, it doesn’t mean that the pupils are always available and that I can give them a task or an assignment whenever I feel like it. It’s important to respect the time they spend with their families or with themselves!*

The teachers’ willingness to put in time beyond their ordinary schedules for their students’ sake deserves special emphasis. It should not be taken for granted; it has implications for the way their profession is perceived. Teaching as a profession inspires students and motivates them to attain and fulfill their potential and beyond. This kind of teaching empowers students and encourages them to improve their educational outcomes and become better people. According to the OECD International Summit 2018, maximizing students’ abilities commensurate with their capacity and aspirations is the purpose of teaching as a profession (14). Therefore, teaching as a profession should also impart digital knowledge to teachers and integrate SEL skills, encourage collaboration, critical thinking, and solving complex problems. Teachers should be aware of external evaluations and should use the outcomes to improve students’ achievements and their own teaching methods in order to follow up on their students and give them support. In addition, teachers should be trained to enable all students to fulfill their potential (18). SEL abilities are very important for teachers because such abilities allow them to control the emotional challenges that typify this profession, cement positive teacher–student relations, assure their own wellbeing, and further their students’ development. It has been found in research (Sivakumar & Moorthy; Ahmad & Sahak, 2009; Haley, 1993) that the perception of teaching as a profession is important in general; the present study demonstrates the special importance of this perception at times of crisis.

In another study (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021), major differences were found. A group of teachers who took part in workshops reported a sizable increase in psychological resilience and satisfaction with life, even in the course of the Covid-19 crisis. The teachers in this study reported, during the crisis, an increase in their ability to cope and their psychological wellbeing, including more positive emotions, attachment to work, sense of meaning, and a stronger sense of achievement. They also reported a higher level of attentiveness to and connection with their students, as well as higher levels of fulfillment of their professional capacities in class.

Discussion

This study examined changes in the substance of professional practice among teachers in Israel’s Arab community during the distance-learning period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings revealed major pedagogical changes on two levels. First, the teachers moved from cognitive goals involving knowledge acquisition, understanding, and thought development to emotional and social goals such as mitigating stress and anxiety, as necessitated by the crisis and the abrupt transition to distance learning. In addition, they developed their students’ autodidactic abilities—a salient need due to the reduced teaching hours in distance learning, the limited nature of interaction during remote lessons, and the need to make up study material independently. Another goal was to enhance pupils’ learning motivation and to strengthen positive relations among students; this emerged from the educational discourse that unfolded during the remote lessons.

On the second level, the change focused on the transition from classroom teaching strategies, in which teachers talk and students listen, to strategies centering more on sharing, empathy for the other, and accommodation. These are perceived as pro-SEL teaching methods that support the attainment of the new abovementioned goals.

The findings of this study indicate that the teachers made these changes in direct response to the new teaching situation that had come about and at their personal initiative. They appear to have taken full autonomous responsibility for them. The personal nature of their response emerged clearly in the way they spoke, their use of the first-person “I” throughout the interviews, and the absence of a discourse that related to organizational and administrative measures at the institutional level. In other words, these changes had not been dictated to the teachers in advance and from on high (by the education system or by school principals); instead, they were outgrowths of genuine need and the participants’ agency as teachers. Notably, the teachers enjoyed enough autonomy to set personal goals and strive to attain them by revising their teaching methods. The study likewise yielded evidence of the teachers’ perception of responsibility for their pupils, as manifested in their willingness to take action outside of regular working hours and give personal attention to each pupil. This attests to the overall importance of the profession and its particular importance during crisis, especially the Covid-19 pandemic (United Nations, 2020; Laurence et al., 2020).

The findings show how, during the Covid-19 crisis, the participants actualized teaching as a profession without prior preparation and planning, by way of a process they initiated due to their strong perception of teaching as a profession. This study’s importance stems from the heightened perception of teaching as a profession among teachers in ordinary times and especially in times of crisis.

Unlike the response of the Arab education system to the crisis, which was desultory and in many cases nonexistent at the organizational systemic level, various countries reacted to the crisis promptly by making a fast transition from face-to-face learning to the online learning framework that the pandemic imposed on teachers everywhere. The teachers’ role, too, changed rapidly and became more challenging to fulfill.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by illuminating the importance of the teaching profession generally and in times of crisis specifically and its significance as a liberal profession such as medicine, law, accountancy, and so on. Many studies try to advance teaching toward professional status but the perception of this occupation as a semi-profession persists (מקור). Namely, teaching satisfies some of the criteria of a “profession,” such as maintaining an organized body of theory, the requirement of a lengthy training and certification period, and the recognition of its trainees as a full-fledged professionals. It fails, however, to meet other criteria, such as having a code of ethics (despite numerous attempts to write one), a professional teaching community that engages in training rather than research, professional conferences, etc. It, therefore, cannot fully be considered a profession. In addition, teaching is notable for vagueness in ranking and professional hierarchy, a ladder of professional progress that is more like a flat pyramid, and frequent lack of clarity about when a teacher is ready to advance to the next rung on said ladder. This is yet more evidence that teaching is not a full-fledged profession despite prodigious efforts in recent years to advance it toward this status by means of research, anchoring its subject matter in literature, and establishing international standard-setting bodies (מקור).

In addition to its emphasis on teaching as a profession in a time of crisis, the present study is important for Israeli-Arab society, the “Palestinian minority,” which, while living in the State of Israel, is also part of the Arab world, meaning that it lives amid contrasts and contradictions and is characterized as a society in crisis. The pandemic created an opportunity to investigate educational and social changes within this society as it underwent a crisis, yielding lessons that are important for handling future crises.

Another theoretical contribution is the combination of assimilating SEL into the training programs that turn out tomorrow’s teachers and the practical contribution of SEL to active teachers as a necessary part of their professional development due to its essential contribution to their day-to-day work.

In this regard, it is worth noting that recently, there has been a growing consensus in Israel’s education system that SEL must be included in the curricula. In 2020, the Yozma Center for Knowledge, Research and Education in Israel issued a summative report recommending the integration of SEL in the education system following an initiative by the Ministry of Education. The initiative indicated the growing interest in SEL as an indispensable means and a must-have for students’ positive and healthy development (p. 41). Such large-scale prospective project is expected to propose a collection of teaching plans for all teachers in Israel encompassing all school subjects, ages, levels, and sectors. Intervention plans have been recommended particularly for the marginalized, the underrepresented, and the oppressed Arab minority in Israel (p. 50).

Further research on the response of school administrations to the Covid-19 crisis and the development of SEL processes and their cultural adaptation to various societies elsewhere is recommended.

The present study is limited in terms of the snowball sampling method it employed. Nevertheless, although the sample thus yielded was unrepresentative, the population of participating teachers was diverse enough to encompass representative demographic traits.

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