

“Correspondence with the Professor”: A Didactic-Pedagogical Tool That Allows Listening to Student Voice

Anna Prusak^{1,2}, Atara Shriki³

¹Mathematics Department, Shaanan Academic Religious College, Haifa, Israel

²Mathematics Education Department, Oranim Academic College of Education, Tivon, Israel

³Sciences Faculty, Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts, Tel Aviv, Israel

Email: atarashriki@gmail.com, anaprusak@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Prusak, A., & Shriki, A. (2023). “Correspondence with the Professor”: A Didactic-Pedagogical Tool That Allows Listening to Student Voice. *Creative Education, 14*, 1379-1410.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2023.147088>

Received: June 12, 2023

Accepted: July 21, 2023

Published: July 24, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and

Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative

Commons Attribution-NonCommercial

International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Many education systems around the world are currently highlighting the importance of social-emotional and personalized learning. The need for teachers to respond optimally to these educational goals often presents a complex challenge. To help teachers address this challenge, we designed a didactic-pedagogical tool we call “correspondence with the professor”, to provide them with a means to develop in their students the ability to reflect upon and take personal responsibility for their learning, while at the same time allowing teachers to become better acquainted with the inner world of their students. The idea behind the tool is to have students write a letter to an imaginary professor describing the scholastic difficulties they face; this is followed by a detailed response letter addressed to themselves from the imaginary professor, in which they offer proposals for resolving each of the problems presented. In studies conducted, which served as the underpinnings of the tool’s design, we examined the benefit of the tool for cognitive, emotional, and personal aspects of learning, as characterized by both teachers and students. This paper takes a teacher-focused perspective of the tool.

Keywords

Listening To Student Voice, Personalized Learning, Social-Emotional Learning, Teacher Professional Development, Teacher Reflective Thinking, Teacher Role

1. Introduction and Contextual Background

The position paper published by the OECD (2018) states that “*We are commit-*

ted to helping every learner develop as a whole person, fulfill his or her potential and help shape a shared future built on the well-being of individuals, communities and the planet.” (p. 3). To realize this vision, “*educators must not only recognize learners’ individuality but also acknowledge the wider set of relationships, with their teachers, peers, families, and communities, that influence their learning*” (p. 4). The paper also states that it should be the students themselves who assume responsibility for their development. This position is clearly not a new one; similar ideas began to emerge as far back as the early 20th century with the educational doctrine of John Dewey (1916) and later of Jean Piaget (Kenneth, 2003), Lev Vygotsky (1997), and others, who advocated for what is known today as “student-centered learning” (SCL) (Jones, 2007). In this learning method, students are accountable for their own learning and achievements. Students define their individual learning goals, select suitable learning resources, monitor their own progress, and develop their own strategies for the benefit of their personal development. Nonetheless, as SCL is a multifaceted learning process, students must be provided with systematic external guidance and support (Hannafin, Hill, Land, & Lee, 2014). Another related educational stream is the “personalized learning” methodology, which focuses on emphasizing each student’s strengths, needs, and interests, in contrast to the “one size fits all” approach, resulting in student confidence and motivation (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Additionally, in recent years, there has been increased interest in Social Emotional Learning (SEL), a process through which children recognize and manage their emotions, set and attain personal goals and make accountable choices, and feel and exhibit compassion (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). For the last two decades, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, <https://www.casel.org/>) has been a leader in studying, defining, and fostering SEL. Based on their extensive research, CASEL (2005) has identified five interconnected sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. According to Weissberg and Cascarino (2013), in order to help students develop these competencies, teachers should coordinate two sets of educational strategies: “*Systematically teaching, modeling, and facilitating the application of social and emotional competencies in ways that allow students to apply them as part of their daily repertoire of behaviors*” and “*Establishing safe, caring, and highly engaging learning environments involving peer and family initiatives and school wide community-building activities*” (p. 10).

Although the aforementioned educational approaches are hardly new, their goals have not, in general, been manifested in the current school reality. This may indicate difficulty for teachers to implement the ideas embedded in these approaches. Indeed, educational concepts related to student individuality, however important, pose serious challenges for teachers: they must become familiar with the world of their students, their abilities and aspirations; they must be attentive and sensitive to student voice and needs, and they must be able to respond appropriately to each student personally. It is thus clear that the current role of the

teacher needs to undergo considerable change. The path to achieving the desired change, however, is not an easy one. As nurturing student social-emotional competence receives little attention in teacher preparation programs (Waajida, Garner, & Owen, 2013), it is no wonder that teacher knowledge of SEL is limited, leading to insufficient attention to student social-emotional competence (Talvio, Lonka, Komulainen, Kuusela, & Lintunen, 2013). Furthermore, given the complexity and demands of the classroom environment and the personal interactions involved in it, as well as the large number of students under each teacher, the expectation that teachers could gather the information they need from each and every student to produce individual personalized responses and adapted SEL aimed at bringing about student well-being and realizing each student's unique capabilities, seems virtually impossible (Prusak & Shriki, 2017, 2019).

To address this difficulty we suggest providing teachers with an easy-to-implement and accessible didactic-pedagogical tool designed to develop student ability to reflect upon and take personal responsibility for their own learning and attainments, while at the same time allowing teachers to get to know the world of their students more closely and, accordingly, address their needs. This tool is also in line with Harari's (2018), who observed that since we cannot predict how the world will look in the future and the kind of problems the future holds, it is essential to develop in today's learners the ability to recognize their own capabilities and to provide them with tools to cope on their own with challenges that life is likely to summon.

In what follows, we describe the didactic-pedagogical tool we developed, "Correspondence with the Professor", designed to cope with the challenges described. We then present partial results from studies that tracked teacher experiences in integrating the tool in their classrooms, identifying their perceptions of its benefits and limitations as well as examining changes in how they perceive their students and of their own instructional and professional goals and roles.

"Correspondence with the Professor": a didactic-pedagogical tool and its underlying rationale

The tool "Correspondence with the Professor" (CWP), was designed to meet two major objectives:

- 1) Addressing students directly, providing them with a tool they can use when they feel a need to help themselves cope with their difficulties independently, without resorting to the mediation of teachers or any other external resources;
- 2) Exposing teachers to the world of each student in a manner that does not violate student privacy yet allows teachers access to addressing student needs.

CWP is applied by having students write a letter to an imaginary Professor in which they describe their main scholastic difficulties; this is followed by having them write themselves a detailed response "on behalf" of the imaginary Professor with advice on how to address each of the difficulties described. This tool provides teachers with an accessible and easy-to-implement didactic-pedagogical means for introducing students to an approach for developing their ability to reflect on their learning and take personal responsibility for managing their chal-

lenges. In other words, the tool enables students to help themselves, on their own if they wish, thereby “releasing” them from dependence on external elements (including teachers), both at school and outside of it.

Although designed to appeal directly to students, the CWP also introduces teachers to the student world in a way that would not have been otherwise possible. Teachers are provided with a tool for developing personalized responses and an adapted SEL approach, thereby supporting student well-being and the realization of their unique capabilities. This stance is consistent with Freire’s ideas from the late 1960s (Freire, 2000) on how educational processes should be implemented:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow... Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other... (p. 80).

This tool was designed to be applied in a series of four successive stages, considering a specific scholastic issue:

- Stage 1. Students draw an image of an imaginary Professor. They then write a letter to the Professor in which they describe one or more primary difficulties in the context of an issue under discussion (e.g., preparing homework, preparing for an exam, taking exams, difficulties in a specific subject, etc.). They try to explain the reasons or causes behind each difficulty described.
- Stage 2. Students complete a reflective questionnaire and ponder on the effects of writing the letter to the imaginary Professor (e.g. What did you learn about yourself as a result of writing the letter to the Professor? What did you feel while writing the letter to the Professor?). Each student puts their letter and questionnaire into an envelope. The teacher collects the envelopes.
- Stage 3. After a break (which can range from a few minutes to a day), each envelope is returned to its writer. Students read the letters they wrote to the Professor and compose to themselves a response letter as if it were written by the imaginary Professor. The response letter gives advice on how to address each difficulty mentioned.
- Stage 4. Students complete a questionnaire similar to the one in Stage 2, and reflect on the effects of writing the response letter from the imaginary Professor. In addition, students are asked to write about the effects of writing each of the letters, identifying differences between the two.

Provided the student is willing, the teacher is to make an effort to meet with every student individually after the four-stage round, to co-plan a personalized course of action that is based on what the student wrote in the response letter, aimed at supporting students’ personal development. In the class plenum, teachers may discuss prominent difficulties that have surfaced in the letters. In this way, Freire’s (2000) worldview stated above is expressed.

For further details on the tool, its theoretical framework, and its underlying

rationale, see Prusak & Shriki (2017, 2019).

Successful implementation of the tool in the classroom, much like any other didactic-pedagogical approach, depends on the willingness of teachers to use it; issues related to aspects of teacher professional knowledge and judgment must therefore also be addressed. Shulman's (1986, 1987) seminal work on professional knowledge required for teaching has laid the groundwork for exploring the complexities of teacher knowledge through the use of consistent terminology. Shulman (1987) specified seven categories of professional knowledge essential for teaching. Although all of them are interrelated, our main focus in the development of the CWP tool was teacher knowledge of learners and their characteristics, as derived from the theories presented in the Introduction and contextual background section above. Therefore, the current study aimed at focusing on how the use of CWF in the classroom impacts changes in teacher knowledge of learners.

2. The Study

This section includes information about the study participants, the research questions, the method of the study and its design, the research tools and the approach to data analysis, and ethical issues.

2.1. Participants

Over a decade during which formative assessment studies for designing CWP were carried out, 77 teachers integrated the tool into their classrooms. These teachers took part in a professional development program (PDP) intended to introduce them to the CWP tool and to support them during its implementation. All these teachers attended the programs out of the desire to learn how to better "reach" their students and to become more familiar with their world. They all expressed dissatisfaction with the level of SEL and personalized learning in their classrooms and felt they were not doing enough to prepare their students for their adult lives. In the framework of the PDPs, the teachers experienced the use of the CWP tool several times and reflected on its potential, before and after its implementation in their classrooms. The teachers corresponded with their own imaginary Professors on issues relating to their professional lives, such as challenges in the context of homework, teacher-student interactions, or challenges related to the school system, to list just a few examples. Since we believe that the self-experience of the tool before its implementation in the classroom is essential for exploiting its full potential (Prusak & Shriki, 2017), teachers implemented the tool in the classroom only after their own experience with it.

Among the 77 participants were 56 math teachers; the remaining 21 teachers were from a range of disciplines. Altogether, more than 2000 students at different academic levels, from the 5th through the 12th grade, experienced the CWP tool, writing about a variety of issues. The students were from Israel and from post-Soviet states.

In the study described in this paper, we wished to maintain consistency in our group under study, avoiding mixing teacher country of origin, disciplines, age levels, and academic levels. We thus focused on 18 Israeli math teachers who taught advanced-level math to 10th-grade students (a total of 597 students). During a single school year, their students engaged in four correspondence assignments, one addressed difficulties in preparing math homework, one addressed challenges in studying for math tests, and two addressed the difficulties in mathematical topics under study at the time the assignment was administered.

2.2. Research Questions

The study followed the experience of the teachers in integrating the “Correspondence with the Professor” didactic-pedagogical tool in their classrooms and sought to explore the following questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive the benefits and limitations of implementing the tool in their classrooms?
- 2) How do teachers perceive the insights they gained about their students following the implementation of the tool in their classrooms?
- 3) How do teachers perceive the insights they gained regarding their professional role following the implementation of the tool in their classrooms?

Note that no observations were made in the classrooms; the answers to the research questions are based exclusively on teacher self-reports, reflecting their personal perceptions of the research issues.

2.3. Method and Design

For the purpose of this study, we applied a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is descriptive and interpretive, aimed at capturing the views and perspectives of the study participants rather than those held by the researcher (Yin, 2011). As the aim of the study was to examine the meaning teachers ascribe to their experience with applying the CWP tool in their classrooms from their own perspective, this approach was found to be the most appropriate. In particular, we implemented a grounded theory design, one of the most common qualitative approaches (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), especially in the context of educational studies (Chong & Yeo, 2015).

In grounded theory design, data collection is unrestricted by predetermined categories and preconceptions of the researcher. The categories emerge “bottom-up” as part of the data analysis and therefore are grounded in the natural context and rooted in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Among the three central grounded theory designs, systematic, emerging, and constructivist, we chose to implement the systematic design, as it is particularly well-suited to the context of educational research (Creswell, 2012).

2.4. Research Tools

Qualitative research strives to collect data from a range of sources of evidence.

To maintain credibility, the conclusions of the study should be based on triangulating data from different sources (Yin, 2011). In collecting data, the ultimate triangulation should not only pursue confirmation from [at least] three sources but should also attempt to find different types of sources (Maxwell, 2009). In this study, four research tools were employed and data was gathered in an ongoing process:

1) Pre- and post-questionnaires: These were designed to identify teacher conceptions of student scholastic difficulties and their sources, as well as their perceptions regarding their professional role. The questionnaires were identical in order to identify perceptual differences that could be attributed to the teachers' experience in applying the CWP in their classrooms.

2) Reflective journal of the teachers: These were used on an ongoing basis to describe and reflect upon their experience in applying the CWP in the classroom and the insights they gained as a result.

3) Discussion logs: These recorded discussions that took place during the PDP sessions in which the participants shared their experiences, insights, and deliberations.

4) Interviews: Personal in-depth semi-structured interviews were held at the end of the school year aimed to deepen insights into teacher experiences and conceptions of the research issues. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to produce verbatim documentation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

As is common in qualitative research, the four data sources provided self-reported perceptions, beliefs, and descriptions of actions. The interviews, however, made it possible to assess the reliability of participant statements obtained through the other three sources of information (Willig, 2009).

2.5. Data Analysis

As is typical in grounded theory, data collection and analysis were interwoven throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006). To analyze the data we employed three stages of coding (Creswell, 2012). The first stage was the stage of open coding. To construct the initial categories, we identified the prominent words or phrases in teacher responses to the pre-questionnaire, and we regularly coded the entries in the teacher reflective journals and the records of the discussions held during the PDP meetings. This data was coded in multiple ways, in accordance with research progress. At the end of the school year we added the information obtained from responses to the post-questionnaires and the interviews. This procedure allowed us to maintain a process of theoretical sampling, in which we went back to the other original data sources to obtain a more careful data analysis and arrive at saturated categories. The second stage was axial coding, whereby we grouped the initial categories that emerged in the open coding stage under more general categories, based on their causal conditions, and identified relationships between the categories and subcategories. Finally, we had a third stage of selective coding, in which we triangulated, refined, and defined the

relationships among the categories that surfaced in the axial coding stage, to generate a grounded theory based on our interpretation of these interrelationships. The entire coding process was reinforced by relevant research literature to increase theoretical sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

2.6. Ethical Issues

Participation in the PDPs was voluntary. There were no grades nor certificates given, and no relationship of authority between the researchers and the participants. We informed the participants about the study and asked for their consent to use the data collected through the various research tools (Neuman, 2011). We emphasized that refusal to take part in the study would not deny them the right to participate in the PDP. As it turned out, all teachers agreed to take part in the study.

3. Results

As mentioned above, during a single school year, the teachers included four assignments of “Correspondence with the Professor” (CWP) in their classrooms. The answer to the first research question (addressed below in Section 3.1) is based on statements made by participants in their individual interviews that took place at the end of the school year and on the summarizing questionnaire. The answers to the second and third research questions (addressed below in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, respectively) are based on the insights that emerged among the teachers after their students performed the first correspondence assignment, writing to the imaginary Professor about their difficulties when doing math homework. We will also present statements taken from the reflective journals the teachers wrote on an ongoing basis while their students were performing their first correspondence assignment and from the discussions that took place as part of their professional development course (see tools 2 and 3 in Section 2.4).

3.1. Findings Pertaining to the First Research Question

How do teachers perceive the benefits and limitations of implementing the tool in their classrooms?

Overall, the research participants found the tool to be advantageous in that it may be used with any age group, any academic level, and in any context, and it is available and easy to use. Additional advantages mentioned were that the tool provides teachers with an opportunity to listen to student voice and get to know their world, a direct outcome of which is that it allows them to offer a more suitable response to individual student needs. Moreover, the teachers emphasized that the tool enabled them to cultivate in students the ability to help themselves, autonomously, and to take responsibility for their own learning. As for the limitations of the tool, seven of the 18 teachers who took part in the current study noted that the tool had no limitations in their opinion, while 11 mentioned

issues stemming from challenges that might arise when teachers are insufficiently trained in how to cater to individual student needs, including the teacher's difficulty in coping with excessive openness on the part of the students.

3.1.1. Teacher Perceptions of the Advantages of Integrating CWP in the Classroom

First, we present the general advantages attributed by teachers to the use of CWP in their classrooms; we will then focus on the advantages that pertain specifically to the opportunity for teachers to get to know the student's world and to be able to help students help themselves autonomously.

A) Advantages of applying CWP: general aspects

All the teachers pointed out the tool's **simplicity of operation**, both technically (*"All you need is a pen and paper"*) and methodologically (*"Just walk into the classroom and let the students write their letter to the Professor followed by their reflection on it."*). Other advantages mentioned by the teachers were the tool's **availability**, particularly in that *"there are no conditions that could limit its use. It can be used any time and in any context the teacher chooses."* Regarding **context**, the teachers feel that the principle underlying the tool also allows them to apply it in the classroom for *"resolving complex or urgent problems related to student conduct, such as disciplinary problems, intra-student relations, student-teacher relations, personal emotional difficulties relating to the school setting, adjustment of new students, and issues of self-image."* Moreover, *"the tool's great potential is that it can be used by students not only at school, but in any situation they encounter in life. This tool helps to develop a life skill that actually enables students to acquire personal experience with something that will serve them at different moments in their life."*

In this context, one of the teachers observed: *"There is a widespread perception that the role of school is to prepare children for life. I am not sure we actually do this properly. I don't think knowledge in mathematics is really preparation for life because students will naturally encounter problems and challenges in life that do not have ready-made answers or mathematical algorithms. It seems to me that Correspondence with the Professor is certainly preparation for life. It's something that they can also apply in the future, in different situations they'll come up against, and, of course, in any other school subject, so it's very important that we introduce our students to this tool and show them how to use it."*

Teachers also addressed the inherent advantage of the tool's applicability at any **grade** or **academic level**, since *"what makes this tool unique is that it can be used at any age, from 5th grade, when children begin to be aware of the meaning of personal reflection and are able to put it into practice, through 12th grade, for any subject, and at any academic level. It is thus something that can accompany students throughout their years of schooling. And I must say that after they gained experience using the tool, they asked me why other teachers hadn't given it to them earlier."*

Other advantages addressed the **timing** in using the tool: “*Teachers don’t have to wait for the right timing for use of the tool. Students can write the letters at any point. For example, at the beginning of the school year. This could allow us to get to know them, to understand them, and get a sense of the students from the start and save us precious time.*”; also, “*You can give the students the tool at the end of the year, so they can conduct a reflective summary of the school year. That has much more value than a summary dialogue in which only a few students participate.*”; and in general, “*every time the teacher feels a problem or a state of distress emerging, they should allow the students to correspond with their own personal Professor.*”

B) Advantages of applying CWP as an opportunity to look into students’ inner world and provide them with a personalized response that meets their needs

In one form or another, all the teachers mentioned that using the CWP tool in their classroom opened up an opportunity for them to **glimpse into the private world** of each student, listen to their voice and gain direct information they could not have otherwise obtained, even through a private conversation. In particular: “*The price of entering each child’s world is minimal, you need to just hand out sheets of paper. But on the way out you discover an entire world, a deep, rich inner world of each and every child, that I never would have been exposed to if not for those letters...such depth cannot be discovered simply by observing a student’s behavior, since such an analysis is subject to my own personal interpretation and does not necessarily reflect the reality of the student.*”; “*The letters and reflections written by the students allowed me to learn about their challenges in math, challenges that for a variety of reasons students do not express explicitly in the one-on-one dialogues I conduct with them. From the letters, I could see that they were interested in sharing with me what they are going through, and something in this writing enables them to bring up very personal things they don’t broach in conversation.*”

Half of the teachers addressed the voice of quiet students: “*In the past, when I tried to understand the reasons for a student’s difficulties, I was usually met with silence. Reading the letters enabled me to hear the voice of the silent, withdrawn students who do not usually speak up or participate in class discussions. The one who wrote the most in his letters was actually one of my quietest students. From the letter that he wrote to the Professor I could understand that he felt that most of the time I turn to the same students, and there was no room left for him.*”; “*To my surprise, there were students who explained that they did not participate actively in lessons because they didn’t want other students to think they were stupid and that they don’t belong in the 5-point [advanced] class. It seems to me that the Correspondence with the Professor helped them begin to overcome their fear of being laughed at.*”

All the teachers mentioned that the unmediated entry into the student’s world enabled them to provide a **rapid and direct response** to student needs:

My quick response to what the students wrote about homework, and the

changes we decided upon together in class, quickly brought about a calmer atmosphere. The speed with which the results were obtained amazed me. I could actually feel the change in student behavior in class as a result of it.

As a direct outcome of the rapid response, teachers felt that the students began to trust them:

The fact that the students see that I responded to the things they wrote has led them to develop their trust in me, and that creates a feedback cycle. They are opening up more and more, and in fact, are letting me help them reach a point where they help themselves.

Furthermore:

Since the students began the letter-writing, when I give them class assignments and explain how to work on them, I always quote their words, the recommendations they gave themselves in their reply letters, and things I made a note of and kept in mind. At first, the children were surprised by this, but I pointed out to them that everything they wrote is very important to me, I read the letters several times, and they are really “alive” in my mind. For me, it was a real personal revelation: understanding that despite my rich teaching experience, I am still not perfect. I shared with them that I am ready to admit that I don’t know everything and to learn new things from them.

C) Advantages of applying CWP as an opportunity to cultivate the ability of students to help themselves

Beyond the ability of the tool to allow teachers to address the stated needs of their students, the teachers believe that the greatest advantage of the tool is the fact that it enables to cultivate **the ability of students to help themselves**:

The tool provides teachers with a simple means to teach students to help themselves. Not only dealing with their math challenges but preparing them for coping with life’s difficulties in general. At the end of the day, it’s the students and not anyone else who are giving themselves advice and choosing their actions when they correspond with the Professor.

In particular, the use of the tool helps students take **personal responsibility for their learning**:

I could absolutely see the change in my students. Gradually they learned to take personal responsibility for learning math instead of blaming the whole world for their problems and difficulties. Because if their personal Professor tells them it’s up to them alone, then it becomes their insight.

One of the teachers reported:

In the first lesson on the canonic circle, a student asked a clarification question. Another student said to him, talk to your Professor, and everybody laughed and nodded in agreement. That just shows that they understood the potential of the tool as a way of helping themselves.

Apart from personal responsibility for learning, the teachers believe that the tool enables students to **take responsibility for their lives** in general:

Usually, tools of this kind are only intended for teachers, consultants or parents, and they are the ones who are meant to apply them. Often these tools are

only diagnostic and students only put a checkmark on a questionnaire when they are asked to respond to it. This kind of approach diminishes the role of children in finding solutions to situations that affect them and their lives, solutions that they should be reaching on their own, and instead, they only think within the narrow framework offered by the questionnaire.

The correspondence with the Professor enables the children to engage in role-playing, think broadly, and look for solutions independently. Thinking about these things is expressed in the actual construction of the tool, because there is no framework or schema that limit the students to writing certain things in a certain way, and everyone can express themselves as they like.

I am not a psychologist, but everyone knows that adolescents have many issues, mainly personal and emotional ones. Scholastic issues are just an outcome of these. My students suggested writing to the Professor about topics that to them are more important than studies, love and disappointment, friendship, relationships, and breakups. From the letters they wrote and the conversations we had afterward, I learned that their letter-writing helps them let go of some of the anxieties found at this age. They start to feel they are capable of making, on their own, changes that are relevant to their lives. They don't need to turn to outside help for everything, and they understand that in life there won't always be someone to lead them by the hand. I am sure that in the long run this can make life easier for them and improve their self-image.

3.1.2. Teacher Perceptions on the Limitations of Using CWP in the Classroom

Eleven teachers addressed limitations of using the tool in their classroom, where the two primary ones mentioned were the difficulty of the teachers in coping with the emotional honesty and the high degree of openness of the students, and the difficulty of the need to provide them a response, particularly without appropriate methodological training.

Regarding the difficulties deriving from **coping with the frankness of students**, teachers claimed:

When I read the children's letters I sometimes felt embarrassed. Everything was so honest and profound, that I felt I had invaded the boundaries of something very personal and that I am doing something that perhaps I shouldn't be doing. I understood that sometimes we teachers are not even ready for this level of trust and honesty from our students, and I asked myself, how does one cope with such frankness?

The difficulties deriving from a **lack of appropriate methodological training** touched upon the fact that:

Today teachers are expected to have the knowledge and ability to respond to the emotional and social needs of their students. It's not clear on what basis they expect us to do this. At no point in my professional life, beginning with the teacher college where I studied, did I ever encounter any kind of instruction in this context. I didn't acquire any tools that could help me understand students'

emotional and personal difficulties, and certainly not one that would help me respond to them. The correspondence tool provides a solution for both of these. But one has to be very careful, because if a teacher is not sensitive enough, they might not be able to provide a proper response to their student, and might even cause further harm. This tool is wonderful, but it's important to study it already during teacher training so that we can learn it gradually, and of course, try it out on ourselves first.

Teachers mentioned that:

Without the prior self-experience that we had with the tool, I would not have understood its didactic, pedagogic, methodological, and reflective aspects. Hence, this must be a necessary prerequisite. It's not that it was easy for me to write about my issues, but it was precisely from this place that I was able to connect to the feelings of the students while they were undergoing this process themselves and to be convinced of the importance of using this tool. Perhaps this is the limitation of the tool since teachers can decide to offer it to the students without having experienced it themselves before.

3.2. Findings Pertaining to the Second Research Question

How do teachers perceive the insights they gained about their students following the implementation of the tool in their classrooms?

Let us note that before the teachers engaged with the tool in their classrooms, they believed that *“this generation, who communicates most of the time via WhatsApp, using trivial symbols and syllables, will not be able to write letters about their personal or emotional difficulties.”* They were surprised to discover that many students could actually express themselves at a high level of writing, and raised a possible explanation that *“we only discover this when we ask them to write about real things that have depth, things that interest them and are close to their hearts.”*

After being exposed to the letters the students wrote, teachers indicated that they changed their perceptions of the students in a wide variety of aspects. First, they discovered the willingness of students to open up and express themselves honestly about their challenges and subtly imply to teachers what they expect of them. Furthermore, they discovered the ability of the students to identify and state their difficulties on their own, build their own plan of action for managing these difficulties, and take personal responsibility for carrying them out. In the following section, we present some of the points the teachers raised in the context of the changes in their impression of the students.

3.2.1. Willingness of Students to Really Open up to Their Teachers

Before the execution of the first assignment, all the teachers were skeptical about student willingness to write at all, let alone do so openly and honestly. The teachers quickly discovered, however, that *“the letters the students wrote to the Professor showed that they really wanted to tell me about their difficulties.”* One of the teachers commented:

I'm sure you [the first researcher] remember how skeptical I was at first. I said then that very few would write, and even fewer would truly write about their difficulties. I even thought there would be some who would make a joke out of it in front of everyone, and drag others into doing the same. The turning point came right at the start, when I saw that students were sitting and writing and from the sidelines, I looked at their faces, which seemed to be filled with light. I was very surprised when I saw they were really writing, and writing a lot.

The fact that students feel they want to share their inner world with others, in particular with their teachers, when the teachers express an interest in it, was a surprising discovery for the teachers:

I must admit that I did not expect such a high level of openness and honesty from my students. I was very surprised to find that they trust me. It seemed as if they were just waiting for me to listen to them.

The honesty of the students stunned me. They bared their souls, and they told me they didn't know these things were important to me or interested me, because I am only their math teacher. I understood that if I show them how important they are to me, they will be happy to cooperate with me.

3.2.2. Student Expectations of Their Teachers

From the response letters the students wrote to themselves on behalf of the Professor and from the personal reflections, teachers learned about student expectations from them, the emotional support they need, and the kind of language they would like the teachers to use when conversing with. As far as **emotional support**, teachers noted that:

The fact that I was attentive to the students, and that it was important for me to listen to them, already gave them a good feeling and a sense of relief. They wrote to me, for example, "Finally there is someone who wants to listen to me in this school. It makes the math teacher a person like me, and not just a remote figure who just teaches me math. It gives me the feeling that I am really important to her," or "I never thought that my math teacher was interested in me at all. Teachers never asked me what was hard for me or how I feel. The fact that you are interested in me gives me a very good feeling, and strengthens my confidence." And even a statement like "Thank you, Professor, for at least listening to me. I feel relieved that I told you about myself and my challenges (even though you are an imagery professor)."

Regarding the kind of **language** the teachers felt the students wanted to be spoken to, teachers mentioned the following:

I learned a great deal from the response letters the students wrote. It's as if they're telling me how they want me to talk to them. For example, statements like "you should be less tense"; "it is all in your head"; "success breeds success", these are things that they apparently expect to hear from me. For me, this was very valuable.

It was interesting to see that many students began their response letter in a tone suggesting that the Professor was identifying with them. For example,

“Dear Roi, I was also once a student your age, and I remember that I had the same problems. So I very much understand you and how hard it is for you to feel that you are not doing well enough in mathematics. So don’t worry. Today I am a professor, and over the years I have learned how to cope with these problems, and I am now going to tell you some of the things I did when I was your age to cope with them and give you tips that will help you overcome your issues.”

I was really moved to read in the response letters the praise the students gave themselves and the forgiveness they showed toward themselves, “you are smart and a good student with creative thinking, but sometimes you are not focused”, “I am sure you will do very well if you can just stop being stressed out about doing well in mathematics”, “Dear Noa, it is very important to me that you do well in mathematics. You should know that I am always ready to help you and will always find time for you.” It is as if they are reporting to me what psychological tactics they use to talk to themselves, first of all, praise, and only then what actually needs improvement; in this way, they are prompting us on what to say and how to say it.

3.2.3. Student Ability to Identify Their Challenges and Find Ways to Address Them on Their Own

All the teachers were surprised to discover how **aware** the students are of their issues and what they stem from. For example:

There are many psychological considerations that disturb children at home. I didn’t know about these and thought that some of the children were simply “weak” and that they suffer from attention deficit, but it turns out that there are all kinds of things that distract them. For example, students wrote that they understand now how much the fact that their parents argue all the time unsettles them, or the fact that their girlfriend broke up with them, or that friends wrote about them in the class WhatsApp group. They were really able to explain how these things prevent them from being focused in their studies.

Teachers were astonished when they realized that “*These children are ready to admit their difficulties. That was a real surprise. They look for the causes of their difficulties within themselves, and don’t blame others, or a lack of time or energy, or circumstances. They honestly say something like, it is much easier to play on my phone, and it doesn’t take as much mental effort as thinking about mathematical proofs.*”

Moreover, the teachers were amazed by the fact that students are capable of **finding a source of support within themselves** and planning ways to cope with the challenges.

I didn’t expect students to find their own solutions to their problems. Before this, I thought that if I were aware of students’ problems, I would be the only one who could find solutions for them. I discovered that they are capable of identifying their own solutions that I wouldn’t even have thought of.

I discovered that these children think very positively about things. They are able to identify and analyze their challenges, and give themselves recommenda-

tions for a plan of action, actually broken down into stages, one step at a time. The recommendations are not just about coping with difficulties in math, but also personal and emotional challenges. It gave them confidence, as if they can hang a sign up in their room with a list of recommendations they have given themselves, and be reminded of them again and again, to act in keeping with what they wrote, to cross out whatever is no longer relevant and to add new things as needed, a personal wording of an actual call to action.

In the context of discovering student abilities to identify difficulties and **propose ways of coping** with them, four teachers expressed the following:

The fact that I was so surprised by this discovery about the students is entirely my fault. I never made the students feel I'm interested in their issues and the reasons behind them, or that I am interested in helping them address those. And it isn't because I wasn't interested or ready to make an effort to help them. I admit that I simply didn't know how to get such a message across without it seeming artificial. And here we are, as soon as I gave the students the opportunity to tell the imaginary Professor about their difficulties, they were happy to do so with a sense of commitment and involvement. The moment they understood I'm interested in them, they simply began to see me differently. Now I'm not just their strict math teacher, I'm also a person to whom they are important. And that has changed their whole attitude toward me. I am truly grateful for the opportunity.

3.2.4. Characteristics of Student Scholastic Difficulties

All the teachers admitted that they were not aware of many of the challenges the students wrote about. In particular:

Because these are students studying advanced-level mathematics, you can't even imagine that they have any scholastic difficulties. It never occurred to me that there are problems that derive from stress and overload, or fear of losing their status as good students. I always looked only at grades as the measure of difficulty, and suddenly I discover each student wrote about some other difficulty or even several of them.

The scholastic difficulties identified by the teachers from the student letters to the imaginary Professor can be divided into three main types: personal, emotional, and cognitive.

A) Personal difficulties

The personal difficulties mentioned in the letters, as described by the teachers, pertained mainly to the student workload, which does not align with their wish to have free time during after-school hours for non-scholastic activities:

I always thought that the children were just lazy and that's why they avoided doing homework. But it became clear to me that although doing well in math is very important to them, it is just as important for them to go to extracurricular clubs, clear their head on the computer, or just to go to the mall or meet with friends. Students wrote that all the homework I give them is really a heavy load, and they think it isn't fair to put them in this situation at their age. They don't know how to deal with the conflict between the desire to do well, on one hand,

and the wish to do other things after school, on the other.

Other difficulties were linked to the lack of open interaction with the teacher, including the following:

I understood that they are embarrassed to ask me for help. Knowing how to ask for help is a very important skill, and I should have spoken to them about it. It shouldn't be taken for granted that students develop this ability on their own.

Teachers also mentioned difficulties associated with the personal traits of the students, such as: *“Independent learning skills is something they say they lack. For example, they don't know how to organize their time, how to arrange their tasks (including homework), from where to begin to do things.”* Also:

It was surprising to discover that there are students with low self-esteem or that lack self-confidence. It was surprising because I didn't see any connection between the image they had of themselves and their grades. And, as teachers, and I say this regrettably, we tend to look first and foremost at their achievements and not at who they are.

B) Emotional difficulties

For the teachers, discovering the emotional challenges the students face was the most surprising part of the scholastic difficulties they wrote about:

On the face of it, it seems that if you're a 5-point [advanced] student, then you have no real problem with math, or you hide it so as not to be considered “stupid”... To my surprise, I discovered that, for example, there are students who don't do homework because of negative feelings such as fear of failure or diminished self-image as a math student, and not because of laziness. That really changed my approach toward homework. I understood that it is not just a drill for the students, today I make sure in advance that they've understood the formulation of the tasks and what they have to do.

I was very surprised by the high level of stress surrounding exams as well as by the other issues the students mentioned...even the really good students in high-level math... I discovered that most of the student issues were actually emotional, such as problems with the sense of self-efficacy in math, and the emotional issues of adolescence...we talked about it, and the students came up with ideas about how to learn in order to regulate their stress.

In this context, teachers noted:

What is interesting is that students blame themselves for not being able to cope with issues or understand themselves and their behavior. There are those who don't believe in themselves and in their ability to make a change in their lives, and sometimes this gives them a feeling of despair, or anxiety and tension, or even apathy. And these are students who are quite good in math. But what is even more interesting is that many of them wrote that thanks to the Correspondence with the Professor tool, they were able to understand themselves and the feelings they experience.

Other expressions related to the students' strong sense that they are actually dependent on others:

There were students who wrote that sometimes they feel helpless because their success doesn't only depend on them. They feel they're dependent on their teachers, and their self-confidence often depends on the teachers too, for example, how highly the teacher regards them, how clearly the teacher explains the topic, the atmosphere the teacher creates during the lesson, and even the teacher's mood or personality. They also feel dependent on their surroundings, parents, friends, and so on. In fact, they expect their environment to support them and help them cope with the challenges, or fill the void created when they are unable to support themselves in times of scholastic difficulties. Such students wrote that they can't have a constructive dialogue with themselves, and I understand from this that they expect me to help them learn to do so. I am not sure I could do this well without guiding them to correspond with the Professor.

C) Cognitive difficulties

Six teachers reported that there were students who thought that the difficulties described to the Professor were only supposed to pertain to the study of mathematics content, and they asked them if they could open the textbook to remember what they found particularly difficult, and copy the wording of exercises they found hard to resolve. In other words: *"it didn't even occur to these students that I meant hearing about their personal difficulties."* In such cases, the teachers clarified the intention and stressed the fact that they could address any kind of scholastic issue, not only ones relating to understanding a specific math topic. Namely, teachers understood that:

The students do not expect us to be attentive to all their issues; rather, they think that the only thing that interests us as math teachers is their problems with math. I think that this expectation is well-grounded because in the lessons we always ask them what problems they've had with the homework, referring to solving the math problem, and not to the emotions that prevented them from being able to solve it.

Since these are high-level math students, the teachers believed the students have no cognitive difficulties. Note that in the assignment addressing how students cope with homework, and in particular in the response letters, there was, indeed, little mention of cognitive difficulties, but in the assignments that dealt with scholastic difficulties for specific study topics, a wide range of cognitive problems surfaced.

3.3. Findings Pertaining to the Third Research Question

How do teachers perceive the insights they gained regarding their professional role following the implementation of the tool in their classrooms?

As we can see from the findings described above, implementation of the CWP tool resulted in newly acquired knowledge by the research participants about their students, about themselves and about their relationship with their students. A key consequence of this was the change in their perception of their role as math teachers; in particular, the importance of paying attention to the voice and needs of their students.

3.3.1. The Teacher as an Educational Figure

As math teachers, their relationship with students is typically one based on different aspects of the subject matter rather than a personal one. The major change reported by the research participants in the context of the perception of their professional role, concerned the importance of listening to student voice, and consequently the ensuing change in the teacher-student relationship and the positioning of the teacher as a meaningful figure in student lives.

Developing awareness of the need to be **attentive to the students**, alongside the discovery of student needs for a listening ear and student willingness to share their issues with their teachers (even showing their excitement that the teacher is interested in listening to them), led the research participants, first and foremost, to change their perceptions about the traditional aspects of teacher-student relationships. Consequently, this brought them to the realization of how this contributed to the improved relations between them and their students and to an improved general atmosphere in the classroom. The reflections written by the teachers indicated that the advantages they attributed to these changes mainly concerned with the development of insights regarding the fact that one of their key roles is providing a supportive and relaxed environment in the classroom:

With the help of the tool, we managed to do something very important: to break the perceptions of “accepted roles” of the teacher-student relationship at school, because the tool, and especially my summary meeting with the students after they wrote their letters, turned me from a figure they perceived as somewhat condescending and cold into someone who is a partner in the process of creating a personal development plan for each student. This affected not only my relationship with the students but also their relationship with math and their image of the school. This is exactly the chain in which students start to feel they’re on an equal footing, they’re full partners with the teacher for their own educational process.

I always created an atmosphere with a kind of “authoritative regime”, I am the teacher, I am the one who knows everything, and I am the one who decides. From the student letters, I understood that this actually created a unidirectional learning process, and at times also generated unnecessary tension in the classroom. It was really not a very good feeling to see myself as reflected in the eyes of the students. All this has now changed dramatically, thanks to the tool. The level of trust between the students and me has grown, and I no longer need strict supervision of my students. Learning has become a two-way process, with teacher and students moving toward one another. And that has solved a large part of their behavioral issues, as well as learning problems. I understood that as a math teacher, the first thing I must do is ensure the development of that mutual trust.

Listening to student voices also led the teachers to understand that the students were not inclined to see them as people who would take interest in their world, even though many would have liked that:

I never thought it was important for students to talk to me about their problems. Now I am aware that teaching equations and formulae just isn’t enough... I

must also be their educator, an educational figure in the broader sense, of counselor, instructor, mentor, and guide, in other words, a significant person in their lives.

Another comment was: *“From the letters the students wrote, I understood that first of all, my role is simply to be a human being. Only after that should I be their math teacher. We are all humans, before we are teachers and students.”* Other evidence of changed perceptions of this aspect of the teacher’s role also appears in earlier sections (see, for example, 3.2.1, 3.2.2).

3.3.2. Awareness of How Important It Is to Refrain from “Labeling” Students

The change in how teachers perceive their students led them to recognize their own tendency to label students, thereby often establishing a rigid attitude towards certain students:

Many letters very much surprised me. For example, students whom I assumed lacked mathematical thinking surprised me when they wrote how important math is to them. It’s clear to me that by labeling them as incapable of doing well in math, it caused me to pay less attention to them, and perhaps even to give them a message that they are not suited for 5-point math. But when I became aware of their daily struggle and their motivation to succeed in math, it led me to think about the damage I caused them by stigmatizing them, which just made my view of them rigid and superficial.

My role as a teacher is to see students beyond our natural tendency, as teachers, because we’ve gotten used to label them as “smart/stupid”, “science-oriented/humanities-oriented”, “diligent/lazy”, etc. Being caught up in the daily routine, I forget that each child is an individual, and these labels put up a barrier between teachers and students, and in fact, they cause teachers to have a misguided view of the students and not see them as a whole person.

Furthermore, labeling some students as “excellent students” also turned out to be an obstacle, as the teachers understood:

When teaching high-level math, we automatically label students as “outstanding” and “not outstanding”. Since the outstanding ones have no difficulties, as seen in their grades, we ignore the possibility that they might have other issues. From the letters, I understood that these students need and deserve personal attention no less than others, especially in terms of emotional support and issues stemming from their perfectionism.

4. Discussion

In this article, we have described the tool “Correspondence with the Professor” and its goals, placing an emphasis on how it equips teachers with a means to help cultivate student ability to cope on their own with issues that affect their studies. This includes identifying the issues and what they stem from, and designing ways to independently address them.

As mentioned, the importance attributed to the tool aligns with the principles

of the [OECD position paper \(2018\)](#) regarding the need to develop every learner as a whole person realizing their potential who takes responsibility for their actions. It also aligns with earlier notions addressing sociocultural learning and personalized learning, which place great value on listening to learner voice ([Bray & McClaskey, 2017](#); [Hannafin et al., 2014](#); [Jones et al., 2013](#)). The methodology employed when using the tool also aligns with the ideas underlying social-emotional learning (SEL), since it enables students to channel their emotions and set goals for themselves. Moreover, it was important to us to develop a tool that would give teachers direct access to the world of their students, establishing a dialogue in the spirit suggested by [Freire \(2000\)](#), and particularly a tool that is easy to apply and requires no special means, one that can be used for any age groups (once the children can express themselves in writing) and at any level of study, at any given opportunity and in any context.

As we mentioned in the Introduction and contextual background section, the ideas underpinning the design of the tool are not typically applied in schools in practice. Given classroom challenges and a lack of suitable training, teachers find it hard to cater to the abovementioned principles and ideas ([Prusak & Shriki, 2017, 2019](#); [Talvio et al., 2013](#); [Waaajida et al., 2013](#)). Consequently, in studies that accompanied the design of the tool, we examined our basic assumptions regarding the solution that the tool provides to both teachers and students. In these studies, participants included 77 teachers of different subject areas in 5th through 12th grade in Israel and in post-Soviet states along with over 2000 students. All the teachers experienced the tool as part of a professional development course before applying it in their own classrooms. In the current article, we have presented the views of 18 Israeli teachers of advanced (5-point level) math in the 10th grade (a total of 597 students). During a single school year, the teachers included four CWP assignments in their classes. In the Results section, we presented statements taken from the individual interviews, the reflective questionnaire that accompanied the teachers as they were trying out the tool, and in particular, quotations from the passages the teachers wrote during their experience of the first assignment, where students wrote to the imaginary Professor about issues related to doing math homework. In addition, we included statements from the discussions that took place as part of the professional development course (see list of research tools in Section 2.4). On the basis of these statements, we will now address the research questions.

4.1. Teacher Perception of the Benefits and Limitations of the CWP Tool

As the findings show, the teachers did, in fact, find the CWP tool accessible and felt it would be easy to apply for all ages and levels of study and for any context. The teachers believe that these features allow the tool to be used at any time and under whatever circumstances they see fit, with no special preparation for students. All the teachers mentioned that using the tool in their classrooms gave them an opportunity to pay unmediated attention to the voice of their students

and become familiar with their world. The information they were exposed to through the use of the tool enabled them to get to know the world of their students in a way they never knew before, even after having had individual conversations with them or observing them over time in class. This was especially true for students who do not express themselves much. The teachers felt that they were then able to customize their responses to student needs in the spirit of personalized learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Similarly to the findings of Bray and McClaskey (2017), the research participants felt that a rapid and direct response to general student needs, and in particular at an individual level, contributed to strengthening trust and improving the relationship between teacher and students, and an increase in students' motivation to learn. As a direct consequence, the teachers became more cognizant of the importance of listening to their students and meeting their needs, whether one-on-one or in full class sessions. In other words, applying the tool in the classroom actually made it possible to create a cyclical process (Figure 1), which teachers had not previously realized was necessary nor possible.

Note that other advantages attributed by the teachers to the tool pertained to the opportunity to reconsider their didactic and pedagogical approaches, and adapt them to student needs (in the case described in this article, rethinking the role of homework, what the right amount of it is and what are the proper types of tasks).

Apart from launching the process shown in Figure 1, the research findings indicate that teachers see the CWP as an effective tool that students may use at any time in their lives. In this sense, the research participants have found that the tool does, in fact, cater to the teacher's role of supporting student ability to take responsibility for their own actions (Hannafin et al., 2014; OECD, 2018), thereby preparing them to cope with any challenges they might encounter later on in life (Harari, 2018), not just scholastic ones. In this context, we point out the distinction made by teachers between tools intended for the use of teachers, educators, and parents, which are, for the most part, diagnostic, and the CWP

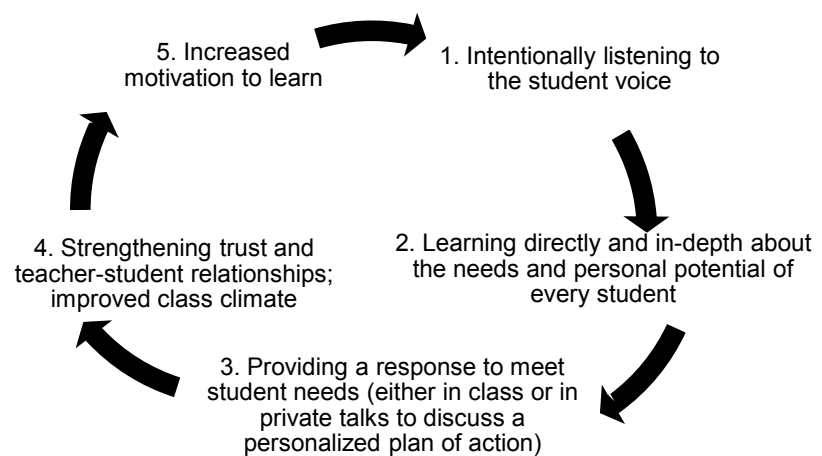


Figure 1. A cyclical process generated by the use of the CWP tool in class.

tool, which is unique in that it is aimed directly at the students and enables them to delve into their inner world on their own, identifying the challenges they are facing and working out a plan of action to address them. This distinction also highlights the insight teachers gained on the need to be sensitive to the challenges faced by adolescents, which are not necessarily linked directly to their studies.

It is important to point out that teachers noted that *“I can’t say explicitly what it is in this writing that makes students open up to themselves and to me in such a deep and real way, as they never did before.”* On this point, we note that in the research literature (e.g., [Hunt & Sampson, 1998](#)) it is common to relate to three main types of writing practices, literary, process-oriented and therapeutic, each with a different purpose. Literary practices aim to create some kind of product (attitudes, mindsets, personal experience, imagination, etc.) for future publication. Process-oriented practices aim to initiate some kind of process and provide people with a tool for self-exploration that can be implemented at different stages in life. Therapeutic practices are aimed at both the process and the product. Such a practice, expressed as writing a “letter to oneself”, is the core of the CWP tool ([Prusak & Shriki, 2017](#)). This practice enables writers to deal in depth with issues that are bothering them, develop their ability to confront their feelings and motives, and help them resolve the issues on their own ([Gray, 1992](#)).

Regarding the limitations of the CWP tool, teachers related to their possible embarrassment due to student honesty and openness, and their insufficient knowledge of how to provide direct solutions to student needs. Therefore, in their opinion, there is great importance for their own prior experience with the tool in order to fully understand its inherent potential and how it might be used. Moreover, they mentioned that in their teacher training and professional development courses they received no instruction about tools and approaches aimed at identifying emotional and personal issues of students, let alone how to help them cope with such issues. These findings concur with those of other scholars (e.g., [Prusak & Shriki, 2017; 2019; Talvio et al., 2013; Waajida et al., 2013](#)). Our recommendation, therefore, is that teacher training programs include hands-on experience with the CWP tool and discussion of ways it can be integrated into their future class teaching.

4.2. Teachers’ New Insights Regarding Their Students

As mentioned in the description of the CWP tool (see Section 1), its in-class implementation depends first and foremost on teacher willingness to use it; this is related directly to teacher professional knowledge, including knowledge about students ([Shulman, 1986; 1987](#)). A literature survey conducted by [Hill and Chin \(2018\)](#) indicates the importance attributed to teacher knowledge of their students for the quality of teaching and the ability to adjust teaching to student needs. This knowledge also constitutes one of the decisive factors in teacher decision-making both inside and outside the classroom, as well as in their judg-

ment of student traits (Borko, Roberts, & Shavelson, 2008; Thiede, Brendefur, Carney, Champion, Turner, Stewart, & Osguthorpe, 2018).

Consequently, scholars are searching for ways to improve the accuracy of teacher judgment. Nonetheless, as is evident from the research review carried out by Thiede et al. (2018), most studies concerning teacher judgment relate to the cognitive aspect of student learning (e.g. comprehension, knowledge, application, intellectual skills) and its effect on teacher instructional decisions. Of course, as already described several decades ago by Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956), cognition is not the only aspect of learning; there are also affective and psychomotor aspects, where affect includes feelings, emotions, attitudes, values, motivation, and more, while the psychomotor aspect involves motor skills and physical mobility. In the framework of the current study and in line with Sousa (2011), we also ascribed importance to teacher judgment through the prism of the affective aspects of learning, due to their centrality.

As we saw in Section 3.2, teachers set out with prior generalized and definitive perceptions about the personal characteristics of students, including doubts about their ability to express themselves profoundly in writing, let alone expressing personal and emotional difficulties. However, already with the first writing assignment, teachers were surprised to discover the great interest students had in writing the letters and the openness expressed in their content. Teachers reported how moved they were by student willingness and desire to share their issues with them so honestly and openly; they saw this as an expression of trust. This discovery led teachers to some serious rethinking, as they understood that their students did not believe teachers take any interest in their personal and emotional lives. Note that from the reflections written by the teachers, we observe that they consider getting to know the inner world of their students to be important and that they are glad the students see them as significant figures expressing an interest in their world. However, at the same time, the teachers also admitted that their lack of awareness of these issues is the result of the lack of a clear message given to the students regarding their interest in student learning issues and teacher readiness to help them address these.

Such a situation has direct implications on the teacher-student relationship; this, in turn, affects student achievement and personal well-being. As indicated by Gasser, Grütter, Buholzer, and Wettstein (2018), student perceptions of teacher care and teacher justice constitute important components of the student-teacher relationship. Nonetheless, students often experience little emotional care in schools; this has negative implications for their academic success and social-emotional adjustment. Such a situation becomes progressively worse over the years as students get older, because classroom interactions tend to become less personal and more focused on academic achievements, especially in educational systems where student achievements are constantly monitored (as is the case in our local education system). Hence, the close familiarity of teachers with the student world beyond cognitive aspects of learning, and teacher awareness of

the expectations that students have of them is so critical. The findings of the study indicate that CWP allows teachers to develop such awareness.

The first exposure to the student's world led to gaining insights into student expectations from teachers, both in terms of the kind of support they expect to receive, and their preferred means of communication, including the use of empowering and encouraging words and expressions of empathy.

One of the meaningful discoveries for teachers was how deeply students were aware of their issues and what they stem from, and the fact that students are ready to admit their difficulties and take personal responsibility for the reasons behind them. Teachers were also surprised by student ability to find a source of support within themselves and to outline for themselves suitable ways of coping with their difficulties independently.

Similarly to what was reported by Gasser et al. (2018), the research participants testified that they had previously focused on cognitive difficulties associated with studying high-level math, in particular, "*the lack of mathematical ability to study mathematics at this level*" (although teachers did not explicitly specify what they mean by "mathematical ability"), and that it had not often occurred to them that there may be other learning issues. Through the letters, the teachers learned that student learning difficulties touch upon a variety of personal and social-emotional issues connected with their daily conduct. Teachers reported discovering that there were challenges related to the interaction between students and those close to them, such as quarrels between parents, breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, and shaming experienced on social media; difficulties related to finding a balance between the importance they attribute to success in math and social activity such as meeting with friends after school or attending extra-curricular activities; difficulties stemming from mental stress due to study overload and the fear of losing the prestigious status of being in the advanced math class; difficulties stemming from the lack of independent learning skills, including time management and the asking for help when needed; difficulties stemming from low self-image and a lack of self-efficacy, often in contrast with their impressive achievements in math, and the fear of appearing "stupid" if they do not succeed.

4.3. Teachers' New Perceptions of Their Professional Role

The research literature on teacher perception of their professional role and professional identity is broad and far beyond the scope of this paper. It should be mentioned, however, that in general, the literature (e.g. Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000) states that teachers perceive their professional role as a combination of three aspects of expertise, subject matter experts (knowledge and skills in the discipline being taught); didactical experts (knowledge and skills in planning, managing, and evaluating teaching and learning processes); and pedagogical experts (knowledge and skills in supporting student social, emotional, and ethical development). Our study participants are teachers of high-level

10th-grade math, and their reflections indicate that before experiencing the CWP tool in their classrooms they perceived their primary role in terms of subject matter and didactic expertise, namely, in terms of pedagogical content knowledge (Ball, Thames, & Phelps, 2008; Shulman, 1986; 1987). As we saw, teachers indicated that reading the letters enabled them to recognize student ability to identify the source of their issues and to plan ways of addressing these. This, together with student willingness to be open and to share, led the teachers to become better acquainted with the world of the students and to understand what their students expect of them. In addition, teachers recognized the rapid positive consequences of implementing student recommendations on reinforcing the student-teacher relationship and enhancing students' motivation to learn. All of these led the teachers to reconsider their educational role. The most significant changes reported by the teachers on this latter point pertain to their pedagogical expertise, the importance of an open and supportive teacher-student relationship and its contribution to improving the class climate, with each side moving toward the other (Freire, 2000, as quoted in Section 1 above). Teachers understood that their tendency to label students dichotomously as "smart/stupid", "science-oriented/humanities-oriented", "hard-working/lazy", and so forth, without really knowing each and every student holistically, has implications for their relationships with the students and for the damage to the student ability to realize their inherent personal and scholastic potential. In particular, premature labeling blocks the actualization of the potential of low-achieving students, since the teachers do not expect students they labeled as "weak" to succeed. Moreover, the labeling also prevents teachers from offering emotional support to high-achieving students, although they very much need it.

As indicated by Ercole (2009), teachers do have a tendency to label their students; this has implications for student expectations, which also affects teacher-student relationships and student academic achievements. Indeed, according to the labeling theory, labeled persons perceive themselves in line with the symbols of the label attached to them and thus conform to the predictions imprinted by the label. Adverse effects may also occur in the case of a "positive" label, due to the pressure created on the tagged person to prove they are worthy of the label (Becker, 1973).

The change in teachers' perceptions of their professional role, made possible by applying the CWP tool, is also in line with more contemporary pedagogy, specifically, the principles and goals embedded in SEL pedagogy, which in recent years has gradually become an integral part of school education policy in many places around the world (Shriver & Weissberg, 2020). According to CASEL's definition,

SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (<https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>).

The fundamental change in the perceptions of teachers on their professional role was a consequence of recognizing the value of listening to student voice, which is beyond “*merely being their math teacher*.” Today, many formal national policies recognize the importance of student voice, leading schools to value its contribution to improving the school system. Many students experience a sense of alienation and indifference in schools, which has implications on their persistence and achievements. However, since considering student voice allows students to feel valued, as if they are creators of knowledge and not just receivers, this can generate student-teacher partnerships (Mitra, 2018).

5. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Further Research

“Teachers—more than other members of our society—need to be lifelong learners.” (Fischer, 2000: p. 281)

The current study focused on math teachers, specifically those teaching advanced high-school math. Given our findings, however, we believe that ongoing use of the CWP by teachers contributes both to their personal and professional development as well as their reflective thinking; the CWP tool thus has the potential to support teacher ability to persevere with their learning throughout their professional life. We recommend that this potential continues to be explored in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Below are some specific recommendations for further research.

5.1. Suggestions for Further Research in the Context of Teacher Education

The findings indicate that the importance teachers attribute to acquiring tools suited to coping with various learning issues relating to the students, particularly, the personal and emotional aspects. There is evidence of the high value that teachers attribute to their own awareness of the expectations that students have of teachers, and their awareness of the ways in which teachers can respond to those expectations. Teacher opinions show that such tools must be acquired in the early stages of teacher training; in the words of one of the research participants:

The aim of teacher training is to equip future teachers with a professional toolkit, without which they cannot undertake the challenging path of teaching. The CWP makes this toolkit much more meaningful in terms of teacher readiness, which means that, as teachers, we will be better equipped.

Consequently, it would be useful to examine how early inclusion of the tool in teacher training helps future teachers learn about student expectations of teachers as a basis for learning about different approaches toward designing personal and class-based responses to student needs.

5.2. Suggestions for Further Research in the Context of Teacher Personal and Professional Development

The research findings indicate the great importance teachers attributed to per-

sonal experience with the CWP tool prior to employing it in their classroom in terms of what it gave them both at a personal level and at a professional one.

At the personal level, not expanded upon in this article, teachers noted that their experience with the CWP, in particular in writing the response letter from the imaginary professor, led them to relate to themselves more warmly and forgivingly: *“This tool has huge potential for giving myself love, accepting myself, especially when writing the response on behalf of the Professor.”* Further research should explore how the personal experience of the teachers with the CWP and with reading student letters supports the development of a culture of reflective analysis among teachers, and the consequent implications on the personal perspective (with or without connection to the professional aspect).

At the professional level, several aspects have surfaced and should be further explored in greater depth:

- Beyond the value ascribed by teachers to their professional role as subject, didactic and pedagogical experts (Beijaard et al., 2000), the primary change expressed by the perception of their educational role was related to their role as mentors, even though they did not use this word explicitly. In other words, teachers differentiated between their perception of their professional role as math teachers and their perception of their role as educators in a broader sense. Indeed, in recent years, educational researchers indicate the importance of the teacher as a mentor (e.g., Aderet-German & Dromi, 2021). Further research might examine whether and how ongoing use of the CWP in the classroom contributes to the development of teacher professional awareness and identity as mentors of their students, beyond being experts in disciplinary content, didactics, and pedagogy.
- As we saw, research participants believe that the use of CWP in the classroom enables teachers to get to know the world of their students more deeply, thereby learning to listen to the student voice and find ways to meet their needs, as well as support the development of student ability to help themselves autonomously. During our study, we were asked by a number of teachers whether we thought they should share information gleaned from the letters and from the ensuing class discussions with parents. The involvement of parents in the education system is a complex issue (some aspects of this are addressed, for example, in the book by Hargreaves, 2005), hence we refrained from giving recommendations on this matter. As such, we propose exploring ethical, professional, and personal aspects pertaining to sharing letter content with parents, from the perspective of both the students themselves and of the teachers and parents as a basis for cooperation between the latter two.

5.3. Suggestions for Further Research in the Context of Students

The current article did not address the contribution of the CWP to the students from their own perspective; from teacher reports, however, we have been able to

learn that student skills of reflective observation of themselves developed from one assignment to the next, that the process they underwent became both deeper and broader, and the advice they gave themselves in their response letters became gradually more constructive, detailed and much more practical. In the current article, we also focused on the findings reported by participants following the first writing assignment, issues pertaining to doing math homework, and thus little evidence of the cognitive aspects expressed in the later writing assignments was presented. In further research, we propose exploring the contribution that introducing CWP makes to student ability to:

- identify the range of issues that concern them;
- build themselves a practical work plan based on the recommendations they had given themselves in their response letters;
- implement their work plan over time.

Further research may also explore the lasting effects these have on student capability in coping with personal and academic issues, as well as the teacher's role in this regard.

In conclusion, the CWP tool has been designed first and foremost to provide teachers with a way to cultivate student ability to help themselves. As such, teachers need not be able to provide a direct solution to student needs, nor must they be obligated to provide a solution beyond individual guidance in building their personal work plan on the basis of the recommendations they wrote to themselves. We do believe, however, that when teachers learn to see one of their primary responsibilities as helping their students grow, they will view the tool as a unique opportunity for their own personal and professional development and for building a new and better relationship with their students.

We conclude with the words of psychologist, Lev Vygotsky:

The time has come to place the student on his own two feet... The child must himself be made to walk...and to decide what direction to follow. What is true as regards walking, that it can be learned only on one's own two feet, and only by one's own tumbles, is equally applicable to all aspects of education (Vygotsky, 1997: p. 342).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Aderet-German, T., & Dromi, E. (2021). Integrating Mentoring and Instruction: Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Role in Different Educational Contexts. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 27, 147-163.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.1933419>
- Ball, D. L., Thames, M. H., & Phelps, G. (2008). Content Knowledge for Teaching: What Makes It Special? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59, 389-407.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108324554>

- Becker, H. S. (1973). *Outsiders: Studies in Sociology and Deviance*. The Free Press.
- Beijaard, D., Verloop, N., & Vermunt, J. D. (2000). Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Identity: An Exploratory Study from a Personal Knowledge Perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 749-764. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(00\)00023-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00023-8)
- Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. David McKay Company.
- Borko, H., Roberts, S., & Shavelson, R. J. (2008). Teachers' Decision Making: From Alan J. Bishop to Today. In: P. Clarkson, & N. Presmeg (Eds.), *Critical Issues in Mathematics Education* (pp. 37-67). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-09673-5_4
- Bray, B., & McClaskey, K. (2017). *How to Personalize Learning*. Corwin: A SAGE Publishing Company.
- Bryant, A., & Charmaz, K. (2007). Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices. In A. Bryant, & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (pp. 1-28). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. SAGE.
- Chong, C.-H., & Yeo, K.-J. (2015). An Overview of Grounded Theory Design in Educational Research. *Asian Social Science*, 11, 258-268. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v11n12p258>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2005). *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leaders' Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs* (Illinois ed.). <https://casel.org/safe-and-sound-an-educational-leaders-guide-to-evidence-based-social-and-emotional-learning-sel-programs/>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education
- Ercole, J. (2009). *Labeling in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Their Effects on Students' Academic Potential*. Honors Scholar Theses. University of Connecticut. https://opencommons.uconn.edu/srhonors_theses/98
- Fischer, G. (2000). Lifelong Learning—More Than Training. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 11, 265-294.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th-Anniversary ed.). The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Gasser, L., Grütter, J., Buholzer, A., & Wettstein, A. (2018). Emotionally Supportive Classroom Interactions and Students' Perceptions of Their Teachers as Caring and Just. *Learning and Instruction*, 54, 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2017.08.003>
- Gray, J. (1992). *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships*. Harper-Collins Publishers.
- Hannafin, M. J., Hill, J. R., Land, S. M., & Lee, E. (2014). Student-Centered, Open Learning Environments: Research, Theory, and Practice. In M. Spector, M. D. Merrill, J. van

- Merrienboer, & M. P. Driscoll (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology* (pp. 641-651). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3185-5_51
- Harari, Y. N. (2018). *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. Spiegel & Grau, Penguin Random House.
- Hargreaves, A. (2005). *Extending Educational Change: International Handbook of Educational Change*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-4453-4>
- Hill, C. H., & Chin, M. (2018). Connections between Teachers' Knowledge of Students, Instruction and Achievement Outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55, 1076-1112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218769614>
- Hunt, C., & Sampson, S. (1998). *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Jones, L. (2007). *The Student-Centered Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, S. M., Bouffard, S. M., & Weissbourd, R. (2013). Educators' Social and Emotional Skills Vital to Learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94, 62-65.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309400815>
- Kenneth, H. (2003). Foundations for Learner-Centered Education: A Knowledge Base. *Education*, 124, 5-16.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2009). Designing a Qualitative Study. In L. Bickman, & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods* (2nd ed., pp. 214-253). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348858.n7>
- Mitra, D. (2018). Student Voice in Secondary Schools: The Possibility for Deeper Change. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56, 473-487.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2018-0007>
- Neuman, W. L. (2011). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (7th Ed.). Pearson.
- OECD (2018). *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030*.
[https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20\(05.04.2018\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf)
- Prusak, A., & Shriki, A. (2017). "Corresponding with the Professor": A Didactic Tool for Fostering Students' Ability to Identify Scholastic Difficulties and Ways of Coping with Them. *Creative Education*, 8, 1702-1719. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.810116>
https://file.scirp.org/pdf/CE_2017081815240222.pdf
- Prusak, A., & Shriki, A. (2019). Correspondence with the Professor: A Didactic Tool for Applying a Humanizing Pedagogy. In *The 7th International Conference on Teacher Education: The Story of Innovation in Teacher Education*. Mofet Institute.
- Shriver, T. P., & Weissberg, R. P. (2020). A Response to Constructive Criticism of Social and Emotional Learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 101, 52-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721720917543>
- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4-14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X015002004>
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57, 1-23.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.57.1.j463w79r56455411>
- Sousa, D. A. (2011). *How the ELL Brain Learns* (4th ed.). Corwin Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452219684>
- Talvio, M., Lonka, K., Komulainen, E., Kuusela, M., & Lintunen, T. (2013). Revisiting

Gordon'S Teacher Effectiveness Training: An Intervention Study on Teachers' Social and Emotional Learning. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, *11*, 693-716.

Thiede, K. W., Brendefur, J. L., Carney, M. B., Champion, J., Turner, L., Stewart, R., & Osguthorpe, R. D. (2018). Improving the Accuracy of Teachers' Judgments of Student Learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *76*, 106-115.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.08.004>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1997). *Educational Psychology*. St. Lucie Press.

Waajida, B., Garner, P. W., & Owen, J. E. (2013). Infusing Social-Emotional Learning into the Teacher Education Curriculum. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, *5*, 31-48.

Weissberg, R. P., & Cascarino, J. (2013). Academic Learning + Social-Emotional Learning = National Priority. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *95*, 8-13.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171309500203>

Willig, C. (2009). Discourse Analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (pp. 160-185). SAGE.

Yin, R. B. (2011). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. Guilford Press.