

Teaching Experience Differences in Social-Emotional Aspects of Emergency Remote Teaching

Nissim Avissar

Kibbutzim College of Education, Tel-Aviv, Israel

Nissim.avissar@smkb.ac.il

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Abstract: The present mixed-method research studied the perceptions of teachers following shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT). It also examined differences between more and less experienced teachers, emphasizing their subjective interpretations of personal experiences, teachers' perspectives on students, and their views on educational relationships. An online questionnaire, specifically constructed for this purpose, explored the social-emotional dimensions of the shift to ERT. The results expose a spectrum of stances and perceptions regarding the change. Overall, the participants reported that no significant change has occurred following the transition to ERT, neither in self-perception nor in the quality of their relationships with their students. However, significant differences were found between more and less experienced teachers. In adapting to the transition, less experienced teachers reported encountering greater challenges than their more seasoned colleagues. This study explores possible links between remote (or online) teaching and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). It calls for the inclusion of social and emotional components in educational and teacher training processes. Such changes will allow better preparation and adoption of effective strategies to cope with remote-online teaching challenges.

Keywords: Covid-19, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), Israel, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Teaching experience

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted an abrupt transition to remote learning, forcing teachers to promptly adapt to a new and unfamiliar educational paradigm and acquire requisite tools for emergency remote teaching. This sudden shift had diverse educational ramification, notably impacting teachers' personal experiences and teacher-student relations.

This study examined the experiences of teachers with a specific focus on changes in their perceptions of themselves and of their students following the transition to emergency remote learning. Its objective was to examine the impact of this sudden pedagogical shift on teachers' experience and to identify differences among them, based on demographic variables and professional factors. At the theoretical level, studying the effects of the transition to emergency remote teaching and the distinctions among defined groups, was to advance understanding of the complexities inherent in the change and their implications, particularly concerning personal experiences and educational relationships. On the practical level, such insights could facilitate the incorporation of appropriate educational solutions to evolving needs within teacher training programs. It may also call for necessitating adjustments in the professional development of educators to integrate remote/online pedagogy into the broader education system.

1.1 Emergency Remote Teaching

Emergency remote teaching (ERT) relates to unplanned and temporary remote teaching. It may include educational activities that would typically take place in face-to-face or hybrid formats. Thus, ERT is a distinct type of remote teaching, that should be assessed differently (Hodges et al., 2020). Some studies examined the influences of ERT on schools' teachers and curricula (Bond, 2021). Other studies focused on the implications of ERT on student experience (Tzafilkou, Perifanou, & Economides, 2021). This study examines the self-experience and interpersonal relationships of teachers in Israel throughout the transition to ERT, employing a social-emotional learning approach. The selection of this focus stems from several compelling factors, including the necessitating conditions, such as lockdowns and social distancing measures. Furthermore, the pedagogical characteristics of this period, marked by a significant reduction in interpersonal interactions among teachers and students, alongside emergent distress agents such as loneliness, anxiety, tension, and depression. These accentuated the need for attention to social-emotional aspects in the context of ERT. The analysis of social and emotional facets of teaching serves to facilitate the restructuring of the remote learning to accentuate educational relationships, thereby fostering the wellbeing and success of both teachers and students. The findings may contribute to teacher training processes, preparing prospective educators for future ERT scenarios (and remote/online teaching in general) and fostering the development of social and emotional competencies.

1.2 Social-Emotional Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social-emotional learning (SEL) constitutes an educational approach grounded in research and practical applications, underscoring the significance of emotional, interpersonal, and social factors in fostering a successful educational process. SEL encompasses five core educational focal points: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills, and responsible decision-making, each with distinct sub-categories representing specific competencies (CASEL, 2020). The surrounding environment (or context), including the classroom, school, family, and community, is also a part of the CASEL model. The qualities of each of the circles and the way they interact is expected to influence the development of the social-emotional competencies.

At the core of SEL lies the assertion that attending to the well-being of both students and teachers is a prerequisite for holistic development, impacting various domains such as enhanced academic achievements, refined social and emotional skills, improved self-perception, favorable attitudes towards school, along with a reduction in negative behaviors, teacher stress and burnout levels (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). The cultivation of social and emotional skills in early education, particularly at the elementary level, has been identified as a predictor of future employment, economic and academic success, and physical health (Deming, 2017). Other studies found improvements in academic achievements (mathematics and reading), reductions in reported levels of hostility, aggression, and depression, as well as positive evaluations by teachers regarding students' academic skills and attentiveness (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones, Greenberg & Crowley, 2015). Moreover, SEL has been linked to the narrowing of academic and social disparities (Borman et al., 2016; Allbright et al., 2019). Intervention programs have shown particular efficacy for students identified as at-risk or experiencing behavioral challenges, narrowing down their academic lacunae (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011). Numerous studies and meta-analyses (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2016) have substantiated enhancements across these domains.

1.3 ERT, SEL and Teaching Experience

The transition to ERT has prompted educators and education researchers to investigate factors conducive to the creation of favorable Social-Emotional SEL conditions. Among these factors, the necessity for a sense of belonging and connection to a group (class or school) has emerged as a crucial element to counterbalance the challenges of social distancing and loneliness (Arslan, 2021). It is asserted that establishing quality educational connections and a sense of care contribute to students' feelings of safety and foster academic, emotional, and behavioral growth, particularly during ERT (Minahan, 2020). Recognizing the pivotal role of educators' wellbeing throughout the pandemic, Dabrowsky (2020) emphasized its influence on teacher satisfaction and productivity, on students' wellbeing and achievements. She advocates for prioritizing relationships and human connections at the core of educational practices, even preceding pedagogy.

A comprehensive literature review conducted during the pandemic (Hehir et al., 2021) identified five central contributors to the enhancement of belongingness and connectedness in remote learning conditions. Notably, teacher-student interaction, encompassing teacher presence, familiarity, and active involvement in learning processes, emerged as a significant factor. teacher-student interaction was found to influence student interaction and engagement with the educational material (Mandernach, Robertson & Steele, 2018). These relationships are inherently shaped by teacher characteristics, including individual personality characteristics, alongside demographic and professional variables.

This study aims to investigate the impact of demographic and professional variables in general and teaching experience in particular, on the quality of teacher-student connections under ERT conditions. Previous studies (e.g., Alea et al., 2020; Dewaele et al., 2018) have shown that experienced teachers faced less difficulty than novices beginning their professional track. This agrees with the commonsense assumption that experience is conducive to self-assurance while professional instability exacerbates stress and mental distress (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). At the same time, other findings indicate that less experienced (or younger) teachers have the advantage of mastering the information and communication technologies (Šabić, Baranović & Rogošić, 2021; Portillo, Garay, Tejada, & Bilbao, 2020). The underlying assumption was that gaining an understanding of these factors would influence teachers' self-perception and their perception of students, can unveil specific difficulties and contribute to identifying appropriate solutions. Hence, fostering the creation of a socially and emotionally secure learning environment for remote education. The voices of teachers are particularly significant in this context, being in the frontline of the switch to ERT and thus firsthand experiencing its challenges. Understanding their experiences will facilitate the development of theoretical and practical approaches to remote teaching and learning, emphasizing its social and emotional aspects which are not sufficiently emphasized in the relevant professional literature.

1.4 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate: (1) How teachers perceive and evaluate the implications of the transition to ERT, (2) Examining differences between more and less experienced teachers in the ways they experience themselves and their students.

2. Method

This is a mixed-method study, employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. As such it provided diverse data on the subject under investigation (Mertens, 2019).

Participants: The study comprised 154 teachers within the Israeli education system, ranging in age from 28 to 71 years ($M=44.7$, $SD=9.25$). The participants had an average teaching experience of 13 years ($SD=0.72$), with a range spanning from one to forty years. Approximately 60% of the teachers were engaged in primary school teaching, while the remaining participants were involved in post-primary school teaching.

2.1 Research Tools

An online self-report questionnaire, encompassing both closed and open-ended questions, was disseminated to the participants. The questionnaire comprised two sections outlined below. The first section featured six closed statements consisted of six closed statements concerning the transition to ERT. The statements addressed the impact of the switch on the teachers' self-experience and their relations with their students. All statements underwent refinement following expert validation. Responses were assessed on a Likert scale, where 1 denoted complete disagreement and 5 signified complete agreement. Subsequently, participants were encouraged to articulate, in their own words, how they experienced the switch to ERT, their insights or any other addition. In the second section of the questionnaire participants were asked to provide demographic and professional details, including age, gender, education, years of experience, and weekly teaching hours. The online questionnaire was distributed through various channels, including social networks—primarily Facebook—via colleagues and acquaintances engaged in education (on WhatsApp), and in M.A. and teaching specialization classrooms.

Ethics: The questionnaires were anonymous. The acquired data served exclusively for research purposes. The College ethics committee approved the research (3_2020AVI, 21/10/2020). This research received no external funding. The author declares no competing interests. Data and materials are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Data analysis: The qualitative data analysis used descriptive statistic indices (central tendency and dispersion) and inferential methods, including ANOVA and T-test. Primary (open) coding, allowing the categorization of content and views (Straus & Corbin, 1990), Served to categorize the qualitative data by content. The analysis revealed five nominal categories (see below), each representing a basic view about the switch to ERT.

3. Findings

Initially, the *quantitative* findings of the teachers' evaluation of the switch to ERT (the first research question) will be presented. The participants highly agreed with the fourth statement, relating to the increased the students' self-learning. A middle rating was given by the participants to the sixth statement referring to partnership and equality between students and teachers and to the second statement regarding a decline in the way the teachers experienced their students following the switch to remote learning. The first and the fifth statements received a low rating. The participants disagreed with the claims that the crisis caused by switching to ERT worsened their personal experience as teachers or lessened discipline and authority. Table 1 displays the averages and SDs of the participants' agreement with each of the statements.

Table 1: Participants' remote teaching experience: Averages and standard deviations (N=154)

Statement	Average	SD
(1) The switch to remote teaching negatively affected my teaching experience	2.53	1.12
(2) The switch to remote teaching negatively affected my relations with the students	3.00	1.11
(3) The switch to remote teaching increased the behavioral challenges I encounter in my work	2.71	1.21
(4) The switch to remote teaching increased my students' self-learning	3.87	0.99
(5) The switch to remote teaching emphasized elements of authority and discipline in my teaching	2.51	1.01
(6) The switch to remote teaching emphasized elements of equality and cooperation between me and my students	3.21	1.05

Teaching experience differences (research question 2) were examined next. The participants were divided into three groups: (1) 0-5 years of experience; (2) 6-15 years of experience; (3) Over 16 years of experience. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) yielded the findings presented in Table 2. They indicate significant differences between the three teachers' groups following the switch to remote learning concerning personal experience, experience with the students, and changes in self-learning. The experiences of younger teachers emerged as worse than those of the more experienced ones, and the reported difference became smaller with experience. The more experienced teachers agreed more than their younger colleagues with the statement that the switch to remote learning strengthened the students' self-learning elements.

Table 2: Participants' experience of the switch to remote learning by teaching years (N=154): Averages and standard deviations

Statement		Teaching experience			
		Up to 5 years	6-15 years	Over 16 years	F
1. The switch worsened my teaching experience	Average	2.97	2.56	2.25	4.08*
	SD	(1.13)	(1.11)	(1.08)	
2. The switch damaged my experience with the students	Average	3.43	3.07	2.65	5.19**
	SD	(1.01)	(1.03)	(1.20)	
3. The switch increased the behavioral challenges I encounter in my work	Average	2.97	2.69	2.60	.90
	SD	(1.35)	(1.15)	(1.23)	
4. The switch increased my students' self-learning	Average	3.47	3.89	4.08	3.73*
	SD	(1.22)	(.90)	(.93)	
5. Following the switch elements of authority and discipline were emphasized in my teaching	Average	2.53	2.53	2.46	.08
	SD	(1.04)	(.84)	(1.23)	
6. Following the switch elements of elements of equality and collaboration were emphasized in my teaching	Average	3.27	3.18	3.21	.07
	SD	(1.14)	(.89)	(1.21)	
N		30	72	52	

Lastly, a two-way analysis of variance did not yield a statistically significant interaction effect.

55 descriptive replies were provided and analyzed *qualitatively* (content analysis). Five major categories were identified, representing five different reactions and stands towards the switch. Each of them emphasizes a specific quality of personal experience or interpersonal relations. Together, they shed light on various aspects of SEL during the ERT period. The five categories and their frequencies are presented below, in figure 1.

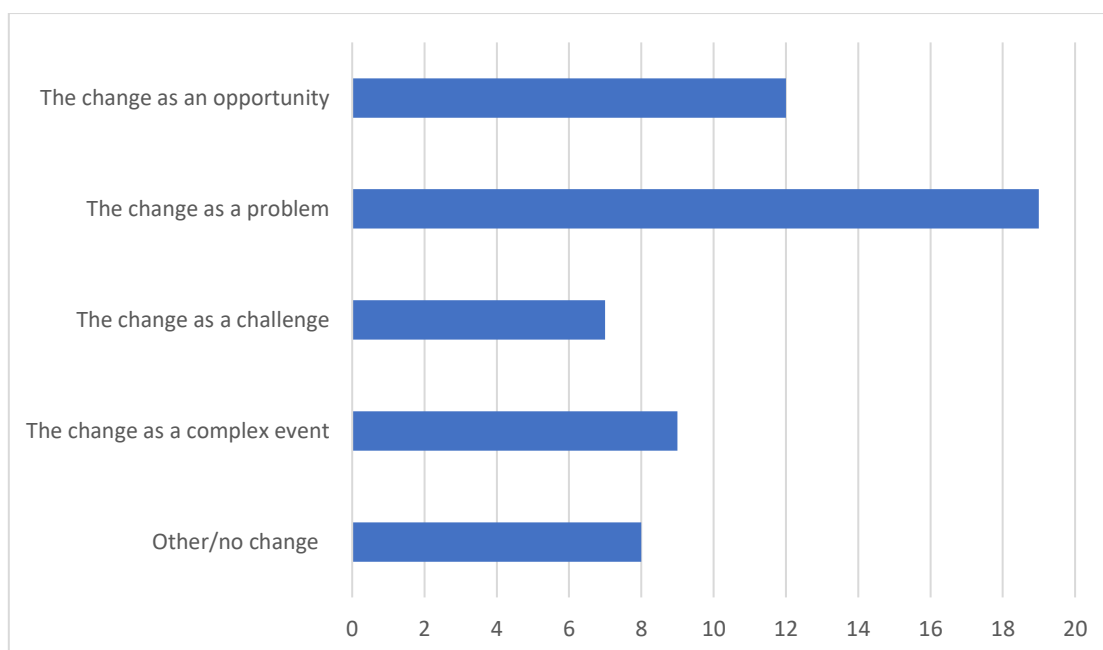


Figure 1: Incidence of the descriptive reactions by categories

As shown, the participants tended to view the switch to ERT in an unfavorable way, as an unwelcome change. Many of them emphasized that it was challenging or raised new complexities. Such responses stress the perceived effort and load the teachers experienced. Examples of descriptive replies in each of the categories are presented below.

The change as an opportunity: These replies indicated that the change was viewed as an opportunity to improve processes: "Developing the students' self-management skills, enhancing the students' research skills, more flexible thinking in teachers, teachers and students step out of their comfort zones." Many participants felt that the shift strengthened their connection with their students and their families: "the closer connection with the families during this period increased my cooperation with the parents and the students." Thus, the shift contributed to a sense of cooperation and reciprocal relationships with the students, or "Greater mutual closeness." Since this category received a relatively high number of reactions, one can assume that it reflects a relatively common stand towards remote teaching, viewing it as an opportunity.

The change as a problem: Here, expressions of concern for both the students' and the teachers' wellbeing were stressed: "Acute damage to children whose home is unstable and non-supportive. The teacher is helpless." Some reactions expressed emotional distress following the shift: "The distance from the class, the same beat, warmth, and activity often fill me with despair. My self-value has decreased." Such reactions express the perceived challenges educators had to cope with, initially without a satisfactory response. The described difficulties stemmed from the gap between the teachers' needs and expectations and actual reality. As mentioned, this category received the highest number of reactions, expressing the widespread difficulty many teachers experienced following the shift.

The change as a challenge: Here, the respondents saw the switch as an opportunity for a wider personal, pedagogical, or educational change. Therefore, the dominant stance here tended to be more involved and motivated: "Remote learning is definitely challenging. First, it is different, and one must learn how to negotiate this ground. The children must learn this, and so must I [...] It is possible to create a good and protective atmosphere, consolidate the class, and advance the students even from a distance." Some participants emphasized the social aspects of the change and the ways it impacted interpersonal relations: "It is more difficult to create a personal relationship with them, but once this is achieved, it is better." Other comments focused on pedagogical challenges: "It requires diversifying the teaching methods. It requires being attentive to the students [...] It requires developing tools to understand where a student has difficulty and come up with solutions to narrow the gap." The relatively small number of reactions to this category may indicate a more general difficulty to maintain a complex view of the situation (of sudden and undesirable change).

The change as a complex event: A complex perception of the situation allowed for important distinctions to be identified and dealt with: "The class is divided. Some students really enjoy remote learning, manage their time well, can study independently, and make good progress. Other students need to regain their previous routine. They are unable to concentrate in remote circumstances and are lost." Other participants focus on gaps in students' self-learning capabilities: "strong students who have already developed independent learning skills enjoy their benefits and adapt well to remote learning. Weaker students enter the online lesson to show they are present and then go on sleeping or doing things other than learning. Average students sometimes also tend to slack in remote learning." Some comments stressed that such gaps parallel socioeconomic disparities affecting students' and teachers' wellbeing. The comments in this category stress the need to train teachers for differential teaching and develop their personalized education abilities. This will help narrow the widening educational gaps in ERT.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the qualitative research components concerning consequent changes to the switch to ERT showed that no damage was caused to the teachers' self-perception. Further, the teachers did not exercise more authoritarian discipline towards their students. Indeed, many of them felt that relationships became closer and more reciprocal. However, the switch to ERT seem to increase the need for students' self-learning. Some of them were negatively affected by the changing learning conditions. Consequently, their achievements dropped comparing to their peers who had more resources and better support at home. Consequently, teachers sensed that educational gaps were broadening following the switch. Research confirms that such gap broadening has indeed happened (Engzell, Frey & Varhagen, 2020; Blundell et al., 2020). Preparing teachers for similar future changes, may create better conditions for all teachers and students to succeed. That is, for equal opportunities and narrowing educational gaps. For this to happen, teacher training programs need to incorporate in their curricula specific components dedicated to developing students' self-regulated learning skills (Carter Jr et al., 2020). Such training may also cover differential teaching and individual tutoring (Tsilitzky et al., 2020). In any case, SEL skills would allow teachers and student teachers to successfully cope with the unique challenges of remote teaching.

Another noteworthy finding regards the significant differences in the self-perception and the perception of students between novice and experienced teachers. Novice teachers reported a more significant change to the worse in these aspects than experienced ones. Their perception of themselves and their students tended to be negative. They struggled to see the switch as an opportunity for development and contended with significant difficulties. To improve their coping with emergency and routine disruptions while maintaining a sense of self-efficacy, their training should attend to and offer an appropriate response for these points.

The qualitative analysis highlights some of the risks teachers encountered as well as the opportunities they identified in the new and unexpected situation. A substantial number of comments conveyed a perception that the transition to ERT represented a deleterious shift, constituting the most prevalent category with 19 comments. Additionally, a noteworthy portion of the statements addressed the challenge of adapting to the change, as evidenced by seven comments, and struggling with the intricacies of the novel situation, as indicated by nine comments. A discernible disparity emerged between "the change as a problem" category, characterized by expressions of distress, frustration, and a sense of external locus of control, and the other two categories – "the change as a challenge" and "the change as a complex event" (eight comments each), which manifested a heightened capacity and confidence. Nevertheless, the comments encompassing these three categories collectively constituted an overwhelming majority, signifying some degree of unsatisfied need or distress. Arguably, the difficulty might have originated, in part, from the agile and unpredictable changes during this period, vis-à-vis the expectations, skills, and work patterns of the teachers. Bridging this gap could be facilitated through teacher training and professional development processes.

The findings substantiate the proposition that a primary impediment in transitioning to ERT lay in the social-emotional domain. This requires an adaptation to the changing reality as well as a flexible approach towards existing instructional paradigms. At a theoretical level, these findings underscore the interconnectedness of remote teaching and SEL. Contrary to common perception, which often construes these terms as representing two divergent educational approaches, they synergistically complement each other in this context. Consequently, it is necessary to incorporate social and emotional components within the framework of remote learning processes to enhance their efficacy. This integration should be embedded in teacher training programs, throughout the duration of teachers' professional development, and, notably, in the pedagogical engagement with students. The absence of these components is expected to lead to an escalation of difficulties during ERT and remote teaching in general. This process exhibits a reciprocal nature, as online tools can potentially foster

the social-emotional dimensions of both educators and learners. This conclusion is supported, in part, by the analysis of the verbal comments emphasizing the positive aspects of the switch. According to this perspective, online teaching and learning embody new opportunities, particularly comparing to traditional teaching, learning, and evaluation approaches. It is responsive to diversity, fostering better conditions for the wellbeing and success of a diverse array of students and educators. Subsequent research endeavors could elucidate the interrelations between remote teaching and SEL and contribute to the formulation of an integrative theory for both domains. While the quantitative components facilitated the identification of broad trends, they fell short in enabling more nuanced observations that could carry substantive implications. Simultaneously, the qualitative elements offered a preliminary insight into the personal experiences of participants; however, they did not afford an in-depth exploration of these experiences. The incorporation of in-depth interviews holds promise for unveiling a more detailed and comprehensive experiential spectrum.

5. Conclusions

Differences in the teaching experience variable, as substantiated by participants' free-style comments, affirm the notion that teachers' challenges encompass both personal (emotional) and interpersonal (social) dimensions. It is imperative for teacher training programs to address these challenges, which have become more pronounced with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic but are not exclusive to this period. With the growing and widespread use of distant learning, it is imperative to train teachers to navigate intricate personal and interpersonal situations, while cultivating essential skills such as emotional management, empathy, and responsible decision-making. Integrating these fundamental aspects of SEL into teacher training can enhance teaching-learning-evaluation processes, particularly within the realm of online learning, in a constantly changing reality. Emphasizing these components in teacher training stands to enhance the wellbeing of both educators and students, thereby improving the overall educational climate. In an era marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, the reciprocal influences of personal experiences and interpersonal relations assume great significance. Strengthening these elements would empower educators to facilitate stable and self-assured teaching in uncertain and unpredictable conditions. This, in turn, can inspire the cultivation of similar capacities in students through modeling and direct learning of social-emotional skills by their teachers.

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