



## **Promoting the use of Social-Emotional Learning in Online Teacher Education**

Noam Lapidot-Lefler<sup>1</sup>

*Department of Education, Oranim Academic College of Education, Tivon, Israel*

*Action Research Centre for Social Justice, Max Stern Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Israel*

The goal of this paper is to address the questions of how social-emotional learning [SEL] can be incorporated into online learning and what effect such integration can have on students. The COVID-19 outbreak significantly increased the use of online learning at all levels of education. However, research shows that the online learning experience may contribute to students' feelings of distancing, alienation, and loneliness. The assumption underlying this study was that these negative feelings are not inherent to the online learning experience; rather, they can be avoided by using online-SEL ("O-SEL") techniques that integrate SEL into online learning processes. This qualitative case study included 42 preservice teachers enrolled in a college of education in Israel, who participated in an online course that employed specific methods for integrating the SEL component. Analysis of students' reactions to the course revealed that O-SEL not only improved students' emotional experience but also enhanced their cognitive learning. These findings strongly suggest that models of online learning should include SEL. Additional research may confirm the positive O-SEL effects on students' experience and achievements. In this context, the current study introduces the concept of "social-emotional presence," which is necessary for learning and development to take place online.

**Keywords:** Emotional education; Social-emotional learning; Online learning; Social-emotional presence; Teacher education

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email address: [noam.lapidot.lefler@gmail.com](mailto:noam.lapidot.lefler@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been accelerated development in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) (Mahoney et al., 2020; Williamson, 2021), supporting the development of teachers and students worldwide (Loinaz, 2019; Malhotra et al., 2021; Waajid et al., 2013). The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis led to intensive research in the field (Yang, 2021), regarding the processes involved in remote synchronous and asynchronous learning or a combination of the two (Moorhouse & Wong, 2022). Alongside the advantages of online learning, there are also challenges for both the learners and teachers using this format, such as technical difficulties and distribution of attention (Joksimović, 2015). Furthermore, there are also social-emotional challenges (Yang, 2021). This study aimed to promote SEL in online teacher education by teaching it directly as part of (online and offline) teacher-education programs and infusing it into the education system in general, in a parallel process. To shed additional light on this issue, the current study examined the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers enrolled in a college of education in Israel who participated in an online course during the COVID-19 pandemic that employed specific methods for integrating the SEL component online (referred to hereafter as O-SEL). Thus, this study addresses both the lack of literature about O-SEL and the need to have a deeper understanding of the processes of online learning. The discussion focuses on illuminating theories and following practices that support and promote O-SEL, as observed in a college-level teacher-education program in Israel.

### *Learners' and Teachers' Experiences in Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to wide-ranging changes in the world of education, given the decision in the majority of countries worldwide to close schools and employ remote learning methods, with an emphasis on online learning (Abbasi et al., 2020). Due to these circumstances, the transition to online learning took place swiftly and without proper preparation for either students or teachers, creating complex challenges for all the parties involved (Kosta et al., 2021). It was found that many students were dissatisfied with online learning during the pandemic and felt that it harmed their learning processes. Students reported difficulty mostly in terms of the quality of their communication with the teacher and with other students, poor quality of teaching, and having to deal with distractions in the course of their lessons (Serhan, 2020; Yang, 2021). With regards to the advantages of online learning during the pandemic, students identified the flexibility afforded by this format as a prominent advantage (Serhan, 2020). In addition, it was found that most participating teachers and students had never attended or taught an online lesson before the pandemic, thus demonstrating the lack of online experience that characterized the educational world up until that point (Kosta et al., 2021).

As suggested by the Community of Inquiry Model (COI Model: Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003), online learning and teaching need to address three components: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Caspi, & Blau, 2008; Garrison, 2007, 2016). With the COI Model in mind, it is not surprising that studies conducted during the initial stages of transition to online learning found that

students and teachers experienced heightened self-awareness during the online lesson, possibly due to the presence of parents during the course of the lesson. Likewise, both students and teachers noted that the learners were not sufficiently involved in the online lesson and that their level of participation was lower than usual. Both parties acknowledged that online learning deprived them of the pleasure associated with the learning process (Sankar Mandapaka & Prakash, 2020). Students and teachers described feelings of loneliness, alienation, and a sense of distance (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The absence of the emotional element in online learning and teaching could explain this experience.

### *The Evolution of the SEL Concept and Its Role in Teacher Education*

The term SEL has served as an umbrella concept for many theories in education and psychology (Humphrey et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Over the last two decades, researchers (e.g. Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), have noted the ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty, and volatility that have characterized the earlier decades of the twenty-first century. This recognition has led to efforts to adapt, change, and hone the process of preparing learners for adulthood (e.g. Israeli Ministry of Education, 2020). Accordingly, the theoretical emphases in education and teaching have also shifted, from a model that focused on pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in teacher education and underscored the importance of professional knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Park & Oliver, 2008) to a model that aspires to address the technological-pedagogical content knowledge of future teachers (TPCK; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Phillips & Harris, 2018).

Another significant realization introduced through recent research was that, in effect, educational processes encompass more than the learning itself; they also include social-emotional processes, such as involvement, human contact, and personal interactions with other learners and with the teacher (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Sankar Mandapaka & Prakash, 2020). Thus, the human interaction component has a positive effect on the mental wellbeing of the parties involved. Furthermore, a learning process that is beneficial to the wellbeing of the individual learner will also have a positive effect on learners' civic development as citizens of the next decade (Izutsu et al., 2015). Consequently, educational theorists, teachers, and learners have concluded that education needs to focus on the social-emotional aspects of learning (Loinaz, 2019; Waajid et al., 2013). Inevitably, the decision to address the social and emotional learning needs of students and teachers affects the educational perceptions and practices of all those involved (Ross et al., 2002), not only in the school system but also in teacher education (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Waajid et al., 2013).

As such, in education, the term SEL usually refers to the process of developing and applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to become socially healthy adults in a changing world. This notion includes the ability to attain long-term goals, work with others, and manage emotions (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš, & Drasgow, 2018). Furthermore, inherent to this concept is the understanding that the learning process cannot succeed without attending to the learners' social and emotional needs alongside the cognitive-academic aspects of the process (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2011).

SEL in education has evolved into a systemic approach that can be integrated into every aspect of the learners' educational experience, whether inside the classroom or beyond, as part of the school day and afterward, and in cooperation with family and community (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The following are five major components of social-emotional skills mentioned in the research literature: (a) self-awareness and (b) self-management, as manifested in the ability to identify and manage emotions; (c) social awareness, as manifested in caring for others; (d) the establishing of positive relationships and coping effectively with challenging situations; and (e) responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011).

Given these recent insights regarding the importance of SEL in education and its evident absence in the accelerated transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the goal of the current study was to address the lack of SEL in online learning. To this end, the following questions were posed:

1. How can SEL and its reliance on emotions and human interactions be incorporated into online learning?
2. How does incorporating emotions into online learning processes affect students' online learning experience and performance?

## **Method**

A qualitative methodology was selected to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the participants' O-SEL experience and the significance they assigned to it in their day-to-day lives. The thematic content analysis approach was chosen as it has been shown to be particularly effective in the field of psychology for gaining insight into participants' emotional and cognitive processes (Braun, & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2018).

### *Participants*

The study participants were 42 students attending two courses taught at the School of Education at the selected college. Demographic characteristics were as follows: 28 of the participants were women, and 14 were men, enrolled in the program for retraining academics in the field of education. Their ages ranged from 21 to 59 years, with the majority in the age group between 30 and 35. Participants came from four different religious backgrounds: Jewish participants (22), Christian (7), Druze (7), and Muslim (6). The majority of the participants resided in the northern part of the country.

### *The Research Instrument*

Assessment of the participants' perceptions and experiences in the course of their online studies was based on their personal written reflections, in which they reported their experience, emphasizing the insights, thoughts, and emotions that emerged throughout the process. Participants were given written instructions (see Appendix) on how to use the reflective tool. To this end, they were instructed to engage in introspection and to report their reflections in writing. They submitted this written assignment in Hebrew.

### *The Procedure*

Data were collected from the participating students at the end of the 2020 – 2021 academic year. Excluding the last five weeks of the academic year, all lessons were conducted online every week at a predetermined time slot. This process combined synchronous and asynchronous online teaching and learning. Each lesson lasted four academic hours, was held in the same setting (whether in-person or online), and with the same group of students. During the last five weeks of the academic year, when classes were conducted in a hybrid format (on campus, and online), approximately 50% of the students chose to attend online (synchronously from their homes).

### *The Case Study: “The Learner” -- An Online Course on SEL*

The title of the two-semester course was ‘The Learner,’ and the focus was on theories and relevant practices for addressing learners’ needs. This was a course on the learning and development of the learner in the education system. The subject of SEL constituted a core issue that accompanied the year-long course. The SEL components embedded in the education course corresponded to the five-component model of SEL suggested by Durlak and colleagues (2011): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, managing relationships, and responsible decision-making in social and individual interactions. SEL was learned in class during the lessons in an ongoing process throughout the year. Each lesson started with a check-in (With the question ‘How are you?’), and that question accompanied us during the lesson in difficult and good moments, as well as at the end of the lesson (check-out). After two introductory classes, students created posters that could explain to other (novice and veteran) teachers what SEL is and why it is essential. In the fourth lesson of the first semester, the students did an online “Hackathon” on the subject, in which they raised questions and struggles about SEL in the education system and possible solutions to strengthen it. Then throughout the year, participants were asked to create, demonstrate (by teaching their peers), and explain the underlying rationale of lesson plans containing SEL-promoting practices. Their lesson plans could be designed to target an individual student or group, be related to a particular teaching discipline, and were intended for use in routine or emergency conditions. In some cases, the lesson plans addressed an individual teacher or a group of colleagues. The author served as the course's lecturer and professor throughout the academic year.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed by the course tutor, who is the author of this paper, using qualitative thematic analysis strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began by reading all of the written data. Next, each reflection was read separately, sentence after sentence, while writing comments in the margins and identifying topics related to the research questions. The reading, thinking, and note-taking took place simultaneously. In the next stage, each reflection was reviewed individually to identify emerging themes. In this process, sections were highlighted, categories were defined, and their interrelationships were identified using the inductive analytic

method. Finally, similar categories from the various texts were integrated under principal and secondary categories.

### *Ethics*

After the ethics committee approved the study, participants were recruited retroactively, that is, after having completed their degree program. Potential participants received a detailed explanation about the study's goals and assurances regarding the use of the data for this unique purpose, the option to withdraw from the study, and maintaining anonymity throughout. As mentioned, at this point, there was no formal relationship between the recruited participants and the researcher because the former had already completed their academic requirements. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing all identifying details and using pseudonyms during the data analysis.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the data revealed two major themes: (a) Positive experiences regarding the promotion of O-SEL during the pandemic- this theme included three subthemes, namely, the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural impact that positive O-SEL experiences had on the participants; and (b) Challenges and difficulties experienced in the context of O-SEL during the pandemic - this theme included two subthemes: difficulties experienced on the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal levels.

#### *Positive O-SEL Experiences*

In their reflections, the participants reported having positive O-SEL experiences, which included a sense of belonging, empathy towards self and others, and meaningful learning. This theme included three subthemes related to the manner in which the experience was perceived and manifested, whether *emotionally*, *conceptually*, or *behaviourally* (either in the present or the anticipated future). Each of the quotes that follow demonstrates one of the three subthemes identified.

#### *The Emotional Impact of Positive O-SEL Experiences*

All the students reported feeling the emotional impact of the SEL activities related to online learning and teaching. Many described a sense of connection, inclusion, and acceptance, which they attributed to the SEL activities they partook in.

The dominant emotions that surfaced as a result of the SEL activities in the online environment made me feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the group, that we were all in it together, and there was room for and acceptance of everyone, including me. That made me feel calm and contented... I felt I was understood and accepted.

Another participant described the emotional impact of the SEL activities thus:

Hearing my peers share their feelings made me feel more empathetic towards others and more self-accepting: I could invest my best effort with a sense of ease and without the stress of seeking to be perfect. This is the type of experience I would like to create for my future students.

Most of the reflections described positive feelings of empathy, love, and camaraderie, which they related to self-motivation and self-efficacy, as the following excerpt exemplifies.

For me, the general experience of addressing social and emotional aspects in the online environment and the specific SEL activities evoked feelings of self-awareness, empathy, love, belonging, and friendship. I felt competent and loved, which helped me recognize what I consider important and significant.

It is evident that partaking in lessons that addressed aspects of SEL had an emotional effect on the learners, increasing their social awareness and empathy towards others.

### *The Conceptual Impact of Positive O-SEL Experiences*

Almost all participants described the SEL processes as significant experiences as well as the positive thoughts they had concerning the SEL-promoting activities.

I found that the activities related to O-SEL experiences were very significant for me. The most significant aspect [of SEL] in the online environment was starting the lesson with the question “how are you?” This was meaningful: [asking] how I feel at this moment as a student who just “left” her home environment and entered into the “online classroom” environment. This question allowed me to pause and make a conscious transition from one environment to the other.

This quote demonstrates the participant’s thoughts about and the significance they attributed to the SEL activities, particularly when starting the lesson.

Another student thought about the difference between lessons with and without SEL aspects.

Taking emotions into account in the social framework was very important ...There is a radical difference between the learning experience that involves SEL and that which is without. The latter leaves one feeling completely disconnected. The question “how are you?” permitted us to feel a sense of connection and conveyed the message that in the classroom, I was not only a student but a whole person. That was enough to increase my motivation and make me feel strongly connected to the lesson.

This student gained an awareness of the effects of “taking emotions into account,” which suggests her conceptualization of the emotional activity in the classroom into ideas about how teaching and learning can become more meaningful. Another participant concluded that “Participating and demonstrating SEL-promoting activities contributed to the construction of [a] group feeling.”

Another participant perceived the elements of SEL as producing a change in the world of teaching.

I thought about the importance of becoming self-aware and providing an opportunity to express and share emotions, which helps one learn to manage emotions and cope with challenging situations. I thought about this significant change in the world of teaching, which allows for a more profound

relationship between teacher and student, and its positive influence on the motivation to learn, which can lead to successful academic outcomes.

This student was able to conceptualize the connection between emotions, self-awareness, and self-management and its resulting impact on learning and achievements.

In the following quote, the participant describes her realization of the need to address SEL components, particularly during the period of the pandemic and in the context of online learning.

At first, I thought this would be a waste of time, but as the course progressed I realized it was a necessity. Especially in the current era or with online learning, SEL is enormously important. Occasionally I noticed that the need for SEL is even greater in the online environment than in a regular classroom. Perhaps this is because the online environment is associated with the pandemic and the related fears, which creates a greater need for expressing emotions.

This participant emphasized the need for SEL but distinguished between its necessity in an online environment in general and during a period of crisis, in particular.

Overall, the participants' words demonstrate that SEL enabled them to create new conceptualizations, which led to meaningful cognitive shifts.

#### *The Impact of Positive O-SEL Experiences on Behaviour*

Participants reported a shift in their immediate and/or future behaviour following the SEL experience. Many participants noted that they wished to make a positive change and to figure significantly in the lives of their students, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

“I am learning to feel and show empathy towards others. I realize that I want to bring positive change to my students and to play a significant role in their experience.” Having experienced SEL in the online environment, they now had the necessary motivation, knowledge, and capability to use SEL in their future teaching: “As a teacher, I would like to apply this to my teaching”; “The SEL experience motivated me to invest my efforts in the learning process and to develop professionally as a teacher.”

I acquired skills and practices that will help me address SEL aspects in the online environment, but not only... I feel I have a greater understanding of and ability to manage my emotions. I am able to successfully regulate my thoughts and feelings and I have more knowledge and experience establishing relationships and feeling empathy for others. Having experienced these things, I am now prepared to teach them to others.

To summarize, it appears that the emotional impact of the SEL experience led learners to new conceptual realizations, which they then desired to act on and adopt in their own classroom teaching practices. The following theme, however, refers to difficulties and challenges that arose during the O-SEL experience and to issues that remained unresolved.

### *Difficulties and Challenges of the O-SEL Experience*

The second theme that emerged from the analysis, namely the difficulties and challenges of the online experience, included two subthemes: difficulties and challenges related to personal issues, involving introspection and inner emotions, and those related to external conditions and circumstances.

#### *Intrapersonal-level Difficulties*

Some of the participants referred to emotional challenges and specifically to the *difficulty of expressing their emotions*; however, as the following quote demonstrates, this led to a learning process: “It’s not always easy for me to express my emotions. The SEL activities were helpful... They taught me how to cope, and to continue trying to express my feelings, even if I don’t succeed.”

Another participant noted the difficulties in expressing emotion in the context of Arab society.

I found it difficult to talk about and share my emotions, perhaps because, in Arab society, we rarely ... express our emotions. In the SEL activity, I had an opportunity to observe myself and identify my emotions and that made me feel at ease... and taught me the importance of allowing my students to talk about their feelings.

In the following quote, the participants found it *difficult to plan and time the SEL activity* according to the specific context, especially in periods of emergency or extreme stress.

From my point of view, the difficulty is in planning a timeframe for the SEL activity. How much time do we allot to social and emotional aspects? In some cases, [an entire lesson] might be too much, and sometimes, in complex situations, a longer time is absolutely necessary. Take, for example, the last military operation, when there was a great deal of tension between Jewish and Arab students in the classroom. Nevertheless, despite the inherent difficulty, [SEL] consistently remains an important component of each lesson.

Some participants described difficulties related to either the social or the emotional aspects, or the connection between the two, as the following excerpt demonstrates.

I am naturally disinclined to discuss emotions with strangers or teachers and such, which made the process difficult for me. We can learn from this that not all our students will be enthusiastic from the start and we need to find ways to entice them to start sharing.

Another student raised the issue of social difficulties in the context of teamwork.

Occasionally I found the teamwork difficult. I felt uncomfortable and I prefer to study independently, to do things on my own, particularly during the more difficult times during the pandemic, when I was home alone, and I didn’t even want to talk to other people. I was enclosed in my own world.

As these excerpts demonstrate, the participants dealt with complicated social and emotional issues during their studies, yet they saw these as an occasion to learn more about the implementation of SEL.

### *Extrapersonal-level Difficulties*

In the context of extrapersonal difficulties, some of the participants described *technical or technological difficulties* they experienced.

Sometimes there were technical difficulties, but it was possible to overcome them, and sometimes, you had to be creative to deal with the technological difficulties, for example when the Internet connection didn't work, when I had shared the wrong screen, or a link didn't work.

Another participant described the difficulty maintaining eye contact during an online lesson:

Sometimes there were communication difficulties. I felt that I had a hard time making eye contact with people, even in one-on-one conversations. I felt I wasn't making eye contact with the group members but looking at the monitor rather than at the people...

The challenges described by the participants, both intrapersonal and extrapersonal, raise questions about the O-SEL process. These are discussed in the next section.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The current paper set out to add to our knowledge about how social-emotional learning can be integrated into online learning and what effect such integration can have on the perceptions and experiences of preservice teachers in a college in Israel. In addition, based on these observations, the following insights can be drawn and corresponding supportive O-SEL practices are suggested.

*How can SEL be integrated into online learning and what effect can such integration have on students?*

In general, given that the participants reported positive experiences, the findings highlight the importance of addressing SEL aspects during online learning and especially during times of crisis. This finding echoes those of previous studies that examined the issue of O-SEL (e.g., Yang, 2021). In particular, the findings corresponding to theme 1 revealed the positive emotional, conceptual, and behavioural impact of the O-SEL experience on the participants. As shown, these three parts of the experience were interlinked: the emotional effect (step 1) led to new conceptualizations (step 2), which in turn led the preservice teachers to recognize the behaviours (step 3) that serve to incorporate social-emotional aspects in the learning and teaching process. The cumulative effect of these three parts of the O-SEL experience enabled the participants to perceive the importance of SEL and created the desire to incorporate SEL in their own teaching practice.

The current findings also included reports of difficulties and challenges encountered during the O-SEL process in the pandemic. These findings too coincide with those of previous studies, which described

technical difficulties (Joksimović, 2015; Thomson, 2018) as well as challenges related directly to the social-emotional aspects of online learning (Yang, 2021). Both types of challenges interfere with the learning process. Examining both the positive and the negative experiences and perceptions related to O-SEL provides a comprehensive depiction of the learner's experiential process.

Based on these findings and the framework of the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Garrison, 2007, 2016), it is possible to suggest specific components that are likely to promote positive O-SEL experiences. As noted, this model refers to three components that must be addressed in all online learning: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Caspi, & Blau, 2008; Garrison, 2007, 2016).

### *A Conceptual Construct and Recommended Practices*

Regarding *social presence*, it has been shown that creating a sense of community can be difficult in online programs (Berry, 2019; Ke & Hoadley, 2009). Especially during the pandemic, when the learning was entirely online, students were overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and loneliness (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). The findings of the current study demonstrated the intrapersonal difficulties experienced by students as they attempted to share and express emotions while interacting with others. This was compounded by the (extrapersonal) technical difficulty of establishing eye contact in the online environment. At the same time, the current study also demonstrated that interacting and sharing emotions with others in the classroom helped create awareness and empathy towards self and others, thus establishing a sense of belonging and community. In other words, the findings highlighted the importance of allowing learners to be seen and heard. Participants mentioned the importance of being asked about their wellbeing, taking the time to consider emotional aspects during the lesson, and sharing their thoughts and feelings. Hence, in light of the importance that participants attributed to the inclusion of emotions through the supportive SEL practices, I would like to propose that the component of "social presence" that is essential in online learning should be renamed to include the emotional aspect, i.e., "social-emotional presence."

With regards to *cognitive presence*, this is the second essential component in online learning, which refers to the learner's cognitive cycle and the way information is internalized (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). An examination of the current findings suggests that not only content-related information needs to be internalized: learners must also come to understand and internalize their social-emotional processes, which in turn creates optimal conditions for a positive learning experience. For example, directly addressing the advantages and challenges inherent in online learning can set the stage for continuous sharing and cooperation. Moreover, according to the findings, explicitly addressing and conceptualizing the notion of SEL had a profound cognitive effect, as participants gained an understanding of the rationale that underlies the SEL processes and practices. Hence, to promote and incorporate the practice of SEL, learners and teachers need to develop the ability to review their SEL processes (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The ability to cognitively examine a situation while considering its effects on one's inner emotions can be experienced as personal and

professional growth. This experience can serve as a model for future use for preservice teachers to help their students undergo similar constructive experiences. Such cognitive experiences are equally beneficial in the online learning environment as in the physical classroom, during times of crisis, and as part of routine learning.

The component of *teacher presence* refers to the teacher's role as manager and mediator of the learning, which helps attenuate learners' sense of alienation and loneliness (Berry, 2019; Yang, 2021). The teacher organizes a positive, tolerant, and safe social environment that encourages interpersonal interactions. This setting ensures that the learner not only has an active role in the learning process but is also emotionally available to carry out this role (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The teacher also plays a central role in mediating the difficulties and challenges experienced by the learners, whether these are related to technical or social-emotional issues. As the current study has shown, encouraging interpersonal relationships is a way of introducing SEL practices. To this end, the teacher thus models the desired interpersonal communication by addressing the students by name, asking how they feel, calling attention to examples of positive discourse during the lesson, and attending to the quieter students who may find it difficult to express themselves in an online classroom (McInnerney & Roberts, 2005). Furthermore, establishing a relationship with the learners individually and ensuring they are engaged in the learning process supports SEL classroom practices (Cavinato et al., 2021). Finally, the online learning environment offers unique techno-pedagogical tools to enable these practices. These include the use of games during the online lesson (Cavinato et al., 2021; Alabbasi, 2018), as well as the use of breakout rooms for conducting small-group activities.

#### *Study Limitations, Suggestions for Future Studies, and Applications*

The current study had several limitations: it represented a specific group of preservice teachers studying at a given time. Hence, any attempt to generalize the results of the current study to other groups must be made with caution. An additional limitation was the time period when the data were collected, specifically, participants' experiences, perceptions, and coping methods were reviewed at the beginning of the COVID pandemic crisis. It is possible that had the data been collected later in the course of the pandemic or if data collection had been conducted over a more extended period, the same group might have described and perceived the same experiences differently.

As shown, SEL activities contribute to personal and professional growth among preservice teachers. Hence, the knowledge derived from this study, specifically the practices for integrating SEL-promoting activities, should be applied to online methods and processes used in training preservice teachers, and the preservice teachers should be encouraged to employ these practices in their future online teaching in routine, as well as emergency conditions.

Although these conclusions are derived from the study of this specific cohort and hence the recommended practices are suited for teacher education in Israel, they may be relevant to other locations and cohorts and merit broader consideration. Given the demonstrated significance of social, cognitive, and teaching presence for successful O-SEL, teachers and teacher educators, school psychologists, counselors, and anyone

involved in adapting and tailoring programs and materials to the online platform, could raise awareness about the conditions that foster presence and help clarify these concepts to teachers and learners. Also, online course designers and curricular planners working at all levels of schooling and in academic education would do well to consider these concepts in their ongoing work.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned recommendations and conclusions, additional research is required. Future studies may compare the O-SEL experience with SEL experienced in the physical classroom, while others may expand the arena to examine the issues during other types of crises, as well as in times of routine studies. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate the perceptions, experiences, and coping methods of preservice teachers from various cultures, societies, or social sectors, to enhance our understanding of the effects of O-SEL on these different groups.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The author does not have any conflicts of interest to report, and declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## **Appendix: The Reflective Tool**

The students who completed the year-long course received the following guidelines for writing the reflections:

*Over the past year, you have participated in parts one and two of the course titled “The Learner,” as part of the program for retraining academics as high school teachers. In this two-part course, we studied the theory and practices of using social-emotional learning (SEL) processes in the online environment. The SEL activities evoked thoughts and emotions that coloured your experience in this course. You are now asked to participate in a related study by reflecting on the process you went through in this course during this academic year.*

*As you approach this task, I ask that you set time aside for introspection, to consider the process you underwent emotionally and behaviourally during and following this course of studies, which involved teaching, as well as learning.*

*Please describe the process, the thoughts and emotions it evoked, and any insights you may have gained. Be sure to include any additional ideas or comments you may have that are related to experiencing SEL online.*

*My sincere thanks for your cooperation!*