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Teachers' Perceptions of Their Goals: Toward Pro-SEL Pedagogy

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Abstract: The switch to online teaching that the global COVID-19 crisis necessitated has been discussed in many studies. Few papers, however, have investigated teachers' perceptions and the self-initiated changes they made due to such a transition. This study adopted a mixed methods design to determine the perceptions of teachers and the changes they made during the crisis. For this undertaking, a purposive snowball sampling of thirty in-service teachers in Israel was used. The study revealed that considerable changes were made in the participants' pedagogical practices, and there was a significant correlation between these changes and teachers' perceptions of their teaching profession. The changes essentially applied to two main categories: teaching goals and teaching strategies. In addition, the findings showed that the revised teaching goals and strategies were executed to the teachers' own volition and were consistent with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) pedagogy. To enhance the social-emotional competence and well-being of teachers and students, the researchers recommend elevating and enhancing the teaching profession by establishing SEL pedagogy in all schools, not only in times of crisis but as a policy empowered by advocacy.

Keywords: SEL; teaching goals; teaching strategies; e-learning; COVID-19; teaching profession



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated global detrimental impacts and unprecedented shifts in education worldwide. As a result, education systems were immediately geared to address the new reality. COVID-19 caused unmatched disruptions and massive changes to education [1]. Contrary to popular belief, numerous researchers assume that lockdowns trigger creativity, and managing stress boosts one's positive emotions during pandemics [2,3]. Similarly, COVID-19 outbreak opened door to matchless and real changes in education. Due to the pandemic wide-ranging and ubiquitous effects, educators were urged to reconsider the prevailing obsolete and rigid education systems [4]. In this respect, Kamanetz argued 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 [5]. The rapid changes and disruptions imposed by COVID-19 created uncertainties and confusion, but simultaneously necessitated rapid responsiveness of schools to reorganise their plans and teaching strategies, reassign their resources, enhance their digital skills, and upgrade their technological know-how. Despite such drawbacks prompted by COVID-19, Gibbs [6] asserted that the pandemic paved the way to positive results refurbishing and rejuvenating the curricula and integrating psychological care as a means to nurture students' well-being. Along these lines, this study aimed to examine teachers' perceptions and the changes they introduced due to the transition to online teaching mandated by the COVID-19 crisis which served as a catalyst for such changes.

2. Change in Policymakers' Attitudes

In an attempt to harness the deleterious repercussions of the pandemic for education, numerous ministries of education around the world pushed for reforms revamping and

updating their curricula, making them more receptive and more responsive to students' skills, attitudes, and needs [7–10]. In China for example, despite the shortcomings pertaining to the sudden online teaching, the Ministry of Education helped teachers upskill their digital competencies and remodel their teaching strategies to fit into the novel situation [9]. Reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistani policymakers and stakeholders remodeled their curriculum framework by adapting alternative approaches and modalities [10]. In Indonesia, a new administration was established to endorse and bolster the school system by incorporating innovative teaching strategies into the curriculum while considering the students' emotional and social needs [11].

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 teaching methods and act more creatively to keep their students involved at a time when every home became a classroom and, at times, multiple classrooms, providing a supportive learning environment. Second, the new situation underscored the need for flexibility and interactions between students and teachers and among students [12–15]. According to a survey conducted in 2020, nearly 90% of countries that responded to the COVID-19 pandemic supported teachers by emphasizing the importance of giving students feedback and maintaining continual communication with them [16].

Remarkably, changes espoused by governments and educators pay homage to the principles of the Social-Emotional Learning Framework developed by CASEL two decades ago [17] and that was henceforward deemed as part and parcel of the educational curricula in several 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, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [18].

3. Practical Changes in SEL during the COVID-19 Outbreak

In its response to the COVID-19 crisis just a few months ago, CASEL [17] readdressed and remapped its SEL's guidelines and core competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills, and aligned 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'.

Similarly, many schools and education institutions have initiated teaching current COVID-19 social-emotional skills among which are recognizing modes to support students emotionally at a distance, overcoming learning loss, helping students adjust to 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 [19]. Although these plans appear promising, not all schools have advocated such changes. Hadar et al. [20] 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.

In light of these worldwide trends, the significance of the current study stems from the heightened perception of teaching as a profession that holds a crucial role in times of crisis. Hence it addresses teachers who were in direct contact with students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These teachers were asked to reflect on the pedagogic changes they had to implement in their teaching when their contact with their students changed from

direct and unmediated to technology-mediated. Viewed in this way, the study is novel in that despite the plethora of field studies pertaining to online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak, little research has encompassed variables such as teachers' first-hand experiences of the changes they implemented.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Goal of the Study

As the entire education system was shut down and teaching had to switch from the physical to the online classroom, this study aimed to examine the correlation between teachers' perceptions of their goals and pedagogical responses to the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2. Context of the Study

The study centers on teachers in the Arab community in Israel (also known as the Palestinian minority), 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%). 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 [21].

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 [22].

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' perception of their goals and pedagogical responses to the significant changes that occurred in the Arab education system following the global pandemic. The study took place between March 2020 and February 2021; 90% of the interviews were held while national lockdowns were in effect.

4.3. Participants

Thirty teachers from various regions in Israel [Table 1]—north (11%), center (80%), and south (9%)—took part in the study: six men and 24 women, aged 25–53, teaching mathematics, science, and languages including Arabic, Hebrew, and English. It is noteworthy that these are core subjects, on which schools focused during the online-teaching period, in addition to one homeroom hour. Five of the participants were also homeroom teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 21 years. Thirteen of them held bachelor's degrees and 21 had earned master's degrees. Fourteen taught in primary schools, seven in junior-high, and nine in high schools.

Table 1 shows details about the participants selected by means of the purposive 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 was fully active during the pandemic period, and so on until the group of participants represented schools at different levels and different geographic regions. 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.

Table 1. Details of participants.

Teacher's Name	Gender	Teaching Subject + Post	Seniority	Age	Degree	Type of School
Ayman	Female	English	3	26	Bachelor's	Jr. High
Rahma	Female	English + homeroom and subject coordinator	15	51	Bachelor's	Primary
Yasmin	Female	English	10	32	Bachelor's	Primary
Zina	Female	English	5	27	Master's	Primary
Hala	Female	Science	7	33	Master's	Primary
Majid	Male	English	5	27	Master's	Sr. High
Rana	Female	English	12	32	Bachelor's	Sr. High
Hani	Male	Arabic	27	50	Bachelor's	Primary
Marwa	Female	Hebrew	10	41	Bachelor's	Primary
Jamila	Female	Mathematics	10	33	Master's	Jr. High
Khaled	Male	Electricity + coordinator	19	43	Master's	Sr. High
Sumaya	Female	English	10	34	Master's	Sr. High
Ayat	Female	Mathematics +coordinator	14	38	Master's	Sr. High
Rima	Female	Mathematics	6	30	Bachelor's	Jr. High
Lubna	Female	Arabic + homeroom + educational counselor	13	34	Master's	Jr. High
Anwar	Female	Hebrew + homeroom	3	26	Master's	Sr. High
Ahmad	Male	Arabic and religion	13	38	Bachelor's	Primary
Suhad	Female	Science + homeroom	21	43	Master's	Primary
Raheeq	Female	Mathematics	4	25	Master's	Jr. High
Rasmi	Male	History + homeroom	3	26	Bachelor's	Primary
Rama	Female	Mathematics	14	39	Master's	Primary
Asil	Female	Science	20	50	Bachelor's	Primary
Sewar	Female	Science	9	53	Bachelor's	Jr. High
Alia	Female	Arabic	12	29	Bachelor's	Sr. High
Renad	Female	Science + homeroom	10	34	Master's	Sr. High
Baqa	Female	Arabic	10	42	Master's	Primary
Maram	Female	English	5	26	Bachelor's	Sr. High
Sondos	Female	Arabic	11	35	Master's	Primary
Tarek	Male	Arabic and religion	8	32	Master's	Jr. High
Marah	Female	Arabic	18	40	Master's	Primary

4.4. Data Collection

This study employed purposive snowball sampling and used a mixed-methods design. The data collection was based on open-ended in-depth interviews (qualitative method). To generalize the results and yield more complete evidence, the qualitative data were quantified using a nominal scale which was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The interviews took place after the investigators contacted each participant through email, obtained his or her consent to take part in the study, and set a date for the interview. All interviews were conducted via Zoom 2020 version 5.0.2 (24046.0510), 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 COVID-19 crisis. 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.

4.5. Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on grounded theory [23,24]. First, open coding of the data was performed, yielding a division into primary categories. Initially, each researcher defined the categories on their own; then these initial categories 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.

5. Findings

This study examined the pedagogical changes made by teachers within Israel's Arab community when the pandemic forced them to switch to online learning. The findings pointed to two major aspects for which changes were reported by the teachers: (1) the goals of their teaching and (2) the strategies they applied to attain the strategies in question. These two aspects were 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 pro-SEL pedagogy 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) 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 comprised 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.

5.1. Changes in Teaching Goals

The analysis of data indicated that the eruption of the pandemic and the transition to online 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:

5.1.1. 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. Sumaya, an English teacher, 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 students' emotions and mental state are more important than any scholastic material' [25]. 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' [26].

All teachers noted the importance of responding personally to their students' needs in the learning process and stressed the strong mitigation of students' stress that they can induce by expressing concern for these needs. Developing teachers' concern for the students' needs and the students' 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 cared about all her students' needs was cardinal in online teaching during a crisis in particular: 'I understand all the students' needs, I treat the students courteously and relate to them on two levels: fairness and caring, we have to find a way to solve this, like giving extra time after class' [27].

Rahma identified specific needs among her students and, by saying 'we have to find a way to solve them, 'she transformed her actions into a purpose that guided what she did. Rasmi, a homeroom and history teacher, spoke about the teacher's alertness and ability to identify a student in distress or under stress. Sewar, a science teacher, reinforced this point: 'The students are our responsibility, 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' [28].

Seventy-three percent of the interviewed 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 students and the experiences expressed

by 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 in times of crisis.

5.1.2. 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 students' self-confidence is a goal that the participants expressed clearly, particularly as social distancing caused students 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. Zina, an English teacher, 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' [29].

As part of enhancing self-confidence, some teachers referred explicitly to their students' self-capacity. Rana, a high school English teacher, said: 'To improve self-capacity, I give online assignments which everyone can do successfully. It's important for them to experience success; it strengthens their belief that they really are capable' [30].

Additional teachers thought it was important to maintain their students' confidence by instilling the belief that this difficult period would subside. Ayman, an English teacher, explained: 'I realised that my students had to feel confident before they took up any scholastic material. Sometimes their inner confidence was upended' [31]. Ayman added: 'The ambiguous and strange period we're living through requires us to become autodidacts'.

Thus, during the period of online learning, 70% of teachers identified the need to develop their students' ability to learn on their own, while 87% of 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, 27% of teachers referred to the importance of bolstering their students' self-capacity. The goal of reinforcing self-confidence and learning ability may have stood out due to the scarcity of teaching hours in online learning, the limited nature of interactions in online lessons, and the need to make up for missing material independently.

5.1.3. Enhancing Motivation to Learn

The teachers saw motivation as the cornerstone of effective learning. Therefore, they noted enhancing motivation is an objective for 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, a science teacher, remarked: 'It's important to make note of their motivation. I'm always searching for those ways and methods. We have to raise their motivation' [32]. For Majid, a high-school English teacher, the goal of enhancing motivation was pivotal:

'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. The most important goal for a teacher is to encourage his students to come to him, to every class, with positive energies.' [33].

Due to the transition from human interactive teaching in class to learning apart in private rooms, 80% of 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.

5.1.4. Reinforcing Positive Relations among Students

The teachers stressed the importance of strengthening relations and proper communication among their students as a prerequisite for SEL. Rana spoke about this: 'My goal is to strengthen relations among the students; respectful and attentive relations are the basis of good learning, and that's the goal of every teacher who's into online learning.' [30].

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: 'I invited my students 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' [34]. Ayman emphasized the importance of social relations among the students as friends: 'Reinforcing social relations among the students as friends and peers can alleviate the stress, strengthen social learning, and enhance the self-confidence of each of them' [31].

In addition, Rana spoke about the importance of building stronger social relations among the students under the teacher's watchful eye:

'There are no breaks between classes and no school hallways! So, I have 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' [30].

Seventy percent of teachers repeatedly referred to building strong relations among students 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 students 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.

5.2. *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 online learning during the pandemic, the teachers changed their teaching methods and focused on integrating new teaching approaches and strategies. The centerpiece of this change was a transition from frontal teaching strategies, in which teachers talked and students listened, to strategies centering more on sharing, empathy for the other, and accommodation. These were perceived as teaching methods that promote SEL and help to attain the new goals. The changes were reflected in three sub-categories, as follows:

5.2.1. *Changes in Pedagogy*

All participants in the study confirmed that they had made pedagogical changes in their teaching goals. 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.

Sixty-seven percent of teachers reported having employed a cooperative-teaching strategy in small groups as a way to strengthen their students' social and emotional skills. Cooperative group work made it possible to bolster positive relations among students, acceptance of each other, acceptance of criticism, and interpersonal listening skills. Marwa, a teacher of Hebrew in a primary school, related:

'I emphasise small-group work in the course of the lesson, 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' [35].

For small-group work and in the larger classroom group, all teachers mentioned introducing digital or motion games at home in the course of online lessons as an important strategy that served several purposes. By gamifying some of the learning activities, they said, two goals were advanced: enhancing self-confidence and improving learning motivation. Rahma 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 students a game with scores that they themselves can check and correct' [27].

To pursue the goals of developing students' autodidactic ability and strengthening their interrelations—two crucial competencies in SEL in terms of the five-ability CASEL model [29]—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 reported: 'In my class, the students are given a text to read independently. I try to encourage them to acquire this skill. I let them work on their own' [33].

Hala and Rana emphasized inquisitive learning as a way to develop autodidactic abilities and strengthen interpersonal communication. Hala noted: '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' [32]. Likewise, Rana stressed the importance of developing autonomous capabilities: 'Giving assignments that require self-learning, research, searching for information they need, discovering and acquiring new knowledge' [30].

Khaled, a coordinator and teacher of electricity, said that the inquisitive-learning approach improved students' 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' [36].

Thirty percent of teachers linked autodidactic ability with problem-solving and decision-making capabilities. In their opinion, the ability to cope with a question or a problem that involves decision-making corresponded to an autodidactic skill that supported the development of SEL. The participants reported that they emphasized learning via problem-solving which led to making decisions by presenting relevant problems in class.

Yasmin, an English teacher, spoke about outcomes that surprised them in terms of their students' abilities to make decisions after they were given problem-solving assignments: 'I handed out assignments where the students had to think about a scientific problem. They worked in pairs. They had to present the problem or the dilemma to the class and propose a solution' [37].

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 to make a specific decision on the basis of the research they had done. They stunned me. Reading their compositions gave me this thrill, this wonderful feeling!' [29].

Other participants employed the 'inverted classroom' strategy to attain the same two goals considered important for intrapersonal and interpersonal SEL: enhancing self-confidence and relations among students. 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 was assigned to be prepared before the lesson, and a complementary reflective discussion took place during the lesson. This method helped 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. Ayat, a math teacher, commented:

'One of the things I brought into online learning was the inverted-classroom method. During the lesson, I gave students roles and responsibilities that entailed small portions of the material, they expressed themselves mathematically; they coped with difficult mathematical problems' [38].

Raheeq, a math teacher, 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:

'Vagueness, illnesses, death, quarantine, and distancing. I found a way to cope with all of this, humor! I started the lesson with a joke, I laughed along with my students; I laughed at myself. In some lessons I'm more a stand-up comedian than a teacher' [39].

5.2.2. Changes at the Personal Emotional Level

The participants found the period of online 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 students' fears, 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 invited my students to converse with each other while I observed and listened. They used the time to talk about how they missed each other, the classroom, the school, the free conversation was usually oral, but sometimes I turned it into a written activity by means of a digital device (a tablet)' [40].

According to Hani, the discussion enabled the students to share their personal and family ordeals and their emotions and fears. It likewise gave these fears a kind of legitimacy and provided encouragement, support, and ways of coping even when the students were in their personal space. Rana shared another example of how this space might be provided: 'It was important to begin the lesson with an emotional question to trigger an emotional and experiential discourse' [30]. The need to give the students space also resonated in the remarks of Lubna, an educational counselor: 'I searched for topics or events that attracted them' [41].

In addition to space where an emotional discourse can take place, in the course of a lesson, 63% of 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 pleasurable, and what they would want the next lessons to be like. Thus, for example, Yasmin reported: 'At the end of the lesson I asked each student to give their opinion about the lesson: Did they like it? Why didn't they like it? Did they feel at ease? I learned a lot from their answers'. Rama, a math teacher, added:

At the end of the lesson, I asked students to evaluate the lesson. In my next lessons, I added and changed things according to their comments for improvement; I showed them that their opinion mattered. That way they felt more self-confident to communicate [42].

Twenty-seven percent of 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 hardships. Where necessary, a parent attended these lessons to encourage and support their child. This created a three-way conversation: teacher, student, and parent. Anwar, a teacher of Hebrew, elaborated:

'I started the session with an emotional heart-to-heart talk and left enough time for everyone to say something. At first it was hard for students to get onto Zoom; they were afraid, gradually, they got into Zoom because they missed each other. From there we went on to synchronic discussions' [43].

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 the difficult period. Rahma commented: 'I shared my difficulties and how I coped with them with my students. It enabled me to develop their personal skills and serve as a role model' [27]. The teachers used this reciprocal sharing to legitimize and justify their students' experiences and emotions. Marwa recalled:

'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 said she couldn't because she was sitting in the kitchen. I replied I was like her sitting in the kitchen. So, she turned on her camera' [35].

Reciprocal sharing of personal experiences and emotions was also a way to encourage reticent and less participatory students to be more forthcoming about their feelings. The

teachers saw themselves as role models. Ayman spoke of having approached her students by adopting a personal tone: 'My dear students: online learning is hard for all of us, myself included. It's new to all of us and we share this hardship' [31]. Lubna, the counselor, added: 'That's my way of empathizing with them, soothing them, and alleviating their stress' [41]. Suhad, a homeroom and science teacher at a primary school, chose the strategy of maintaining an empathetic and caring relationship with her students:

'I've got my finger on the pulse at all times, checking who's attending class and who's not, and asking about those who weren't there. It took a lot of energy and time, but I felt it was more important than anything else' [44].

Lubna also shared: 'Some students felt more appreciated when I called and talked with them. I asked about their feelings and expressed my wish to see and hear them' [41]. Managing relations, following up, and maintaining communication are among the basic SEL skills that promote a healthy and constructive student–teacher relationship. Students who have adequate management skills can cope with social pressures and negotiate and handle a constructive and effective discourse. Asil, a science teacher at the primary level, noted emphatically: 'It's very important to listen to our students, very important to call them by name individually, communicating with students and parents was very helpful in releasing pressure and stress' [45].

This tripartite (teachers–students–parents) process of follow-up and communication toppled the distance barrier and gives students a sense of intimacy and companionship even as they learn remotely. At this stage, it was very important for teachers and parents to collaborate in the educational process because it facilitated teaching and learning and helped to attain objectives and success. Ayat emphasized this point:

'We as teachers, we as parents, had to be partners . . . There were certain devices that I used in my lessons, like dialogs or challenging questions. I also took a direct look at the student's hardships. I was always in contact with students and their parents, and I always asked about them' [38].

Rima expressed much the same thing: 'There were differences among the students in terms of being comfortable with how I communicated with them. Most students preferred WhatsApp because they wanted private and personal conversations. Reciprocal emotional discourse enhanced self- and social awareness and made it easier to analyze a given case, a piece of information, or an experience from different points of view, to show empathy, valorise a range of ideas and differences, and to respect others'. Ahmad, a teacher of Arabic and religion at a primary school, added: 'Sometimes I communicated with students personally and sometimes with their parents in order to make them part of the lesson' [46].

5.2.3. 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 was one of the participants who engaged in this practice. She reported:

'I imparted information to my students to instill educational values more effectively by bringing in personal examples and to deal with their bashfulness, which stemmed from the inability to keep up with the group, I had several personal meetings with five students' [31].

Alongside this flexibility, the teachers found it important to respect the students' time for the sake of effective time management and to avoid confusion. In this context, Rahma said: 'Even though we were in the midst of a period of online learning and lengthy lockdown, it didn't mean that the students were always available and that I could give them an assignment whenever I felt like it' [27].

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 they perceive their profession. Teachers inspire students and motivate them to attain and fulfill their maximum potential. This kind of teaching empowers students and encourages them to improve their educational outcomes to become better people. Along these lines, social-emotional abilities are very important for teachers because such abilities allow them to control the emotional challenges that typify this profession, solid positive teacher–student relations, assure their own well-being, and further their students' development.

According to the OECD International Summit [47], the purpose of teaching as a profession is to maximize students' abilities, capacity and aspirations. This is possible when 'teaching' is conceived as a profession that imparts professional training and enhances teachers' digital and technological skills, integrates SEL skills, and encourages students' collaboration and critical thinking. Several studies argue that the perception of teaching as a profession is extremely significant [48–50]. In addition, teachers should be trained to enable all students to fulfill their potential [47]. The significance of the perception of teaching as a profession and the way it affects students positively, particularly in times of crisis is emphasized in this study. It is hence recommended that teachers be aware of external evaluations of their profession and use the outcomes to improve students' achievements and their own teaching methods in order to support and follow up on their students' progress.

6. Discussion

This study examined the changes that the professional practice goals of Arab teachers in Israel underwent during the online-learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed major pedagogical changes on two levels:

First, the teachers under study shifted from cognitive goals involving knowledge acquisition, understanding, and thought development to emotional and social goals (SEL) mitigating stress and anxiety. In addition, they developed their students' autodidactic abilities which were also boosted by the reduced teaching hours, the limited nature of the interaction, and the need to make up study material independently that the new online-learning reality coerced. One goal that these teachers turned to in particular was to enhance students' learning motivation and to strengthen the positive relations among them. This emerged from the educational discourse that unfolded during online lessons.

Second, such changes in goals focused on the transition from classroom teaching strategies, in which teachers talked and students listened, to strategies centering more on sharing, empathy, and accommodation. These are perceived as pro-SEL teaching methods that support the attainment of the new abovementioned goals.

The findings of this study further indicated that teachers made these changes to their personal initiative as a direct response to the new online-teaching situation. They appeared to have taken full autonomous responsibility. The personal nature of such responses 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 by the education system or by school principals, but rather, they were outgrowths of genuine needs and the teachers' professional agency. Notably, the teachers enjoyed enough autonomy to set personal goals and strive to attain them by revising their teaching methods.

Moreover, the study yielded evidence of the teachers' perceptions of responsibility for their students, as manifested in their willingness to act outside of regular working hours and give personal attention to each student. This attests to the overall significance of the teaching profession and its fundamental role during a crisis, especially, the COVID-19 pandemic [51,52].

One more finding to consider is that during the COVID-19 crisis, the participants actualized their teaching as a profession without prior preparation and planning. In this respect, this was a process they initiated due to their strong perceptions of teaching as a profession. Unlike the response of the Arab education system in Israel 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 an online learning framework that the pandemic imposed on teachers everywhere. The teachers' role, too, changed rapidly and became more challenging to fulfill.

Recommendations, Limitations, and Future Research

This study makes a theoretical contribution to existing research by illuminating the importance of establishing SEL pedagogy and empowering it via advocacy. In this respect, the researchers of this study recommend advocating policies that prioritize the acknowledgment and support of school staff in addition to terms of incorporating academic interventions and accommodations. This step should go hand in hand with enhancing the teaching profession generally and in times of crisis specifically. Ministries of education worldwide should make efforts to advance teaching as a profession and internalize its significance as a liberal profession just like medicine, law, and engineering. Many studies try to advance and develop teaching toward professional status but, unfortunately, the perception of this occupation as a semi-profession persists. 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 full-fledged professionals. It fails, however, to meet other criteria, such as having a code of ethics (despite numerous attempts to write one) and producing a professional teaching community that engages in training rather than research. This might be the reason it has not been fully considered a profession yet. In addition, teaching is notable for its vague assessment in terms of ranking and professional hierarchy, its professional progress scale that is more like a flat pyramid, and its frequent lack of clarity about when a teacher is to be advanced to the next level. This only provides evidence that teaching is not viewed as a seamless profession despite the prodigious efforts made in recent years to promote it toward this status by means of research, anchoring its subject matter to literature, and establishing international standard-setting bodies. In addition to its emphasis on teaching as a profession, the present study is important for the 'Palestinian minority' in Israel, who while living in the State of Israel, is also part of the Arab world, living in a whirl of contradictions and is characterized as a society in crisis. In this sense, COVID-19 created an opportunity to investigate educational and social changes within this society that underwent a crisis, and simultaneously, offered valuable insights for handling future crises. Therefore, although this study was conducted on a sample population, it could be generalized to the population at large, particularly as its findings were consistent with SEL as a universal model, and with its pillars and core components.

It should be noted that recently, there has been a growing consensus among Israeli stakeholders and policymakers about the essentiality of integrating SEL into the curricula. In 2020, the Yozma Centre for Knowledge, Research and Education in Israel issued a summative report recommending the integration of SEL into 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 [53]. Such a 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.

To conclude, the current study was limited in terms of the snowball sampling method it employed. Still, although the sample was only partially representative reflecting *the properties of the Palestinian minority in Israel*, the population of participating teachers was diverse enough in terms of geographic location, gender, and years of work experience to

encompass representative demographic characteristics. At any rate, to make this research more inclusive, it is suggested that future research should tend to a more representative sample that includes Jewish teachers. Another recommendation is that future research should examine the response of school administrations to the COVID-19 crisis and the development of SEL processes and their cultural adaptation to various societies elsewhere.

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