Education During the Active War
Exploring Teachers' Perceptions and Practice in Syria

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Education is the basic right of every child in any condition. Unfortunately, the conflict in Syria has denied 2 million students education and destroyed 7,000 schools (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2021). Education during conflict is even more critical to promote strong social, emotional, and cognitive development in children. There have been several studies to evaluate the availability and accessibility of education in conflict zones (Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Badrasawi et al., 2018). However, there are rare, if any, studies to explore teachers' perception of teaching during war and their performance. Teachers in a war zone certainly have the most significant role in fostering students' development in a different aspect by implementing creative teaching in their lessons. Thus, this study explored the perceptions of primary school Syrian teachers about education in a war zone and their creative teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of studies on children and their education during and after conflict are conducted by humanitarian organizations such as Save the Children, the United Nations, and UNICEF. However, there are seldom studies on teachers and their perception of education during conflict. Deryden-Peterson (2011) found that education is the key to improving the life of all people, but this education is not always readily available. Although the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC 2008) states that education is a right for all children, Sommers (2002) revealed that many children in a war zone are at a huge educational disadvantage. These students are deprived of quality education as the basic right for each child (Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC 2008). The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2021) has studied education within Syria and reported that 2.45 million children are not in school, and those who are, are in overcrowded, insufficient classrooms (UNICEF, 2021). Similarly, 460,000 of registered children living in refugee camps did not have access to education (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan [3RP], 2021–2022). Students in war zones, particularly in Syria, are not receiving quality education, if they are receiving education at all.

Some of the studies focused on the roadblocks that prevent students and teachers from coming to school. For instance, research published by Save the Children in 2020 indicated that the walk to school puts both students and teachers in a situation where they may be abducted,

raped, maimed from explosive devices, or even targeted in gunfire (Salarkia et al., 2020). Bush and Saltarelli (2000) discussed families' choice of not sending their students to school within war zones out of fear for their safety. Yet teachers play a large role in the perceptions that students have about education and war (Buldu, 2009). Henderson & Milstein (2003) suggests that children's resilience is directly related to the resilience of their teachers. The events, conversations, and day-to-day lives that teachers and students undergo together shape the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of both (Buldu, 2009). The ramifications of a school building being blown up in a conflict zone do not solely affect students, it also affects the teachers (Boyden & Ryder, 1996; Paulson, 2011). Due to the relationship teachers and students share with one another in the war zone and the trauma they share, research about teacher's perceptions on education can reveal significant learning outcomes for educators around the world to adopt the meaningful structured strategies of these heroes in teaching during an active war.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Syria currently is known as the world's largest producer of both internally displaced people and refugees (USA for United Nations High Commission for Refugees, The UN Refugee Agency, 2019). Prior to the conflict, education was an important (and free) part of Syrian society. There, "more than 90% of primary school-aged children were enrolled—one of the highest rates in the Middle East" (Save the Children, 2013, p. 12). War, however, has affected all aspects of Syrians' lives, and education is no exception (UNICEF USA, 2018). Boyden and Ryder (2016) reported that teachers were prime targets of violence because of their role as key community players, yet they still continue to report to the job every day (p. 12). Consequently, the authors note, "The teaching of creative, artistic, interactive, and expressive skills has the added value in war zones of helping to reduce psychosocial distress" (p. 23). Conflict zone teachers stay resilient for their students and implement creative, unique measures and coping mechanisms to try to create a sense of peace in students' lives (Brody & Baum, 2007).

Paulson (2011) stated that "many learners expressed preferences for professions such as secretary, nursing, military, and police. In fact, the majority of the boys preferred professions that would enable them to take revenge for their wartime experiences" (p. 199). Again, teachers have a

big responsibility in promoting education to their students. The role of a teacher does not just carry over for the year they have the student; the attitudes teachers have can be carried with a student well into adulthood, as their perceptions are shaped by the adults who surround them (Buldu, 2009). In order to understand students' perceptions, teachers' perceptions must be explored. The purpose of this study is to explore the understanding of teachers' perception about education in an active war zone and their creative teaching practices to keep students engaged in learning in unprecedented circumstances.

The following research questions guided this study to determine the current status of perceptions and practices of Syrian primary teachers:

- What are the perceptions of Syrian teachers about education in a war zone?
- What are creative teaching practices for teachers in active war zones?

RESTRICTED CLASSROOMS ENVIRONMENT

When envisioning a typical classroom, thoughts of desks, resource materials, technology, smart boards, bright colors, posters, and a structured day-to-day routine may occur. In conflict zones, teachers have the bare minimum. In Syria, the resources they have is from what was left behind before the war began, and there is no guarantee that what is left will still be standing in the classroom the next day. According to Miller et al. (2005), students enrolled within facilities face quick and unexpected interruptions in the conflict zones. Centers of education close or are relocated when conflict arises. This inherently threatens children's opportunities for an ongoing, continuous education.

Similarly, each educational facility brings a unique set of challenges. School buildings often have severe overcrowding and have a high susceptibility to shelling, displacement, and/or looting (Boyden & Ryder, 1996; Paulson, 2011). Not only does this prevent students from coming to school, it contributes to student/teacher's trauma.

Schools should serve as a safe space for children to interact with their peers, play, and consume their next meal (Paulson, 2011). A school is a child's sanctuary; what occurs inside lays the foundation for rules, values, policies, learning, socialization, and discipline for the future (Boyden & Ryder, 1996). Paulson (2011) stated, "Basic education might go a long way in instilling values of respect for differences, mutual tolerance, sharing, participation, and cooperation" (p. 186). If a child's sanctuary is limited or taken away, they lose the foundation of stability, self-control, and

determination. Children need constant direction and guidance. When teachers, who serve as role models in students' lives, are wrongfully taken away, a students' sense of right and wrong is hindered.

According to Anderson et al. (2004), school structures, found in the macro-context, are one of the main components in rehabilitating and educating refugee children. If we take away the building and provide students with education in other ways a sense of stability is lost. Even when informal education was expected to take place to help children develop social skills, it was compromised by the social upheaval associated with conflict (Boyden & Ryder, 1996). Even if students and teachers find a way out of their conflict zone, educational challenges do not end. Education for students in refugee camps has been described as "non-continuous instruction in refugee camps consisting of a few hours a week" (West Coast AMES, 2002, p. 4). Educators in the conflict zone have to implement creative practices to create a sense of stability in students' lives, despite the challenges that are presented.

TRANSITION TO NEW SCHOOLS AND CREATIVITY

Teachers and children alike face new sets of educational and social challenges when they transition from Syrian schools to refugee schools either in other countries or internally displaced camps. For example, in reference to students, "Many have been in camps, experienced trauma, lost members of their families, had minimal schooling, and arrive with little or no literacy." (Brown et al., 2006, 150). Both students and teachers face language barriers and prejudice in refugee camps outside of Syria. Students can also exhibit behavioral problems leading to disciplinary issues, resistance, adjustment troubles, and cultural and financial differences between children coming in and the people who already reside there (Arar et al., 2019a).

Arar et al. (2019b) focused their study on Syrian refugee children and teachers who relocated to Turkey. They discovered that Syrian children had an increased desire for counselors that could teach coping mechanisms to support psychological needs from trauma. These children also needed translators in order to be supported. Arar et al. (2019b) also explored the challenges Turkey teachers faced when attempting to provide a sense of belonging and safety to Syrian refugee students. A school principal in Turkey and members of the education system explored refugee education and considered adjustments needed to incorporate both cultures from Syria and

Turkey in their schools. To ensure the conformability of refugee students, the education system recruited Syrian teachers and implemented two different curriculums (Arar et al., 2019b). Both Syrian and Turkish teachers had to creatively work together in order to mend the divide between students as well as find ways to heal the trauma that resided with students.

To encourage inclusivity and understanding in refugee classrooms, researchers Arar et al. (2019a) asked Turkish and Syrian students to compare each other's specific national and cultural values. This resulted in five principals playing the national anthem of both countries in the morning. Students learned how to show respect to one another by listening to the anthem. By increasing the Syrian background and culture into the education system, children and family involvement increased through the school's establishment of mutual understanding. The schools in the Arar et al. (2019b) study also implemented two different curricula, one in the morning for Turkish children and one in the afternoon for Syrian children, with 15-hour Turkish language courses. This proves how "empowering school culture was necessary to maintain the other four dimensions of multicultural education" (161). The subtle changes had a big impact on community involvement. Arar et al. (2019b) found that with religion, "It is easier to persuade both Turks and Syrians by using the religion as a unifying force" (160).

Similarly, Greaves et al. (2020) investigated a case study exploring the lived experiences of Syrian refugee teachers in Lebanon, primarily focusing on the period of adaptation that occured after arriving in Lebanon from Syrian war camps. During this time, teachers exchanged knowledge about each other's experiences, which helped them all empathize with their learners and their unique situations better. In this particular study, the teachers focused extensively on how to bring the Turkish and Syrian community together, which led them to understand the role of religion as a unifier with emphasis on harmony and integrity (Arar et al., 2019b). Teachers in the war zone and teachers who move out of the war zone have to be peacemakers and proponents of multicultural education in order to create an environment where students can celebrate one another and create a sense of belonging.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

Teachers in the war zone do not simply serve as teachers. They serve as counselors, mediators, distractors, mentors, and providers. Werner (2005) highlighted the intense psychological demands required from teachers

who are undergoing many personal traumas themselves. The following exemplifies that fact: "It can be inferred that teachers did not only sacrifice their own lives to reach children in the remotest areas, but they selflessly did their roles as parents, friends, and companions in eliminating the grim effect of war on the lives of their learners" (Catoto & Flores, 2016, 54). Teachers use these many roles and employ creative practices to engage students, motivate students, and make them feel that they are safe even in the most extreme circumstances.

Perceptions of educators in war zones can also be uncovered by directly reflecting on Syrian teachers', and generally teachers with the experience of conflict zones, thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Greaves et al. (2020) conducted a study around two Syrian teachers' perceptions on education. Both of the teachers studied understood that they could use their background knowledge and understanding of the war to help their students who are in the same environmental circumstances. One of the teachers believed that war has actually opened new doors to education, especially for those who are refugees. Had the civil war not occurred, this teacher, Haya, believes that certain refugee learning opportunities would not have been available (Greaves et al., 2020). Reflecting on research that includes information from teachers directly leads to the revelation of their perceptions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma associated with war clearly has an impact on all aspects of the lives of those living in a war zone. In order to study a person in this condition, then, one must study the human ecosystem of subjects to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Hoffman & Kruczek, 2011). Bronfenbrenner (1979) introduced the notion of an ecological systems theory that hypothesized that human development is significantly affected by interactions among multilayered systems. The first such system Bronfenbrenner identified as the microsystem that consists of direct relationships between a person and their immediate environment such as family, friends, religious groups, work, school, and peers. The second system he referred to as the mesosystem, which includes the interaction and linkages between microsystems that have a direct impact on an individual. Exosystems, the third type of system, include interactions with environments such as community and societal landscapes that indirectly impact on the person. The final system he called the macrosystem, which is the culture that embraces environments of a person in micro, meso, and exosystems.

After focusing on individual interactions with the environment, Bronfenbrenner & Ceci (1994) proposed a bioecological systems theory to expand the role of human characteristics considering emotional and psychological factors. In this theory theorists coined the term "chronosystem," which was added as a layer to indicate time as an important factor in change of personal characteristics and environment. In addition, despite the original theory that concentrated on children, the revised bioecological model aimed to investigate adults as well.

In their research on individual and community responses to mass trauma and disaster, Hoffman & Kruczek (2011) demonstrated how Bronfenbrener's bioecological systems theory provides a more comprehensive understanding of factors related to individuals and environment interaction
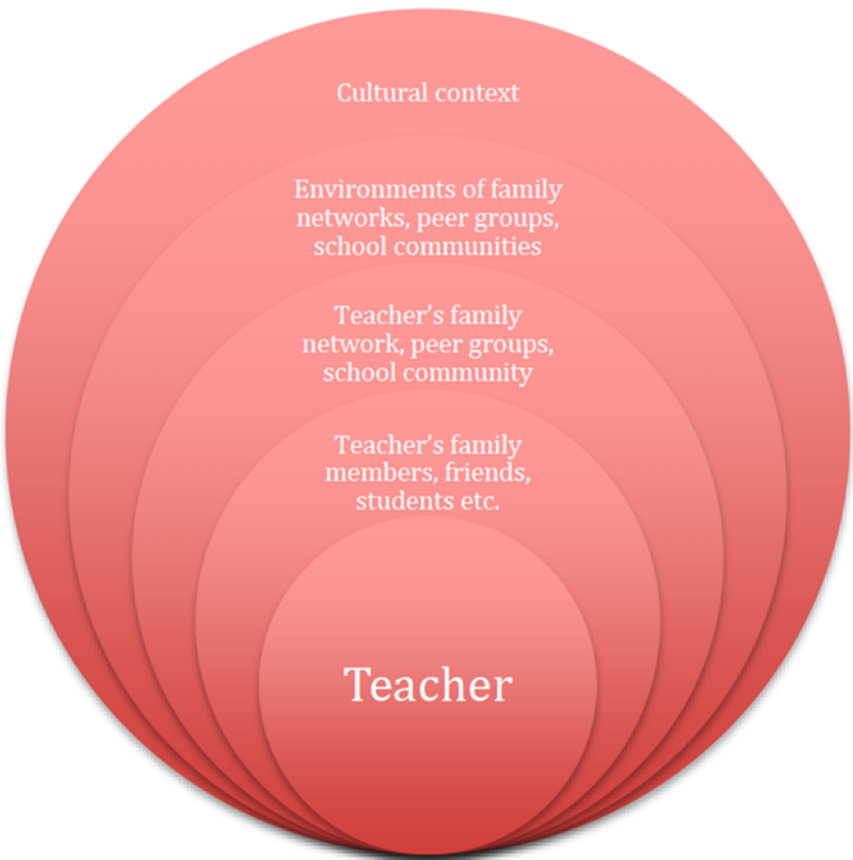

Figure 1. The Teacher's Ecological Network.

in face of adversity. Similarly, Boon et al. (2012) utilized this model to evaluate the resilience of an entire community during and after adversity.

The role of teachers in supporting children exposed to traumatic events has been highlighted in school interventions. However, research on teachers' ecology has often been dependent upon students' ecology. Nevertheless, as Baum et al. (2009) mentioned, "teachers have their own ecological milieu, and if we place the teacher at the center of the circle, we see how there are many levels of impact upon the teacher. These include: the student impacting on the teacher—making the interactions between teachers' and students' ecologies multidirectional" (64). Figure 1 illustrates this conception of a teacher's ecological network.

The current study utilized the ecological and bioecological model to better understand the perceptions and creative teaching strategies of teachers working in a war zone.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher developed and implemented five short-answer questions for teachers in an active war zone. The five questions identified perceptions of teachers living in the war zone, stressors that affect teachers in the war zone, and ways that they engage and encourage students in the classroom:

- How do you describe your living situation now in the war zone?
- What are the major stressors in your daily life outside the school?
- How do you describe being a teacher in a war zone?
- How do you encourage students to study?
- How do you emotionally support your students?

The participants for this study included only teachers, and no students were surveyed for this research. The survey was administered through an online web-based link that was given to participants. Due to the conflict in Syria, it was crucial that the surveyed teachers felt their identities were protected and safe, as they continue to work and live in the war zone area. Participants' identities, data, and passwords were protected through Secure Sockets Layer (SSL), the encryption protocol created to provide safe, secure communication over the internet. Participants were made aware that if they chose to communicate with researchers over email, the server might not be secure. Researchers were transparent with participants about their safety and the measures put in place to protect their identities throughout the survey process. Participants had 15 days to complete and submit the survey.

In total, 70 elementary education teachers were chosen to respond to the short answer questions and 100% responded. All participants' native language was Arabic, and they taught students ages 5 to 10 years old. Of the 70 participants, 99% were female and 1% were male. Twenty-three percent of the participants were age 22 or younger, 51% were 23–29, 23% were 30–39, .06% were 40–49, with .04% of participants' age unaccounted for. All of the participants spoke Arabic, so all materials needed to be translated into their native language. Two native Arabic speakers (PhD students in education) translated and approved the final survey translation.

Due to the requirements for confidentiality and protecting participants' safety, all data was collected fully online and anonymously. Teachers had to use the school computer in order to complete the survey as they did not have computers at their homes that they could utilize. It became a challenge for teachers to find time to access the computer due to the unpredictable schedules and unknowns created by the war zone environment. These teachers were the sole adults in the classroom, which made it increasingly difficult to find the time to access the computer in the schools. No matter the circumstance, completing the survey came with a different set of individual challenges for teachers. This led to an increase in the time it took to collect data and flexibility from researchers in order to assist participants in completing the questionnaire. Duration of data collection was approximately three months.

Sample

Researchers collaborated with a Syrian professor who is a member of the curriculum development committee for participating schools currently under siege in Syria. The researchers collected a sample of elementary teachers around Damascus, Syria. The selected schools for the survey included approximately 300 teachers from primary grades through high school. Of the 300 teachers, 70 educators specialized in elementary education. The population for this study included elementary teachers in independent nontraditional schools (basement schools). The schools are in any private hidden area to protect students and teachers from constant bombing. For our sample, we had teachers of the children from grades 1 to 4, with children ranging in age from 5 to 10 years. The 70 teachers studied collectively taught 2,000 students combined.

Data Analysis

Participants were required to respond to short-answer questions. The primary researcher reviewed the data for the initial analysis, and started to take note of the ideas or experiences described by participants that were described in participant responses. The primary researcher generated memos that "should be suggestive; they needn't be conclusive" (Dey, 1993, 89). Researchers made a list of all codes that were developed. We utilized both open coding, or "the initial organization of raw data to try to make sense of it," and selective coding, or "formulating the story through connecting the categories" (Dudovskiy, 2018). To support transparency of the study and the trustworthiness of the researchers' report, this study implemented member checks of data collected and interpretations, reflective commentary, and diagrams to demonstrate an "audit trail" (Shenton, 2004). The themes and subthemes of the study are classified in a comprehensive four categories.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to explore the understanding of teachers' perception about education in an active war zone and their creative teaching practices to keep students engaged in learning during unprecedented circumstances. The result of the study correlated with the pervious studies and literature review. For example, "Transition to new schools and Creative lesson plans" was identified in the past research as one of the factors influencing teachers' perception and created more room to take the initiative to look out of the box to support students in the classroom (Greaves et al., 2020). Data coding categories developed according to the literature review of the study. The following revealed the emerging codes from short answer interviews.

Teachers' Perceptions of Living in the War Zone

Most participants reported having a peaceful and satisfying life prior to the war. For example,

> Before the war, my life was pretty stable, safe, and comfortable. I didn't have any problems in or out of my environment. My life was full of happiness and everything I needed for my husband, my children, and me. My job as a teacher was very safe, pleasant and full of enthusiasm to go to school every day and teach children.

These teachers never imagined having to live and work in war zone conditions. Daily struggles such as adjustment to continuous exposure to violent incidents, bombing, military attack, deadly respiratory diseases, and loss of family members, friends and beloved ones. A lack of basics resources such as drinking water, food, and first-aid supplies now consumed their thoughts. Another teacher revealed,

> As a mother, I have to take care of house chores. I have a hard time handling house expenses. I am always worried about the safety of my children and my husband. In addition to taking care of my family and my siblings, I am concerned about my students' safety and wellbeing. At school, there are many children who have lost family, been injured or traumatized. This is my responsibility to support them.

In addition, transportation to and from school required much courage. Many teachers felt they and the children lived as "targets of threatening dangers." In spite of these major challenges, few teachers were dissuaded from their job. For example, one teacher noted, "My house is very close to the line of attack, transportation from and to school is very dangerous for me. Every day, I risk being killed going to school." However, she went on to say, "My passion for doing my duty as a teacher and seeing students gives me the courage to be at school every day."

This example is a clear picture of strong teacher perception of positive attitude and dedication to the integrity of work not just as a teacher but also a caregiver for each child during an active war. This category of coding directs us to Baum et al.'s (2009) study that when teachers are in the center of the ecological milieu, they have their own layer of intimidated support systems including those for whom they need to care. This is a critical teacher and student ecological multidirectional that needs to be addressed in day-to-day life in an active war zone.

Religion and Faith

Teachers consistently referred to their religious beliefs as their first sources for creativity and to encourage students in their education. They used the Quran and religious books as daily resources at school to boost students' enthusiasm: "I encourage students and support them emotionally through reading daily prayers so they can feel calm. I receive my own energy through God, praying, and reading Quran and prayers."

Similarly, teachers strongly emphasized the value of helping each other according to their religious beliefs. One teacher brought attention to her family as an immediate source of resilience. She stated, "I am emotionally

strong because of the love of my job and my family. Secondly, I teach students to read and write to help them in their lives and most importantly to please our God."

Teachers' perception of teaching during an active war is inseparable from the role of their religion and spirituality. They continue to advocate for children's right to continue education because they believe this is the way to serve their community and fulfill their duty as true Muslims. One of the teachers shared, "Through using positive words, I make students feel loved and blessed. I ask them to be strong even during such hard circumstances. I also ask them to take the prophet Mohammad as their role model."

Teachers reported relying heavily on their faith and religious beliefs to continue their role as teacher and encourage students at school. They used reading daily prayers to bring the feeling of safety, love, and compassion to children.

Encouraging Students' Positive Behavior

The main behavioral strategy for the majority of teachers was to encourage students at school by "using different ways to give awards and praise and honoring the best students," for example, "friendly tournament games between them, gifts for students, and honoring and cheering for them in class." In addition to Quran prayers, teachers shared successful historical characters' life stories to provide examples for students and encourage them to continue to work hard and never give up. As one teacher noted, "I always tell stories of our historical heroes and successful past people and their goals and achievements to allow students to see them as lifelong examples."

Transition to New Schools and Creative Lesson Plans

The classroom in an active war zone is extremely different from the standard classroom as known in the West. The classroom needs to be placed in a safe environment, which typically means underground in a basement, in the mountains in a cave, or anywhere that is dark and unreachable, to protect children and staff. Therefore, teachers need to adapt to an non-traditional environment and make it comfortable and safe for learning. This requires creativity and dedication to help children stay focused and engaged during the instruction time. Teachers look at shelves of their school's limited materials; unused leftovers from home, family, and friends; or reusable stuff to keep the students engaged in the process of learning. For example, a teacher mentioned, "I use any materials including the leftover boxes, old clothes, and used cleaning supplies to teach children about

different topics in math and science. I talk to parents and other friends to find children's interest and build up the lesson based on their stories."

Another teacher mentioned,

> I teach children how to be patient and wait for their turn during competition. I create different fun competitions in different subjects such as math and literacy to help them understand the topic and teach them how to improve their skills when they fail. I praise them with an encouraging and positive word following Quran.

Showing up to the classroom every morning in the war zone is a great example of the strong commitment whereby teachers demonstrate their responsibility to each child and their family and show them bravery and hopefulness.

DISCUSSION

Several studies such as Arar et al. (2019a) and Buldu (2009) came to the conclusion that communication between families, community, and school is essential to increase attention on war-related issues children may be facing. This communication bridges the gap between children's home and school life. Communities need to come together as a united front for children through collaboration. After being faced with this challenge, school staff, teachers, and principals develop strategies to help students. This could be one of the best practices for refugee families and schools in refugee camps and countries.

Boyden & Ryder (1996) reported, "Special care must be taken to ensure that children are not at risk when alternative routes to and from school and a means of rapid exit need to be identified and and taught to children" (23). Teachers have to create backup plans for educational buildings in case something happens to the one that they are in (Boyden & Ryder, 1996).

Depending on the teachers' upbringing, they may or may not be able to relate to children's traumatic experiences that they face in the conflict zone. When teachers have no previous experience dealing with trauma-based children, and they are faced with a chaotic situation such as a fight, if they lack the knowledge to properly deal with the situation, it could lead to an unsafe situation (Catoto & Flores, 2016).

Children exposed to war zones suffer from a variety of traumatic experiences, some overlapping, such as "the length of time spent in refugee camps or as asylum seekers in other countries; the trauma of war and the camps; severe disruption to schooling; frequent absence of an intact family;

lack of literacy in the first language" (Miller et al., 2005, 26). Knowing that no two experiences are alike, it can be difficult for teachers to assess everyone at the same level. With formal training on trauma and post-conflict resolution, teachers can begin to navigate how they will meet their students' diverse sets of needs.

Nielsen & Grey (2013) report that the Syrian War is the conflict with the most intense human suffering thus far in the 21st century. Teachers in the war zone experience trauma, loss of family, fear of death, lack of hierarchy of needs, and basic security. Teachers in this study revealed a new layer of dedication to children and their education through their positive perception and creative initiatives that were inspired by their faith and spirituality.

The current study supports findings from Parkinson et al.'s (2020) research on reconceptualizing academic development as community development in Syria. They found that Syrian citizens are strongly motivated with a sense of responsibility for rebuilding and leading Syria's future through education. In addition, cultural and religious factors are one of the stronger factors associated with perception (Thoits, 2013). Teachers in an active warzone teach valuable lessons to all educators around the world. Connor et al. (2003) and Yasin and Jani (2013) supported the notion that teachers' spirituality and religious beliefs had a strong impact upon promoting their positive perception during traumatic experiences.

Findings from this study suggest that educators around the world and international stakeholders must allocate resources to be directed to education in areas of conflict. Teachers in war zones, and especially in Syria, are strong examples of empowerment and dedication to children and their education. Their commitment to children's learning is an inspiring lesson for teachers around the world. International organizations must work together to provide training, security, technology, and support for the teachers in Syria. It is our duty as educators to learn from their lessons and be the voice for teachers in Syria.

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