Professional Crisis or Temporary Burnout? Teacher's Experiences Towards the End of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Various studies were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic on teachers' experiences and feelings during the abrupt shift to remote learning; however, the prolonged effects of the pandemic on teachers in Israel have not been examined. The present study was conducted towards the end of the pandemic, during the last (and, so far, final) wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel. This wave was characterized by the resumption of in-person classroom teaching or hybrid teaching and refraining from imposing lockdowns. For this study, interviews were conducted with 58 elementary school teachers. Analysis of the interviews reveals a profound rupture in the teachers' sense of efficacy, stemming from numerous changes, an upsurge in emotional and social problems among children, and teachers' skills being only partially suited to the situation. As stated by the teachers, it seems that role frustration and a rising tendency to leave the education system express the need for long-term change in the teaching profession. An analysis of findings is provided from the perspective of theories of organizational engagement and employee competence. Recommendations are proposed concerning teachers' future professional development processes.

Keywords: teachers, post Covid 19, teachers' engagement, employee competence

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when lockdowns were imposed and learning and teaching were conducted remotely, several studies were carried out on the effects of the new situation on teachers' emotional, physical, and pedagogical aspects (e. g., Bornstein, 2020; D'Mello, 2020; Presley & Spinazzola, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021). The effects of having to contend with a new, challenging, and complex reality led to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other adverse effects. However, the long-term effects of the changes in the education system have not been comprehensively examined. Fan et al. (2021) state that "many studies have analyzed the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in different populations […] however, so far, there has not been any particular study on educators" (p. 915). Very few studies have focused on discovering the effects on teachers during the pandemic, and hardly any have investigated the ongoing effects of the pandemic on them. This study attempts to fill the knowledge gap by examining the pandemic's long-term consequences and implications on teachers.

This study was conducted in the winter of 2022, towards the end of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel. During this period, the schools resumed their activities, Israeli government policies prevented new lockdowns from being imposed, and the pandemic began to subside slowly. Teachers continued in-person classroom teaching, combined with hybrid teaching (for students who had to stay home due to illness or isolation). This period was attended by an array of difficulties resulting from having to contend with returning to school after two years of remote teaching, the student's emotional and social problems, and the acute overload the teachers experienced. Interviews with teacher focus groups enabled analysis of various factors that affected their emotional and physical state during this period, the level of burnout, their sense of self-efficacy, and commitment to the organization.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

The importance of the study stems from the fact that it is among the few studies up to this time examining the long-term impact of the epidemic on the feelings of teaching staff. Another significant contribution lies in the potential to expand the explanations given for the dissatisfaction of teachers and the abandonment of some of them from the education system.

1.3 Material Studied

To address teachers' feelings or mental health, we must also consider their student's well-being. Several studies examined the pandemic effects on children and adolescents. Some of these effects resemble post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Trauma has been defined as "events that overwhelm a person's ability to adapt to life, leading to strong negative emotions that are associated with the degree of experienced or witnessed threat to self or others" (Blaustein, 2013, p. 4).

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted most of the essential routines in the lives of children and adolescents; it was attended by isolation from friends, greater parental involvement in their children's lives (due to constantly being at home), and financial and health crises, and even the loss of relatives. Consequently, children's sense of well-being was undermined, and there was an upsurge in various psychological disorders (Bornstein, 2020; Presley & Spinazzola, 2020; Skinner et al., 2021). Spending less time with friends, coupled with an increase in opportunities for parental control over adolescents' activities during the pandemic, runs counter to the typical course of development of adolescents and young adults, which is usually characterized by parents granting greater autonomy, and greater exposure to the influence of their contemporaries (Skinner et al., 2021; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). In addition, since the mental health of children and adolescents depends on the resilience of their families and communities, global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupt family activities and routines in various ways, have an adverse effect on their mental state (Bornstein, 2020).

Various studies found a connection between the pandemic and a considerable increase in self-reported pathological mental health issues among parents and young adults. A survey of parents and adolescents from five countries showed that more than half of the young adults reported an increase in anxiety or sadness during the pandemic (Skinner et al., 2021).

Some researchers engaged with the treatment principles for the crises that typified the pandemic. Collin-Vézina et al. (2020) argued that trauma-informed care principles are suitable for working with children during the pandemic. They recommended applying principles such as trustworthiness and transparency, safety; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment and choice; and engaging with cultural, historical, and gender issues. Other researchers warn against the potential long-term psychological effects of pandemic-related anxieties on children and adolescents. For instance, Presley and Spinazzola (2020) found that 25% of parents and 14% of children suffered a decline in mental health or behavioral problems during the first three months of the pandemic, i.e., between March and June 2020.

A study examining the prevalence and intensity of PTSD among school teachers in China during the pandemic found that the prevalence of PTSD associated with the pandemic was 12.3% (Kukreti et al., 2021). Another study, conducted one year into the pandemic, examined the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and PTSD among teachers and found that the participants reported high-stress levels associated with being a teacher, high levels of fear regarding the transmission of Covid-19 in the school setting, and high levels of anger about the education system's policies and decisions concerning the pandemic (D'Mello, 2020). The teachers' feelings of stress were caused as a consequence of lost social support due to death/change in family status; lower annual household income; lower rating of mental/emotional health during the pandemic; more significant changes for the worse in physical/psychological health during the pandemic; significant symptoms of mental health disorders during the pandemic; and lower levels of social support/smaller number of people providing it. Qualitative data showed that the teachers' most stressful experiences during the pandemic were coping with overwhelming and varied feelings, new challenges in teaching; having to teach for many more hours; and being perceived as blameworthy (D'Mello, 2021; Fan et al., 2021).

1.3.1 Teacher Burnout and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Burnout is a persistent negative emotional state characterized by a general feeling of psychological discomfort and low self-esteem, motivation, and professional commitment. It occurs as a result of prolonged stress caused by the professional environment. Burnout syndrome manifests in three main dimensions: cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and low self-efficacy (Sánchez-Pujalte et

al., 2021).

Examination of teachers' self-efficacy (TSE) reveals three subcomponents: efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management, and efficacy in student engagement (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). As a rule, teachers with high self-efficacy tend to see a stronger connection between implementing effective teaching on their part and improved student results. Such teachers are more likely to experiment with new teaching methods and show more significant commitment to the profession (Cardullo et al., 2021; Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

The Covid-19 pandemic led to changes in all the above three aspects, which affect TSE: teaching methods changed – teachers had to teach remotely or by a hybrid model; classroom management changed – teachers shifted to virtual classrooms, small groups, or the inclusion of home-schooled children; and student engagement in lessons and school life changed too – as a result of the effects of the pandemic and distancing on the student's emotional state.

Initial studies on TSE during the pandemic indicate that many teachers experienced a decline in their sense of self-efficacy and an increase in their understanding of stress and burnout (Pellerone, 2021; Rabaglietti et al., 2021). For example, remote teaching had a considerable impact on TSE – on the one hand, teachers noted the challenges they faced in teaching remotely, e.g., equality between students is one of the main challenges and disadvantages stated in their responses. Inequality ranges from insufficient resources, e.g., a computer or internet access, differences in parental support for the child, and gaps between sub-populations. On the other hand, many teachers stated that remote teaching and learning could benefit sub-groups due to the reduced influence of peer pressure and fewer distractions (Cardullo et al., 2021). Another exciting finding pertains to the effect of the form of teaching on TSE during the pandemic. Teachers who only taught remotely reported the lowest sense of efficacy and engagement, followed by teachers who taught in a hybrid model. Teachers who taught in person reported the highest sense of efficacy and engagement (Pressley & Ha, 2021).

Dickson (2010) highlights the difference between low effectiveness resulting from the employee's lack of competence or knowledge and the lack of organizational engagement. According to him, an effective performance management system should distinguish between the two. As we will see below, making this diagnosis among teachers is not simple since the lack of knowledge required to deal with the situation affects organizational connectedness and repeats itself.

Levkovich and Ricon (2020) found compassion fatigue among school counselors. In their study, "Compassion fatigue" (p. 159) refers to a mental state where a person's compassion and empathy towards others, and efforts to ease their pain, may harm their ability to empathize and tolerate the intensity of the other's suffering. The researchers claim that secondary traumatic stress can be viewed as a natural behavioral and emotional reaction to exposure to traumatic events experienced by others. Their findings show that 50% of the participants in their study reported experiencing compassion fatigue, 40% reported burnout, and 24% reported secondary traumatic stress. However, 57% reported satisfaction from assisting others.

This review reveals that most studies focused on how teachers teach and their perceived efficacy. The present study also engages teachers' perceptions of their ability to deal with student's emotional and social state, parent-child interactions, and work-life balance at the end of the last wave of the pandemic.

1.4 Research Questions

1) To what extent has the pandemic affected the mental well-being of teachers?

2) To what extent has the pandemic affected teachers' sense of self-efficacy?

3) Has the pandemic impacted teachers' perception of the teaching profession and willingness to persevere?

2. Methods

The study sought to examine teachers' perceptions of teaching towards the end of the pandemic and the complexity of contending with the changes in teaching methods, the state of the students, and the sense of self-efficacy attending to these changes.

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design based on exploring the authentic experiences of the participants using observations or in-depth inquiry (Zahavi, 2021). Analysis of the data was based on the principles of grounded theory. This approach does not impose a thesis or research question on the studied field but uses the knowledge emerging from the field to build a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The findings were categorized into various themes by the frequency and intensity of the respondents' responses.

The findings' analysis was carried out according to the stages of the grounded theory. Coding text and theorizing:

The search for the theory anchored in the field begins with the initial analysis of the studied text. The text in the current study was divided into sections according to key phrases. These sections were then divided into conceptual components and, from there, were divided according to the headings that appear in the research findings.

Memoing and theorizing: current drawings derived from the initial conceptual components were used later in the field research to register, validate, or disqualify these components.

Integrating, refining, and writing up theories: The different components that arose from the field were combined into a concept or theory that deals with explaining the observed phenomenon. Thus, on page 9, as well as on page 18.

2.1 Participants Characteristics

Eight elementary schools were selected to participate in the study. The schools were chosen by socioeconomic status (high/medium/low) and population sector (Jewish/Arab). A focus group comprising four to fifteen teachers was conducted in each school. The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 62, and seniority in teaching went from one year to 37 years. Fifty-seven of the participants were women, and one was a man.

2.2 Research Tools

The study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The participants were interviewed about their feelings as teachers and about varied issues related to the periods of returning to school. The questions were:

1) What was it like for you to return to school from the teaching and emotional, physical, and family aspects?

2) Do you feel the effects of the protracted lockdowns on yourself? On the students?

3) Describe the challenges you have faced since the school year's start. Describe the transition to in-person classroom teaching in terms of discipline, students' adjustment to in-person classroom learning, and social and emotional aspects.

4) Describe your sources of support (colleagues, school counselor, school principal, home, environment); who 'holds you, recharges you, serves as a source for consultation, and so forth? What kind of support do you receive?

5) Describe your teamwork nowadays (hierarchy in the team, change in power relations, new and veteran teachers, and so forth).

6) Do you believe in your ability to contend with students experiencing difficulties? And in your ability to provide adapted differentiated instruction?

7) Do you believe in your ability to convey the required material to the relevant age group?

8) Do you believe in the ability of the school staff to perform its function and promote the students as required?

9) Do you believe in your ability to maintain an optimal emotional connection with your students?

10) Describe the figure of the post-Covid teacher in your view (knowledge, skills, values).

11) Do you intend to remain in the profession?

12) Would you recommend teaching as a profession to your friends? Why?

3. Results

It was found that the feelings of the teachers were adverse. There is a significant workload resulting from the diversity of procedural demands on the part of the system, the lack of restrictions on working hours, the breaking of the boundaries between work and home, and the professional challenge they face during this period. The teachers are supported mainly by the other teachers close to them or family members but less by their principals, the management team, or the educational system. The teachers also feel that the general public does not appreciate their contribution. In addition, at the professional level, the need to continue striving for curricular achievements is perceived as a burden.

3.1 Constant Sense of Overload due to Changes in the Form of Teaching and the School's Operation

Most teachers in the study reported fatigue and burnout as their predominant feelings. They felt overwhelmed by the numerous changes. The teachers were required to keep attendance records, maintain regular contact with students in isolation, conduct a dialogue with parents to ensure all students were being tested, and, at times, combine in-person classroom teaching with online teaching (Zoom). Teachers who also filled administrative

roles were required to contend with frequent changes in lesson schedules due to teacher absences and to maintain a never-ending jigsaw puzzle.

> *"I'm exhausted from the daily changes that aren't part of the job […] I find myself more of a clerk than a teacher" (Hillit), "I spend most of the day on attendance sheets/handing out testing kits/talking to parents […] The parents don't always perform the pandemic test. I have to contact them to ensure they follow the instructions […] we're not in a fully trusting place with the parents and the system" (Shifra).*

Additionally, most respondents have children and felt they had to manage the "fight" against Covid-19 at home and divide their time between contending with it at school and home. This feeling was also attended by an absence of boundaries between work at school and personal home life – mainly due to the need to manage the crisis throughout most of the hours of the day, and a blurring of boundaries between public and private space, which began with the first lockdowns when teachers taught from their homes via Zoom.

> *"We're also mothers, my children are in isolation, and you're expected to come to work as if it's business as usual, and I can't leave little children at home on their own. I felt I was being pushed into a corner; I felt torn" (Mika)," There are no boundaries - with the Zoom sessions, there was an immediate blurring of the teacher's borders between work and home; I find myself constantly required to respond to the parents" (Nur).*

> *"As a new teacher, I feel tired; I don't know what it was like before – I'm exhausted from having to prepare different lessons by Zoom or in-person, an overload of information on the WhatsApp groups, and multiple changes" (Renana).*

The sense of overload was also attended by uncertainty and constant changes, which added to the importance of burnout – the classroom changed its appearance daily (as students went into/came out of isolation). Teachers struggled to maintain teaching continuity or contact with their students. Additionally, communication with colleagues (discussed below) did not continue as before, thus depriving teachers of the possibility of receiving professional or personal support from their peer group.

> *"Chaos every day, a different number of children turn up, and there's chaos in their homes too (Hillit)," "Confusion – between covid confirmed kids and kids who aren't half the class is in isolation, half isn't, there are gaps between students, uncertainty - are there or aren't their lessons, will this child turn up or not" (Maram), "were Stressed all the time, we don't have a chance to speak to each other, exchange information, or get advice – only sometimes, for a short period… (Juma).*

The last aspect that contributed to the teachers' harsh feelings was the perceived attitude of the education system and the public toward their functioning. They felt their vast investment was not sufficiently appreciated by the public, who thought they should contribute even more and forgo vacation days to compensate for gaps in the studied material. At the same time, the "system," i.e., the Ministry of Education or the school principals, sought to address the gaps that had formed during the protracted learning period via Zoom. Consequently, the demands placed on the teachers did not decrease. Some study participants felt that this insistence on maintaining full school routines came at the expense of their health, given the possibility of contracting Covid-19.

> *"No consideration is given to the overload; the demands are the same; they want us to teach as if nothing's changed [….] We're presented unfavorably in the media as if we're not investing as if we're not pulling our weight […] The media doesn't show the everyday difficulties; ostensibly, everything's gone back to normal, but we know things haven't gone back to normal (Michael)", "In the media, it's like there's an all-out campaign against the teachers, like we're the enemy of the system, when in practice, we're experiencing difficulties, quarreling with the parents, finding it challenging to teach, there isn't a dull moment, messages late into the night (Lihi).*

3.2 Role Frustration

A considerable proportion of the interviewed teachers feel that their role has changed substantially. The change has occurred in various aspects of the teacher's role and professional identity. The main elements that have changed are the emotional relationship with students, the teaching methods, a sense of success and efficacy in the role, and the interface with parents.

The following figure (Figure 1) demonstrates the teachers' main areas of role frustration. The mentioned regions are interconnected. For example, teachers' teaching methods became obsolete because of the changing relationships with the child/the alienation felt by teachers and students due to social distancing, which affected the student's trust in the teacher and their willingness to attend school. The declining sense of teachers' efficacy affected the teaching methods - The teachers had to lower their expectations of the students due to their

emotional state and changed their teaching methods accordingly. Similarly, the partnership with the parents became essential to harness the student to learning, but this relationship deteriorated over time - the parents did not cooperate with the teachers as expected. This factor had a recurring effect on the teachers' competence.
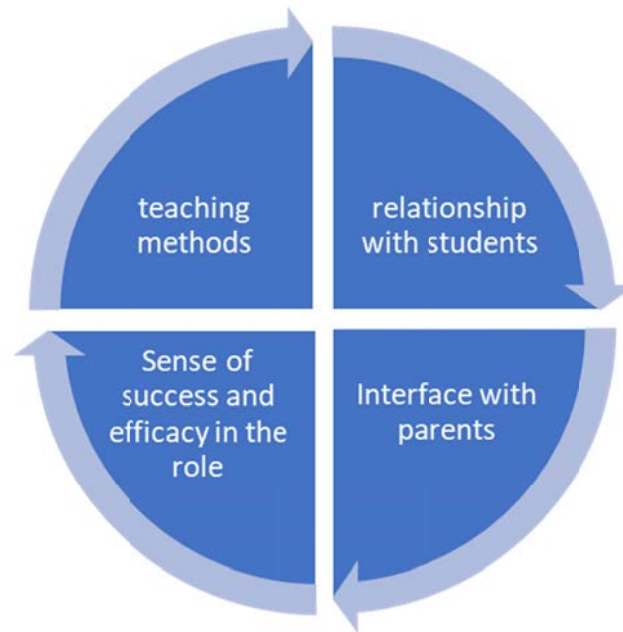

Figure 1. Areas of change in the teacher's role

3.2.1 Role Frustration: Emotional Connections with Students

First, the teachers were asked about their impressions of the students' functioning upon returning to school after two years of Zoom classes (or absence from kindergarten due to lockdowns). The overall feeling was that they are "different children" whose emotional and social functioning has changed considerably, and not always for the better. Thus, the teachers focused on addressing emotional and social aspects much more than they did in the past and on re-instilling basic learning skills that the children have lost.

Loss of learning skills

"Emotional instability is evident among the children – it's difficult for them to return to the routine of school, to sit for long periods, and learning habits have to be re-instilled [...] Children who've come from kindergarten are unsettled – it's hard for them to sit and learn, they can't sit for very long, even on Zoom they're constantly fidgeting, getting up and leaving. I can't focus [...] They're learning, but I have to deal with discipline a lot" (Galit).

Dealing with emotional aspects

"I'm occupied with the emotional aspect – the children aren't concentrated" (Hagit), "It's tough to teach the children, they are distracted, there are much more attention and concentration problems [...] The children who started first grade – they're different in terms of emotional maturity – are more childish and don't know how to conduct themselves socially, which applies to all grades" (Ahlam).

Difficulty maintaining ongoing emotional and scholastic connections with students

"Maintaining contact with sick or absent children is challenging; I lost touch with them during the current wave" (Shira), "Maintaining contact with the children is problematic; you're drowning in the number of children who don't turn up" (Nepal).

Dealing with social aspects

"The children have lost basic social skills. Before Covid, I felt that the playground enabled them to meet and experience problem-solving. It's harder for them to solve problems, and they have a lower frustration threshold [...] Class group-building is practically nonexistent because there isn't any

structure in the class, there's no classroom and no social core – one day, these children are absent. The next those children are absent" (Rinat).

Some teachers responded by putting learning aside, extensively engaging with the emotional aspect, and improving the students' well-being.

"I only address the children's emotions, to help the children feel good within all this chaos, to give the children a safe and pleasant place – not teaching properly [...] We use the arts and crafts, the children enjoy it more" (Shifra), "We must put considerable emphasis on emotional dialogue and what the students are going through, and less on the curriculum" (Mika).

Nevertheless, some teachers feel that in-person learning is essential. In contrast, others would instead return to Zoom because all the students can attend and ae a lower risk of infection.

3.2.2 Role Frustration: Role Efficacy and Success

Many teachers admit that skills that served them well in the past now provide a less successful solution in the classroom. They feel frustrated because they cannot teach the material according to lesson plans and the curriculum – due to the student's emotional state, disrupted learning habits, and the constantly changing composition of students in the classroom.

"We're not teaching. There's no way to teach the material as we should [...] I conduct emotional discussions many times at the expense of learning time. We stop and deal with other things to solve a problem or something emotional" (Renana), "We feel we're in a place without boundaries or walls – children are here today, absent tomorrow, it's impossible to keep track of their learning, the students are different emotionally, present and not present, parents have given up – you don't know where to go or what to do" (Kohav).

Some teachers claim that as a consequence of the situation, they have had to "lower expectations," teach students at a lower level, use different teaching techniques, and adapt them to the current situation.

The math curriculum has changed; the motivation of the 12-14-year-old students is very low, there's a lot less motivation and lower attendance in the class, and students have to be motivated differently. It's not enough to teach and memorize. I'm also lowering the level of learning and understanding required; I'm trying to set the bar at a lower level" (Chen), "We don't feel we can teach the material according to age group – the gaps are just too significant, especially in big classes [...] My attitude has changed; I'm easier on the students and warmer. It helps encourage them to return to school, so they'll be more connected to learning [...] It's different from how it was before; we're not as strict about the little things as we were" (Noy).

Some teachers stated that they lack the knowledge required to deal with the student's emotional and social needs. They maintained that they are not trained to deal with these aspects and have never dealt with them on this scale.

"Regarding the social aspect, I feel I have the tools to help the children, but when it comes to the personal emotional level, not so much; I'm not a psychologist or a counselor" (Eden), "It's not like someone guides me or tells me how to deal with the children's emotional aspects; I act from my experience if I have any [...] It's tough for us; we know how to deal with learning gaps or learning habits, but dealing with mental problems is hard; we don't have the training, and we can act from our general experience, but that doesn't always work" (Kohav).

On the other hand, the class sometimes constitutes an emotional anchor for the children, and the teachers feel that the students benefit from being at school.

"On the other hand, in the higher grades, there's a powerful desire to attend school – especially from a social standpoint, and they come to class willingly, the classroom serves as their main anchor; they're hardly ever absent" (Rina).

In summary, many teachers said that the change left them feeling that their skills as teachers do not adequately respond to the current gaps between learners. As one teacher sums up*: "I feel like I'm not good enough, nothing is clear, at one time I feel adequate, but right after that I'm not good enough" (Eden).*

It is important to note, however, that a small minority of the teachers view the change as an opportunity for professional learning and revitalization:

"All the conventions and norms that we knew are in disarray. We have to manage the educational institution differently – it's a beautiful opportunity to introduce new things into the system [...] some

students want to stay at home, and it's a challenge to make them come back – a challenge that's good for me" (Shifra).

3.3 The Interface with Parents

Managing the relationships with the parents is a significant part of the teacher's work, from enlisting parents to help the teacher contend with the student's motivation to recruiting parents to participate in the student's learning – help with homework, provide private tutoring, or psychological and psychiatric treatment. Most teachers felt the "contract" between teachers and parents had changed during the last wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some teachers claim that relationships improved, and the contract with parents has become more substantial due to the situation. In contrast, others point to gaps in communication that impact their functioning and success as teachers.

"The relationships have changed for the better because we contacted each child during the Zoom period and talked to their parents. Also, the parents took part in the learning on Zoom, which enabled them to understand how difficult the teacher's work is and identify with them" (Rivka), "Some parents ask for the school's help – it happens more because of more difficulties and creates a closer and better connection" (Gurit).

However, for some teachers, Enlisting parents' participation and partnership was challenging. These teachers felt as though they had been abandoned on the battlefield.

"Some parents can't cope with ensuring their child's learning […] The parents have given up; they're chasing after their livelihood and find it hard to manage the students' learning" (Shir), "The parents are on edge because of the situation and all the changes, and they don't always understand the system's needs – they are emotionally overwhelmed because of the situation, and sometimes they take it out on me" (Ziva), "We have to quarrel with the parents to make them perform the covid tests. (Mika).

The last aspect that troubled the interviewed teachers significantly was the issue of parents crossing boundaries in teacher-parent interactions.

"The parents crossed boundaries – calling us twenty-four hours a day, at unearthly hours, voice messages in the middle of the night, everyone needs to undergo a re-education program and become reaccustomed to the system's routines – teachers have boundaries" (Juma), "Parents crossed the line, asking the same questions over and over, even after I've given them answers, daily battles with the parents to perform the covid test or make the child wear a mask. Some parents even asked me to call and wake up their child who doesn't want to get out of bed" (Nepal).

3.4 Change in Teaching Methods

The teachers were asked about the leading educational challenge they are currently facing. Most of them spoke about several aspects:

First is the ability to maintain the students' regular attendance and engagement at school:

The challenge is for the children who don't regularly attend to keep them in the picture and pester their parents to push them to participate in lessons on Zoom. (Ziva)

"Keeping children in the picture, children who are getting lost, and also got lost and didn't learn last year […] To make it fun, not only studying, it's essential to draw them back to school" (Shifra).

Second, the need to give the students a sense of confidence and constancy in the crisis they are experiencing:

"My job is to maintain a framework of some kind for the children, a safe place that gives the children a sense of safety and calm, that everything is functioning correctly" (Dana).

And, as stated, the need to maintain essential learning habits, as well as primary social connections:

"Returning to instill learning habits, form social connections, instill communication skills, help restore reactions that fit the situation, and go back to basics – how to learn, how to sit, and how to behave" (Dalia).

However, when they were asked about their future needs as professionals, somewhat different aspects emerged, which, in our view, are more critical and long-term. The change that occurred in the teachers' perceptions of their needs as professionals expresses, in our opinion, a profound rupture in the teacher's role.

3.4.1 Ability to Contend with Heterogeneity in Student Levels (Differentiated Instruction)

Most of the teachers in the study spoke about differentiated instruction as the main issue and skill they need to acquire. They feel that heterogeneity in the classroom has significantly increased in the wake of the Covid-19

pandemic and lockdowns and that teachers are currently contending not with three levels of students but with many more different groups.

> *"There are children at different levels in today's classrooms and considerable heterogeneity. The entire classroom teacher population needs to be trained to work heterogeneously. It requires intervention from above" (Mor).*

The teachers also want help in terms of the workforce to bridge the gaps:

> *"I lack considerable knowledge because the gaps at school are enormous. After all, there are more able children, and there are children who didn't attend school for a long time and didn't learn on Zoom either – these are gaps of eight groups, not three like they used to be, and teachers can't reach them on their own. We need help and more (subject) teachers in the classroom" (Ahlam)*

3.4.2 Special Education Skills

Some respondents compared the situation in regular and special education schools. According to them, the student's current emotional and educational needs (described above) mandate a different teaching style that typifies special education classes. For instance, teaching in small classes or groups, individually adapted curriculums and with overcoming uncommon emotional issues. Most of the teachers who referred to this issue felt that they do not possess such skills or that it is impossible to address them in the current classroom or school setting (big classes, availability/time, teaching positions).

> *"The size of the classes isn't suited for using special education skills – I think professional assistance should be introduced into the classroom; I need an assistant or another teacher. This allows the class to be divided or to work according to levels [...] If I have help, I can focus more on social and emotional skills – we don't have the time to do it effectively" (Hanad).*

The teachers feel that the professional supervision and guidance they receive are inadequate and do not provide a response to their needs:

> *"I'm not getting enough tools to deal with the mental or social aspect – from the parent's perspective, Covid's to blame, no need for an assessment, it'll pass, and in a regular year, it would have been possible to have an appraisal or a committee. I need more tools to deal with this situation" (Loris).*

One of the teachers sums up the prevailing feelings among teachers: "There's no way or time to reduce the gaps in a big class, and I can't apply the usual tools I used to apply that would work" (Shahar).

3.5 Teachers' Sources of Strength in This Crisis

The teachers were asked about their sources of strength or support at the current time since a large part of their personal and organizational resilience derives from support processes between the principal and the staff and within the staff. We examined whether there are established support processes and whether the management supports the team.

The findings were surprising. The vast majority of teachers in the study stated that they receive support from their closest circle, namely fellow teachers or teachers teaching in parallel classes. Some felt that support is provided on the staff level.

> *"We help each other on the staff – many venting talks, a great sense of partnership between colleagues" (Hanad).*

> *Much teamwork and each one help the other; it has to be this way. (Ronit)*

Another source of support is family:

> *"I feel my family is also experiencing what I'm experiencing and shares in all the changes or complaining, and it gives me strength [...] I'm supported by the staff, my husband, the family, and the immediate staff" (Eden).*

Most surprising was that the teachers felt that there was no established process in place to help them cope with the situation, not by the Ministry of Education nor by the school principals:

> *"There isn't anything institutional to provide support like we're not human beings; we're expected to go on as usual, as if we weren't part of Covid ourselves. I'd expect support from above – that they'll ask for good things that we can do and not think we've got octopus tentacles that can perform 1000 tasks" (Mor).*

Some felt that the Ministry of Education is oblivious to what is happening on the ground and is even disruptive:

> *"They sit in their ivory tower, haven't set foot in a classroom in years, and live in a dream world. There are zero resources to contend with the gaps (before Covid). What are teachers in the lower grades supposed to do? They don't have the resources, and stuff here gets nothing. This is a generation of children who've experienced loss. All day long, they want achievements and tests"* (Lihi).

A small minority of the teachers in the study felt they should help themselves:

> *"It's a daily challenge; we use our intuitions and experience, each according to what she understands and sees fit [...] I give strength to myself, I don't want to give up, but I doubt there'll be a reduction in the gaps even two years from now"* (Dvora).

As stated, a small minority felt that the principal or the system was involved in the support they received at school:

> *"Our staff collaborates with the principal's initiative, and we exchange information and knowledge [...] The principal gives support – if a teacher can't, she lets her rest or not come in"* (Ahlam).

3.6 Desire to Remain in the Profession

The teachers in the study were asked about their desire to remain in the profession and whether they would recommend the teaching profession to others. Their responses were split into two categories: (1) Teachers who felt it was challenging to continue working in the trade, and today they would have chosen differently or plan to leave the profession. Most of the responses fell under this category. The reasons they gave were feelings of overload, absence of limits on giving, and perceived lack of appreciation from the system; and (2) Teachers who admitted that although the profession has become difficult, they feel that their contribution and emotional connection to the domain compensate for the difficulties.

> *"I get up feeling that it's time to look for another profession – enough is enough"* (Ina).

> *"Some teachers left, especially young ones who felt the trade didn't suit them – they said: What were we thinking? They don't feel they could survive an entire career as a teacher"* (Rada).

> *"I'd say no – there are good moments and some rays of light, but it isn't rewarding financially and not in terms of appreciation from the parents and the children"* (Ella).

As stated, an even smaller minority of the teachers spoke about the profession lovingly, mainly due to the satisfaction they derive from it and their connection to it:

> *"I feel I'm doing good during this period, I manage to reach the children and the parents, and I feel a sense of satisfaction – that's why my feelings are different"* (Loris).

> *"It depends on their desire – I recommend it; I love my job"* (Ayelet).

> I love my profession and can't live without it, but it's not easy, and nowadays, it's not easy to succeed" (Idit).

4. Discussion

The study was conducted during the last wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Israel, a wave that did not entail lockdowns by the government. Teachers had to contend with multiple changes, medical forms, new procedures, and frequently changing class composition. This unique situation (following the challenges teachers faced during the lockdowns) exposed gaps, frustrations, and crises associated with their personal and professional functioning as teachers. Most of the teachers in the study expressed harsh feelings. They feel overloaded due to the numerous procedural demands made by the education system, the absence of limits on working hours, broken boundaries between work and home, and the professional challenges they face. The frustration grows mainly due to the perceived lack of sources of support. According to the teachers, they primarily receive support from fellow teachers close to them or family members and, to a lesser degree, from their principals, the management staff, or the education system. Moreover, the demands made by the system during this period – striving for achievements, reducing gaps, and implementing various programs – are perceived as being detached from the needs on the ground and unnecessarily placing an even more significant burden on teachers. Additionally, many teachers felt their contribution during this period was not appreciated by the general public or the education system.

Examining the teachers' feelings from the organizational engagement perspective reveals that most aspects that influence engagement were problematic. Engagement is generally defined as the relationship between the organization and its employees. It contends that engaged employees contribute more, are more loyal and optimistic towards the organization, and are, therefore, less likely to voluntarily leave the organization (Macey & Schneider, 2008). The model presented in Figure 2 is based on five components that influence an employee's desire to remain in the organization (Dickson, 2010).

The pyramid's base consists of pay, working hours, and benefits; the second level is learning and development, which enable the employee to acquire additional skills, be more creative and motivated, and value and accord meaning to their work. The third level is advancement and promotion. An organization that provides employees with opportunities for promotion enables them to strive to advance and remain in the organization and increases employee commitment. The fourth level – leadership, trust, and respect – is an essential parameter for employees. Employee-manager relations touch upon opportunities for growth and development in the organization, trust in the leadership, and ability to influence. The fifth and final level is value, meaning, and purpose. Organizational engagement flourishes when there are strong connections between organizational and personal values. Engaged employees derive enjoyment from their work, and their work becomes more efficient (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

Figure 2. Pyramid of engagement (Dickson, 2010)

Analysis of the different levels of the pyramid reveals that the teachers' responses attest to difficulties on three primary levels: the first, basic conditions (absence of boundaries, long hours); the fourth – leadership, trust, and respect (sense of being unappreciated, lack of establishment support, and lack of understanding concerning teachers' needs), and the final and most important level – value, meaning, and purpose. While some teachers have a genuine sense of meaning in the challenging situation, many others lose hope and meaning and are considering their options (e.g., leaving the education system, seeking a part-time position, or early retirement).

Levkovich and Ricon (2020) found compassion fatigue among school counselors. In their study, "Compassion fatigue" refers to a mental state where a person's compassion and empathy towards others, and efforts to ease their pain, may harm their ability to empathize and tolerate the intensity of the other's suffering. The researchers claim that secondary traumatic stress can be viewed as a natural behavioral and emotional reaction to exposure to traumatic events experienced by others. Their findings show that 50% of the participants in their study reported experiencing compassion fatigue, 40% reported burnout, and 24% reported secondary traumatic stress. However, 57% reported satisfaction from assisting others.

The results of the current study can also be interpreted as indicative of compassionate fatigue. Teachers, who have had to deal with growing needs on the part of the education system, as well as students and their parents, will feel increasingly difficult to express empathy and offer a solution to these needs. While there is no mistaking t of burnout experienced by teachers as a consequence of the unique situation they faced during the last wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, this also stems from deeper aspects associated with the teaching profession. As stated, the teachers report facing a substantial change in the teaching methods they are required to employ. Some claim that the way they taught in the past incompatible needs to be more suitable and compatible with the current situation. We assume that while the change is indeed more acute in the current situation, it is undeniably limited applicable to it. The need to apply differentiated instruction, work in small groups, provide a unique emotional response for each student, and build personal curriculums is part of future-oriented teaching approaches. Due to the Covid-19

pandemic, teachers were forced to face this future overnight. The teachers' harsh feelings may reflect the professional "breakdown" that necessitates adopting different teaching methods and abandoning old ones. As noted by some of the teachers in the study, the required teaching methods increasingly resemble the teaching methods employed in special education classes. However, the structure and size of the classes, the demands placed on teachers, and the resources provided by the system, are incongruent with the required change, which only heightens their frustration. In effect, the education system has not managed to perform a sufficiently fast change to respond to changes in the school setting.

The present study's findings are consistent with a survey of teachers' perceptions concerning the future of professional development. In that study, teachers were asked about their future professional development needs and how they wish to be taught. In their responses to a survey and verbal responses, the teachers referred to a lesser degree to specific content, such as interdisciplinarity, autonomous learning, or content knowledge, and a greater degree to situational issues that fall under the concept of "resilience." They note the importance of emotional intelligence, emotional work with students, ability to read the situation and change accordingly and swiftly. The study reveals that the respondents' trust in external knowledge provided by external experts has weakened, and the importance of experts is declining. On the other hand, there is an apparent demand for practical competencies – the teachers want to learn from their colleagues since they perceive them as possessing "real" or more "relevant" knowledge, and being more open to change, such as learning in ways they would not have considered in the past.

5. Conclusion

In light of the present study's findings, there is no doubt that the education system needs to examine its plans for retaining teachers and connecting them to the education system and the knowledge and resources required to support the necessary change. It is evident that financial solutions, e.g., raising teachers' pay, will not suffice in the long term. Teachers' sense of professional meaning and efficacy also needs to be addressed.

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