

## The Applicability of learner-centered education in refugee settings: The Syrian refugee teachers' case study

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### Abstract

Displacing the largest number of refugees in recent time is one of the devastating impacts of the Syrian war. Turkey hosts over 3.6 million Syrian refugees. Almost half of them are children in the preschool or primary school stage. Because refugee children are five times more likely to miss schooling than non-refugee children, the provision of high-quality education in refugee settings is emphasized in the literature, as it offers children and their community protection, security, social cohesion, and it also prevents conflicts. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to report some key findings of a qualitative study that primarily examined Syrian refugee teachers' perceptions of quality education and their experiences of pedagogical change, which included adoption of more learner-centered practices in line with the standards set by the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), an organization that guides the delivery of quality education in emergencies. This paper explores teachers' beliefs about learning, their education, training, and their perceptions of learner-centered education (LCE) and the implementation of LCE in an urban Syrian refugee school in Turkey. In addition, the paper investigates teachers' vision of good pedagogy within their realities and capacities. The findings from this study showed complex contextual influences affecting the educational provision for Syrian refugees and LCE implementation challenges. A key implication that arises from this study relates to the suitability of LCE as "best practice" in the refugee context.

### Keywords

Syrian refugees, quality education, good pedagogy, INEE, learner-centered education

### Quality Education in Refugee Settings

Providing education for children affected by conflict is as old as history. Nevertheless, the interest in researching education in conflict and emergencies is growing and the number of publications in this field has grown continuously (Blumör & Buttlar, 2007; Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011). In the education in emergencies literature, the complex relationship between education and conflict is recognized. Many authors emphasize the positive and negative roles of education, particularly in times of conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004; Harber, 2004; Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Nicolai &

Triplehorn, 2003; Pigozzi, 1999; Save the Children, 2017; Schweisfurth, 2013; Sinclair, 2001; Smith & Vaux, 2003; UNESCO, 2014).

According to a UNESCO (2014) report, which highlights the positive aspects of education, education is a lantern that shines a light on every stage of life, leading to a better life. Education enhances human rights and helps people claim their other rights, as they learn the obligations which they entail (Nicolai & Triplehorn; 2003; Pigozzi, 1999; Sinclair, 2001; UNESCO, 2014). Smith and Vaux (2003) indicate that education provides people with the necessary skills, knowledge, and values they need for their personal, social, and economic

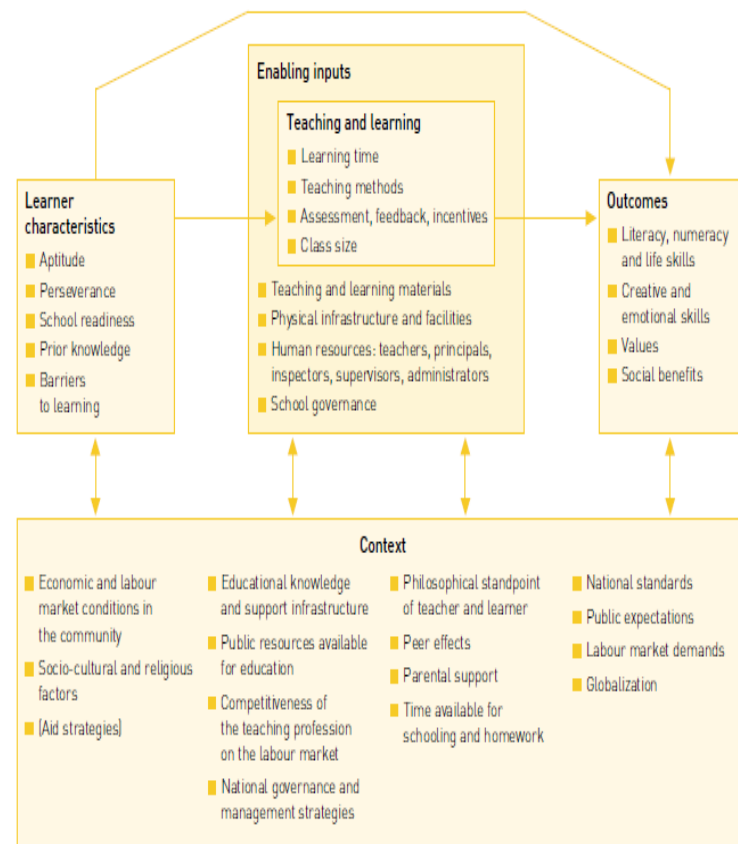
development. In addition, education plays a vital role in reducing poverty, as it increases their opportunities for obtaining well-paying jobs that, in turn, increases the economic growth of society (Save the Children, 2017; Smith & Vaux, 2003).

However, in *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict*, Bush and Saltarelli (2000) show “the constructive and destructive impacts of education—the two faces of education” (p. vii), an idea that challenges the assumptions about the real value of education. The uneven distribution of education, the denial of education as a weapon of war, the use of education as a weapon in cultural repression, the manipulation of history for political purposes, the manipulation of textbooks, the use of education to diminish self-worth, harboring hate toward others, segregated education to ensure inequality, lowered self-esteem, and stereotypes are examples of the negative roles of education that Bush and Saltarelli (2000) highlight. Therefore, curriculum content, pedagogy, and how education is financed and delivered can lead to positive or negative impacts (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004; Harber, 2004; Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Smith, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). To take advantage of the positive aspects of education, achieve development goals, and support peacebuilding, UNESCO (2014) stresses the importance of providing children with good quality education, particularly in times of conflict.

Despite the abundance of literature that acknowledges the importance of achieving quality education, several authors point out that there is no universal definition of quality education, particularly in emergencies (Alexander, 2015; Box, 2012; Midttun, 2006; Sayed & Ahmad, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2015; Sriprakash, 2012; UNESCO, 2005; Vavrus 2009; Williams, 2001). As Box (2012) and Williams

(2001) argue, the term “quality education” is complex because its meaning varies depending on the values and priorities of different stakeholders. The term has been defined differently by different organizations. Therefore, when evaluating the quality of education and methods to improve it, UNESCO-IIEP (2010) recommends defining the particular elements of quality, along with its standards and indicators. For example, UNESCO’s (2005) framework shown below in Figure 1 defines the elements of education quality as follows:

**Figure 1:** UNESCO’s Framework for Understanding Quality



*Note: From “UNESCO’s Framework for Understanding Quality,” by UNESCO (2005)*

In UNESCO's framework, there are five main dimensions of educational quality: learners, environments, content, processes, and outcomes. Access, teaching and learning processes, and outcomes are affected by context and the range and quality of inputs provided. The quality of education is influenced by the characteristics of learners and their capacities for learning, the degree to which they obtain supporting inputs, and the quality of their learning environments. However, according to Sayed and Ahmad (2015), the notion of education quality is contested despite the popularity of the UNESCO's framework. Along a similar line, Alexander (2015) criticizes the way quality has been loosely and elusively defined by international aid agencies. For Midttun (2006), the definitions of quality and relevant education change from one context to another such as when people move from home to exile or from camp to settlement. Given that the implementation of quality education is heavily dependent on a specific context, providing a universal definition of quality becomes a challenging task. Furthermore, there are many influences and challenges that affect the provision of quality education in different refugee settings (Box, 2012; Brown, 2001; Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Save the Children, 2017; Sommers, 2002; Williams, 2001).

Nevertheless, in refugee contexts, learner-centered education (LCE) is central to the discussion of quality education as its use is endorsed by international aid agencies as "best practice." Specifically, LCE can improve refugee children's learning, address their needs, and promote their psychological healing and critical thinking skills (INEE, 2010b; Lattimer, 2015; Midttun, 2006; Mtika & Gates, 2010; Pigozzi, 1999; Schweisfurth, 2015; Sinclair, 2002; Tabulawa, 2003; UNESCO-IIEP, 2010;

Williams, 2001). In its widely cited framework, Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction (INEE, 2004)—updated in 2010 (INEE, 2010a)—INEE offers guidelines for supporting the delivery of quality education in emergencies internationally, and notes the adoption of LCE as an indicator of quality education. INEE (2010b) indicates that in learner-centered classes, learners' skills, knowledge, experiences, and interests are considered. Teachers challenge learners, promote their creativity, and respond to their emerging needs in class (Mtika & Gates, 2010; Westbrook et al., 2013). According to Schweisfurth (2013), education that is more learner-centered is defined as "a pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests" (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 20).

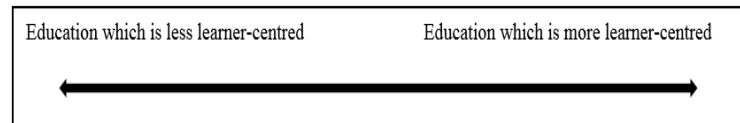
Despite the promises of LCE, the history of LCE implementation is "riddled with failures grand and small" (Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 425). Many authors discuss LCE's problems of definition, its critiques, and its implementation challenges in different international contexts. (Brown, 2001; Brinkmann, 2019; Kagawa, 2005; Mendenhall et al., 2015; Mtika & Gates, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2004; Schweisfurth, 2013; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019; Sommers, 2002; Sriprakash, 2012; Stott, 2018; Tabulawa, 2003, 2013; Vavrus, 2009; Williams, 2001). For example, there are different interpretations of LCE, as the literature shows, that have influenced the way LCE is understood and implemented in different contexts (Lattimer, 2015; Thompson, 2013). The term LCE is unclear and loosely used, as Schweisfurth (2013) warns, which suggests that anything might be

called learner-centered when explaining policy or practice. Furthermore, based on the comprehensive definition Alexander (2000) provides, pedagogy is comprised of many components, including teachers' knowledge, values, and skills, the purposes of education, the learning environment, the process of learning, and the interaction between teachers and learners and the world outside. The use of learner-centered pedagogy is influenced by many factors, including the local culture, teacher-learner relationship, resources, time, class size, curriculum, assessment, government policy, teachers and learners' beliefs, experiences, and motivation (Brinkmann, 2019; Gipps & MacGilchrist, 1999; Guthrie, 2011; Kagawa, 2005; Mendenhall et al., 2015; Mtika & Gates, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2013, 2015; Williams, 2001). Therefore, what works and is considered effective in one context may not work in a different context because of the complexity of pedagogy as several authors argue, including Alexander (2004), Guthrie (2015), O'Sullivan (2004), Schweisfurth and Elliott (2019), Sternberg (2007) and Vavrus (2009). These authors, among many others, suggest that teachers use a combination of teaching methods in different contexts.

Against this background, this paper, which is based on my PhD thesis (Sharif, 2020), presents some key findings from a qualitative case study that partly examined Syrian teachers' views of appropriate pedagogy in the Syrian refugee context in Turkey and the challenges of pedagogical change that include more learner-centered practices, and teachers' capacities to implement those practices in the refugee context, given the particular and variable conditions of those contexts. This research views pedagogic models on a continuum of practices with LCE at one end, and aligns with the views of many authors who have written on the topic,

including Alexander (2008b, 2017), Mendenhall et al., (2015) and Schweisfurth (2013):

**Figure 2:** LCE as a continuum



*Note: From Learner-centered Education in International Perspective: Whose Pedagogy for Whose Development?, by Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 11.*

With regard to this continuum, Schweisfurth (2013) clarifies that teachers' education, training, and experiences may impact the manner in which they choose their teaching approaches (i.e., with greater or lesser ease).

### **Conceptual Framework: From Less Learner-centred to More Learner-centred Pedagogies**

A survey of the literature shows that culture influences education in powerful ways (Alexander, 2000; Guthrie, 2011, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2013, 2015; Sternberg, 2007; Vavrus, 2009). Sternberg (2007) argues that when learners are taught in ways that are in agreement with their local culture, school performance is positively affected. Schweisfurth (2013) illustrates that as a sign of respect, in some contexts, learners do not question their teachers. When new pedagogy that challenges the cultural beliefs of learners, parents, and teachers is introduced, it will be met with resistance. As a result, understanding pedagogy and the goals of education, as Sternberg (2007) argues, should occur only within the cultural context.

To guide this research and facilitate understanding of the complexity of refugee education, multiple frameworks were used, specifically because international aid agencies'

promotion of LCE as an absolute has been heavily criticized in the literature mainly for disregarding the local context of education (Alexander, 2008a; Brinkmann, 2019; Guthrie, 2011; Lattimer, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2004; Schweisfurth, 2013; Schweisfurth & Elliott, 2019; Sternberg, 2007; Tabulawa, 2003, 2013; Vavrus, 2009). This research drew on five frameworks which guided the analysis of research data from different perspectives: Alexander's (2008b, 2017) framework for dialogic teaching, Guthrie's (2011) five teaching styles continuum, INEE Minimum Standards for Education (2010a), O'Sullivan's (2004) learning-centered approach, and Schweisfurth's (2013) minimum standards for LCE.

In situations of conflict, Sinclair (2002) indicates that teachers usually implement traditional teaching methods that are considered less effective pedagogies. To address this concern, INEE (2010a) notes that a minimum standard to achieve quality education should include "instruction and learning processes [that] are learner-centered, participatory and inclusive" (p. 87). INEE (2010a) advises teachers to provide children with opportunities that engage them actively in learning activities, encourage their interaction, and develop their skills. Engaging children in play is also promoted as part of the healing process. The learning environment should be safe, supportive, inclusive, and it should be one that helps build children's self-esteem (INEE, 2010a). INEE (2010a) shows some examples of LCE activities, including role-play activities, group work, games, telling stories, and peer education.

In contrast with INEE (2010a), O'Sullivan's (2004) learning-centered approach encourages teachers to adopt any method that facilitates learning in class within teachers' realities and capacities. This approach, which

considers contextual factors, articulates an adaptive form of LCE that is sensitive to the realities of classrooms. Therefore, in the learning-centered approach, achieving quality education is possible when teachers use less learner-centered methods to improve learning. O'Sullivan's (2004) framework aligns with Alexander's (2017) framework for dialogic teaching, which can be used to analyze learning talk in the classroom. According to Alexander (2017), teachers may use five kinds of talk, which include rote, recitation, instruction, discussion, and scaffolded dialogue. Alexander (2017) points out that, based on their suitability, teachers may use any of the five kinds of talk, but the last two types offer children the greatest cognitive challenge they require to promote their learning, confidence, and engagement.

Guthrie's (2011) teaching model that describes five teaching styles on a continuum—authoritarian, formalistic, flexible, liberal, and democratic—is also used in this research to facilitate understanding of the teacher and student roles, content approaches, and reinforcement. In this model, teachers may use any style or all, separately or together, when appropriate. Therefore, like O'Sullivan's (2004) and Alexander's (2017) frameworks, Guthrie's (2011) framework encourages teachers to use different methods to support learning. All of these frameworks are compatible with Schweisfurth's (2013) minimum standards for LCE, which considers the local learning context and encourages teachers' adoption of less learner-centered methods to deliver quality education. The seven minimum standards Schweisfurth (2013) defined to understand and evaluate learner-centered practices emphasize learner cognitive engagement and motivation which may not be the same in different contexts, respectful relationships in the classroom, building on learners' knowledge and skills,

supporting high quality classroom talk, using relevant curriculum and pedagogy, and meaningful assessment that supports learning.

### **Education for Syrian refugees in Turkey**

As of March 2020, the estimated number of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey is about 3.6 million as the UNHCR website indicates ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). The exceptionally large number of Syrian refugees has affected the provision of education and its quality in Turkey, particularly between 2011-2014. The war in Syria that began in March 2011 was expected to end soon. The initial presence of Syrians was considered temporary and they were first referred to as “guests,” but later the Turkish Government registered them under the Temporary Protection Directive (McCarthy, 2018). The confusion in the status of Syrian refugees in Turkey affected the creation of a clear educational policy framework, but resulted in disregard for the education of refugee children in host communities (Çelik & İçduygu, 2018; Dorman, 2014). Although Syrian refugees who had official documentation or residence permits could attend Turkish public schools, enrollment rates were terribly low. As several reports indicate, there were many challenges affecting children’s access to education, including the language barrier, education gap, lack of official documentation, overcrowded schools, and child labor (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Chatty et al., 2014; Dinçer et al., 2013; Dorman, 2014; INEE, 2014; Kirişci, 2014; Save the Children, 2014; Watkins & Zyck, 2014). Because of the overwhelmingly large number of Syrian refugees, UNICEF facilitated the creation of an education system for Syrian children and used a revised Syrian curriculum with the aim of encouraging school enrollment in host communities (UNESCO, 2015).

Between 2012-2017, education for Syrian refugees was provided in Turkish public schools and temporary education centers, a practice which ran counter to Turkish national education law, which advocates monolingual education content. The centers were mostly run by Syrian teachers and used Arabic as the main medium of instruction. Therefore, they were more commonly known as “Syrian schools.” Between 2012-2014, Syrian schools were not officially accredited nor monitored by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MONE). They mostly operated under threat of closure because of the use of the Arabic language and Syrian curriculum. In 2014, the MONE regulated Syrian schools that met acceptable standards. Since then, these schools operated under the supervision of MONE. The schools were gaining popularity among Syrian refugees for various reasons. About 78% of refugee students attended these schools as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees reports (UNHCR, 2017). Many Syrian refugees preferred sending their children to Syrian schools because of their familiarity navigating a foreign land, allowing the transmission of Arabic culture, knowledge, and language, and offering a sense of belonging (Çelik & İçduygu, 2018). Nevertheless, as the war in Syria progressed, the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey became permanent and Syrian schools were gradually closed by 2018, shortly after the completion of fieldwork conducted for this research.

### **Aims of Research**

This paper reports some of the main findings of a qualitative study that aimed to contribute to the growing discussion on the appropriateness of LCE internationally as “best practice,” particularly in refugee contexts, and is based on research that examined the quality of education at an urban Syrian school in Turkey within the scope of temporary protection. This



paper also examines Syrian refugee teachers' understanding of appropriate pedagogy within their realities and capacities and their experiences of pedagogical change to LCE, which aligns with INEE standards (2010a).

### Methodology

To achieve the aims of this research, of which the main goal is capturing “participant perspectives,” the qualitative case study methodology was used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 32). Qualitative research was selected due to its potential to uncover the complexity of human nature and provide rich and deep data (Miles et al., 2014). In this research, the case study strategy is particularly useful to understand “how” Syrian teachers provided education for Syrian children based on their perspectives and “why” they did what they said they were doing (Yin, 2014).

The Syrian school involved in this research was open from 2013 to 2018 out of refugee camps. Data collection took place over a two-month period in early 2018. Because of access restrictions to the school site, this research benefitted from the advances in and popularity of the Internet and social media technologies as research tools (Andreotta et al., 2019; James & Busher, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collection techniques used to understand appropriate teaching pedagogy and the challenges to LCE implementation in the Syrian context from different perspectives include online documents, and real-time online observations and interviews. Some of the key findings from the online semi-structured interviews with teachers (via Skype) will be presented to communicate teachers' own perceptions about quality education, their perceptions of classroom reality, influences on their teaching, and the challenges they met. This paper also explores how teachers'

views compare to the international understandings of quality education as articulated by the INEE, an organization which that guides the delivery of quality education in refugee situations.

### Participants

Purposeful sampling, which is popular in qualitative research, was used to recruit teachers who were experienced in teaching Syrian children in Syria before the war. The goal was to facilitate understanding of the changes in teaching practices, if any, in the refugee context. Table 1 below shows teachers' qualifications, training, and their years of teaching experience in Syria and Turkey:

**Table 1:** Syrian Teachers' Qualifications, Training and Years of Teaching Experience

Teachers	Qualifications	Teaching experience in Syria	Teaching experience in Turkey	UNICEF Training
Andy	Postgraduate Diploma in Education BA in Education	3 years	3 years	-
Iona	BA in Sciences	3 years	3 years	-
Rose	BA in Arabic Language and Literature	4 years	3 years	✓
Jane	BA in Arabic Language and Literature	9 years	2 years	-
Grace	Teacher Preparation Institute	13 years	4 years	-
Hannah	Education: 4 <sup>th</sup> year undergraduate student	1 year	2.5 years	✓
Julia	Arabic Language and Literature: 3 <sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate student	7 years	4 years	✓
Anna	BA in Education	1 year	4 years	✓
Maggie	BA in English Language and Literature	5 years	3 years	✓
Leah	BA in Islamic Law	2 years	2 years	✓
Lucy	BA in English Language and Literature English Language Teaching (ELT) Training	2 years	3 years	✓
Cara	BA in Arabic Language and Literature	15 years	3 years	✓
Amy	BA in Mathematics	11 years	4 years	✓
Lily	BA in Sciences	5 years	2 years	✓
Sarah	Postgraduate Diploma in Education BA in English Language and Literature	7 years	2 years	-

*Note: From Pedagogy in an urban Syrian refugee school in Turkey: approaches, perspectives, and performances by Sharif, 2020, p. 121.*

It is important to clarify that as part of their degree course in Syria, six teachers were formally prepared to teach in schools. The teachers are Andy, Grace, Hannah, Anna, Lucy, and Sarah. However, the rest of teachers did not have any formal preparation at the beginning of their teaching career in Syria. Two years after opening the refugee school, UNICEF offered two-week teacher training on the INEE minimum standards. The topics discussed in the training included implementing LCE in refugee classes, providing psychosocial support, and using time-management techniques. Teachers who had received the UNICEF training at another school provided the training for teachers at the research school. Some teachers who were teaching at another school missed UNICEF training.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis guidelines supported by the conceptual framework of the study. Information was coded by giving labels to the data collected. The codes allowed for a semantic and conceptual reading of the data. In this way, the coding process was an analytic process rather than a process of data reduction as Clarke and Braun (2013) advise. Guided by the conceptual framework, the data were read several times to note similar and different patterns, search for major points, refine main themes identified, and develop new sets of codes and potential themes that were facilitated by the flexibility of conducting semi-structured interviews. After grouping similar themes together and naming them in analytic memos, the main themes were identified in relation to the research questions. One of the key themes identified was related to Syrian teachers' perceptions of effective pedagogy for teaching refugee children and their views on pedagogical

change to include more learner-centered practices as INEE (2010a) recommends.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Teachers' Vision of Good Pedagogy***

The findings showed that teachers used a combination of teaching methods along a continuum and their roles ranged from providers of knowledge to facilitators. These changes were due to several underlying influences and contextual difficulties. Teachers identified some of the influences and challenges, and highlighted the importance of using various teaching methods to improve the quality of education in the refugee context. However, it is important to point out that although teachers incorporated some features associated with LCE in refugee classes, the findings indicated that teachers interpreted LCE differently and implemented it based on their particular understanding of the term in the Syrian context.

When asking Lucy about her preferred teaching methods, she replied, "it doesn't matter whether it is a new or a traditional method. All what I care about is that my pupils learn." Lucy emphasized that she used a variety of methods to teach her classes such as explanation, questioning, repetition drills, and group work because of children's traumatic experiences. Lucy explained that because of the impact of the Syrian war and displacement, children's communication skills were affected. Many children missed some learning and were unable to read or write. In addition, many children were traumatized and they stopped talking as Lucy clarified:

*At the beginning I kept asking why doesn't she respond? Why doesn't he talk? I was shocked to know that the pupil and his brother were hit by a missile. His brother died when they*



*were together. Since then he stopped talking.*

Therefore, Lucy believed that using repetition drills to teach new knowledge would be beneficial for refugee children:

*I think repetition is the best way of teaching ... I mean you keep repeating over and over again, and you keep reminding them. So, I find this way of repetition drill very good ... I mean I'm getting good outcomes from the pupils. So, if I read a lesson once and don't get back to it, the pupils will be unable to read it well definitely... not at all, not at all.*

However, based on children's reactions to the way she taught, Lucy indicated that she used different methods. Along a similar line, Jane said that she used various methods because of several influences such as children's traumatic experiences:

*I believe in using a hybrid of methods ... we can't use teacher-centered methods nor learner-centered methods all the time considering the special circumstances our pupils have been through.*

Hannah and Maggie also indicated the importance of using all available teaching methods to support children's learning. In particular, Hannah believed that using storytelling, dialogic, and problem-solving techniques can better engage refugee children. Moreover, using storytelling can facilitate the identification of children who have been through traumatizing experiences and those who are in need of support. However, Hannah pointed out that sometimes the content of lessons may not encourage dialogue, which influences the effectiveness of storytelling techniques with

children. Therefore, Hannah favored using different methods in class.

Agreeing with Lucy, Hannah, and Maggie, Lily said that employing various methods is particularly good within their realities in the refugee context:

*Every lesson depends on using certain methods. Some lessons are transmissive. Some lessons require doing demonstrations or hands-on activities which within the available resources we can do as in the lesson you observed. In some lessons, we depend on using visuals or drawing. I give my pupils some cartoons and they draw. They feel happy because they did something using their hands. We also use them as visual aids to explain the lesson.*

Lily indicated that her choice of methods was affected by the lack of resources. In some lessons, the science teacher said that teaching aids were hardly found in the school:

*There is a severe lack of teaching aids and materials which affects the way I teach my lessons. In many classes we can't do hands-on experiments. Most of our lessons here are transmissive because we don't have any alternative options [...] in some lessons we manage to get some materials, but there are lessons which are primarily transmissive.*

As the findings showed, there were several contextual influences and challenges which affected teachers' pedagogical decisions, including children's traumatic experiences and the lack of teaching resources and aids. Therefore, teachers indicated that they used less learner-centered techniques to support refugee

children's learning and responded to their varying needs as they perceived them. The findings suggested that teachers' own beliefs about teaching and learning served as another important influence on teachers' pedagogical decisions. For example, in varying degrees, all teachers said that they mainly relied on direct instruction techniques such as explanation and questioning to teach refugee children. Several teachers like Iona, Rose, Leah, Lily, and Lucy said that they primarily used direct instruction techniques because they perceived them to be effective in teaching refugee children. The findings suggested that there was an emphasis on the need for teachers to provide explanation in the Syrian context because of children's learning abilities. For instance, Iona described a typical lesson saying that she began her lesson recalling previous information using question and answer technique and then she provided explanation:

*Whatever the lesson was, in any subject I begin first by explaining the lesson. If I have a teaching resource such as a picture, I put it up for the pupils to see. I explain, and they see the picture. When the lesson finishes, I ask them if they have any questions or if there is something they don't understand. The pupil who has a question can ask and I'll answer. This will serve as a repetition of the lesson. Then, we answer the questions provided in the school textbook. Lesson time is short anyway.*

Iona indicated that there were gaps in children's knowledge and learning abilities because of the refugee experience. Iona said that the war and displacement affected children's access to education. Some children were placed in a grade level based on their age and despite having limited access to education before.

Therefore, Iona said that she consciously provided explanations to fill gaps in children's knowledge. Similarly, Lucy, Jane, and Rose discussed the influence of the war on children's learning abilities and their choice of less learner-centered techniques. For instance, Rose said the following:

*Here in Turkey I am teaching Primary 4 pupils and I always have to teach information pupils learn in Primary 1 and 2 to fill the gaps in their knowledge ... yes there are gaps and even a distinguished pupil here in Turkey can't achieve half of what a pupil in Syria used to achieve. You know the changes in our circumstances.*

Children's low learning skills, which were caused by the war, affected Rose's choice of explanation. However, what is implicit in Rose's view is that she believed her main role in class was to provide knowledge to cover a fixed curriculum in a context where children experienced interruption in learning. Furthermore, Lily's beliefs about the effectiveness of asking children questions encouraged her to use this technique in class:

*I always depend on engaging pupils in the lesson. I always try to ask them questions related to the lesson or familiar information I expect them to know based on their existing knowledge. Most of the time I ask pupils a couple of questions till I get the idea or the response I need.*

Along a similar line, Andy, Cara, Sarah, Jane, Amy, Anna, Hannah, and Maggie believed that using questioning techniques can engage children in class and promote their self-esteem. As an example of changing teaching techniques and priorities in the refugee context, Andy said

that he mostly relied on questioning to be closer to the refugee children who needed more affection because of their traumatic experiences:

*Explanation as a teaching technique distances the teacher from his pupils and transmits information to them. Today; however, even if the lesson requires using explanation, I don't use it with our pupils in Turkey. I change the way the lesson is taught from explanation to dialogue. Before (in Syria) I used to give my lesson using explanation, but now I use dialogic teaching to be closer to pupils. By dialogic teaching I mean question and answer. I use question and answer not from a distance to be closer to pupils. I ask a question, listen to the answer, I motivate the pupils to be closer to them ... to feel the love they lost in Syria.*

Andy indicated that in response to children's needs, he consciously relied on asking questions in class. Andy highlighted children's need for building self-confidence which is particularly important for refugee children who feel they have no value in society during the war:

*There are pupils who felt during the war that the human being doesn't have any value. The value of the human being is as cheap as the price of a bullet. This is how they believe ... I am teaching Primary 4, the pupils are smart and they are up to the level. However, the idea they have is that the human being has no value. He is as cheap as the price of a bullet in Syria. Therefore, I use the method that you observed to activate the pupils. I ask pupils to come out to the front of class, I talk about them and let them depend on themselves.*

For its perceived advantages, Andy believed that using questioning techniques is appropriate in the refugee context. Moreover, Andy argued that using questioning techniques can actively engage children and demonstrate implementation of learner-centered practices in the Syrian context. However, based on the findings, there was confusion about the meaning of LCE and how it was implemented in refugee classes. As revealed in Andy's responses above, dialogic teaching and question and answer techniques were the same. Moreover, several teachers including Hannah, Grace, and Leah said that they did not know what LCE exactly means and indicated their lack of knowledge of pedagogic models. Therefore, they said that they used any methods that could show physically active children in class. As particular examples of teachers' responses to using LCE in the Syrian context, Leah said, "I think during the UNICEF training we came across learner-centered pedagogy, but I can't remember what that was about." As for Hannah, she said, "I don't know exactly what learner-centered pedagogy is, but from my experience I am using a combination of methods." In addition, Grace said, "Well, you mean the pupils teach the lesson? Don't you?"

The results showed that some teachers believed that they were implementing LCE based on the way they understood active engagement. Most teachers believed that giving children some tasks as creating visual aids, teaching their peers, and guiding children to prepare the content of the lesson and play the role of the teacher in class are examples of using LCE practices. According to Andy, Grace, Iona, Julia, Rose, Lily, and Sarah, giving children such tasks empowered and engaged them. For example, Sarah said that the children enjoyed imitating her style and playing the role of the teacher, as it empowered them:

*The lesson they teach is always interesting even though they don't use English all the time. The pupils seem to enjoy it and the ones who are teaching love playing the teacher's role. Therefore, I'll continue using this method in my class. When a pupil is the teacher, their peers pay attention and listen to them because I think they don't want to embarrass them.*

As Sarah indicated, children accept support from peers without that acceptance affecting their self-confidence. Similarly, Andy said, "When a pupil becomes the teacher, he becomes more confident. He feels he has a value in this society." However, as the findings show, teachers said that children played the role of teacher as a follow-up activity or after explaining a lesson. For example, Hannah said:

*When pupils are absent, I ask their peers to explain the lesson. I give them the role of the teacher and they explain. I sit behind their desk [...] honestly, I always explain the lesson for them before they teach their peers. I tried peer teaching before I provided my explanation and to be honest with you the pupils didn't interact.*

Along a similar line, Lucy said, "I must explain first, and such activities function as a revision, so pupils know some information ... new information no way!" Moreover, Jane said, "We depend on using active learning techniques after I teach the lesson." Similarly, Maggie emphasized the impossibility of giving children an active role particularly at the beginning of school term:

*It is impossible to use LCE when pupils just start school. They receive information. The teacher should have a*

*role at the beginning and then pupils get used to the teacher, they imitate the teacher, they build good rapport and then you can give them an active role and let them work in groups and be leaders.*

Many teachers indicated that there are certain times when LCE can be used when certain conditions are met. Because of the serious lack of resources, classroom structure, children's traumatic experiences, learning abilities and psychosocial needs, as well as teachers' beliefs, education, and training, the findings emphasized that implementing LCE as "best practice" is unrealistic in the Syrian context:

*In this course, most of the methods they [UNICEF trainers] talked about can't be used here. They are not appropriate in our context here ... I mean in our school as refugees. These methods work in their context and their schools. They are appropriate for people who are settled in their country, their schools are well-resourced, and they have laboratories and tools. Some ideas were useful, but mostly I find them hard to implement considering our realities (Interview with Lily).*

Considering the underlying influences on pedagogy and challenges of educating refugee children, the findings indicated that Syrian teachers consciously rejected implementing LCE despite UNICEF recommendations. Their rejections were due to their beliefs regarding its implementation in the refugee context within their realities and its limited capacities. From teachers' perspectives, LCE can work only at certain times and under specific conditions in the Syrian refugee context.

### **Discussion**

Based on the views of teachers, mixing pedagogies in class can support the delivery of quality education in the Syrian context. This is in line with the views of many authors including O'Sullivan (2004), Barrett (2007), Vavrus (2009), Guthrie (2011), Schweisfurth (2013), Thompson (2013), and Alexander (2017). However, this finding does not align with INEE (2010a) which supports LCE implementation as "best practice" in refugee situations. The findings of this case study research highlighted multiple influences and challenges that affected teachers' decisions and their views of LCE and effective pedagogy.

Teachers in this research study held perceptions of effective pedagogy that reflect O'Sullivan's (2004) learning-centered approach, where the priority is to provide effective learning using whatever activities, techniques, and skills are available. Like Guthrie (2011), Syrian teachers support the implementation of a flexible teaching style that gives learners more active roles within the constraints defined by teachers. However, the findings indicated that as the teacher is the leader and controller of activities in their respective classrooms, the teacher-pupil relationship in the Syrian class is actually hierarchical (Guthrie, 2011). Children have a limited role in class and learning choices, which affects LCE implementation as defined above by Schweisfurth (2013). This is further supported by the way teachers expressed incorporating the use of LCE based on their tightly framed understanding of active learner engagement. For example, the findings showed that there is confusion about the meaning of LCE and how it is implemented in class. Some teachers considered asking children closed questions and having physically active children

engaged in various activities as examples of employing LCE. However, based on Schweisfurth (2013) and Brinkmann (2019), LCE is defined based on learner cognitive engagement. This suggests that LCE was interpreted differently in the Syrian context and, therefore, superficially implemented in class.

The reasons for confusion about LCE interpretation and implementation may be due to limited teacher education and training. As mentioned previously, not all teachers were professionally trained as part of their degree course in Syria. In interviews, most teachers indicated their lack of knowledge of pedagogic models. In addition, some teachers missed UNICEF teacher training on the INEE minimum standards which was offered to some teachers in certain schools at particular times. Although some of the topics in the training course included use of LCE in classrooms, offering psychosocial support, and using time management techniques, teachers criticized the quality of the training course as it was delivered by teachers who attended the training previously in another school. Therefore, some teachers were not certain about what LCE means and how it is to be implemented in class. To effectively understand and implement LCE, Syrian teachers need high-quality training on LCE, offered by well-qualified trainers. The training should be offered on a continuous basis to ensure that teachers are aware of LCE implementation in line with INEE (2010a) recommendations.

Some teachers expressed views that contradict learner-centered beliefs in the way Deakin Crick and McCombs (2006) suggest. For learner-centered teachers, all children can learn, whereas non learner-centered teachers believe that some children cannot learn (Deakin Crick & McCombs, 2006). In the Syrian context, some teachers emphasized that children needed

teachers' use of explanation techniques because of children's huge learning gaps and their capabilities. Like the views of teachers in O'Sullivan's (2004) study in Namibia, Syrian teachers' perceptions about their classroom role reflect behaviorist beliefs about children's capabilities, which can hinder LCE implementation in the ways that INEE (2010a) recommends. Presenting the curriculum as a fact challenges the constructivist views of learning and encourages more learner exploration of knowledge and less teacher telling (Weimer, 2002).

Nevertheless, the literature highlights the importance of using less learner-centered techniques in refugee contexts and developing countries, especially those where there are big gaps in children's knowledge, and lack of time, space, instructional aids, and resources prevail (Bennett, 1976; Clark et al., 1979; O'Sullivan, 2004; Guthrie, 2011; Mendenhall et al., 2015). In line with the literature, the findings indicated that teachers perceived less learner-centered methods as effective in the Syrian context because most of the children are traumatized and may be reluctant to participate in class because of their refugee experience and displacement. Most teachers emphasized that children's traumatic experiences and their psychosocial needs were among the main challenges they encountered when applying LCE. Other examples of the challenges that teachers encountered and which hindered LCE implementation in the Syrian context include the physical classroom structure, and the serious lack of resources and teaching aids.

Because of the underlying influences on pedagogy and challenges of educating refugee children, the findings indicated that Syrian teachers consciously rejected implementing LCE despite UNICEF recommendations. Their rejection of LCE was due to their beliefs

regarding its implementation in the refugee context within their realities and capacities. Based on teachers' views, LCE can work at a certain time and within specific conditions in the Syrian context. Therefore, this research recommends contextualizing LCE to consider teachers' and learners' realities and capacities as suggested by many authors, including O'Sullivan (2004), Alexander (2008b, 2017), Vavrus (2009), Schweisfurth (2013) and Thompson (2013). In a contextualized form of LCE, teachers may use less learner-centered methods to improve learning.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This paper presents some of the key findings of a qualitative case study which partly aimed to understand how quality education was understood and delivered in the Syrian refugee context in Turkey, and is based on an examination of teachers' views and their perceived classroom needs and reality. The paper shows how LCE was interpreted and implemented differently in the Syrian case study. Teachers believed that giving children teaching roles can actively engage them in learning and used this example to show how they adopted learner-centered practices in refugee classes. As teachers gave peer teaching tasks only after providing their own explanation, LCE was superficially implemented in the Syrian context as an add-on activity.

To support teachers' understanding of LCE and effectively implement this pedagogy in the Syrian context, Syrian teachers would benefit from effective training on LCE to actively and meaningfully engage children and support their learning and well-being. The paper recommends that LCE training should consider both teachers' and learners' needs and the challenges encountered in the local context. The training should provide teachers with practical guidance



and experience of LCE. Skillful questioning and provision of support to children with psychosocial needs are examples of key areas that need to be addressed in LCE training to facilitate effective implementation of LCE in the Syrian context. It is important to ensure that the trainers are well-qualified to develop teachers' pedagogic knowledge and skills and provide them with practical advice.

The paper highlights teachers' vision of good pedagogy in the refugee context and encourages the use of various techniques on a continuum to support children's learning. Because of multiple contextual influences and challenges affecting pedagogical decisions, including children's traumatic experiences, needs, learning abilities, physical classroom environment, teaching resources, and teacher's beliefs, education, and training, Syrian teachers consciously rejected implementing LCE all of the time, suggesting that LCE can be appropriate at certain times when certain conditions are met. Therefore, this research recommends using contextualized forms of LCE in which teachers engage learners and support their learning using less learner-centered methods, while considering the various underlying influences on pedagogy and challenges of educating refugee children. In conclusion, the implications that arise from this case study research contrasts with the international understandings of quality education as outlined by the INEE, an organization that promotes LCE implementation as "best practice" internationally.

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