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Integrating Syrian refugee teachers into Swedish educational labour market – reflections on a fast track design

Catarina Economou and Maaike Hajer

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ABSTRACT
In autumn 2016, Malmö University started two “fast track” trajectories for teachers with refugee backgrounds. The participants were offered an education of 26 weeks as an introduction to the Swedish school system, consisting of content courses, professional Swedish and workplace learning. The aim of this small explorative study was to get an impression of the participants’ views and understanding of the role of becoming a teacher in Swedish schools, realising the characteristics of pedagogy aimed for in the curriculum, specifically the interaction patterns and student participation in learning processes. Main research questions addressed participants’ expectations of differences and challenges in the Swedish school context as compared to their experiences in Syrian contexts. A combination was chosen of focus groups interviews with a small number of teachers and students on their views and experiences with pupils’ involvement in classroom communication as well as quantitative data gathering. The quantitative survey measured teachers’ acquisition and participation-oriented views on learning. Open-ended reflection on learning questions was also given to the students. Results showed significant development towards more participation-oriented beliefs on learning. Interview data and written statements reveal varied differences between the Swedish context and the participants’ experiences from schools in Syria.

KEYWORDS
Syrian refugee teachers; Swedish Educational Labour market; integration; participation-oriented learning; multilingualism

Introduction

During 2015 and onwards, large numbers of refugees entered Sweden. In response to this influx, the Swedish Government aims to support and to facilitate newly arrived immigrants quickly finding employment and a workplace relevant to their education and work experience, especially in professions where there is a labour shortage. Several fast track programmes have been organised for different professions. The goals for these different fast tracks are to shorten the period of time from arrival to work, to utilise the participants’ relevant competences and to take advantage of the right competences in branches where there is a shortage of labour. This requires that courses in the Swedish language (especially in professional Swedish) are taken by immigrants and that an early valuation of the immigrants’ competence, motivation, workplace learning and formal education is conducted.1

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Swedish education has seen a shortage of certified teachers for many years. In particular, there is a lack of secondary-school teachers in the subjects of science, mathematics and language arts, and a lack of primary and pre-school teachers, in general (Åstrand, 2018; Statistiska Centralbyråns [SCB], 2016). The fast track programme for teachers and preschool teachers was established in cooperation with relevant social partners – the Swedish Teachers’ Union, the National Union of Teachers, the Employers’ Organisation for the Swedish Service Sector – and the Swedish Public Employment Service, as well as other relevant government agencies and several higher education institutions spread over the country, one of which is Malmö University.

Participants in the fast track programme have a background as teachers in primary, secondary school or preschool, mainly in Syria, but also in Iraq and Dubai. The path to a national certification for teachers in Sweden varies among the participants due to their previous education and professional experience. Some can participate in the education for foreign teachers, while others have to follow the traditional teachers’ education. During the programme, each participant has the opportunity to receive an assessment from a career counsellor to ascertain what further studies, after the fast track, would be required to obtain the national certification.

The fast track programme can be characterised as an introduction to the Swedish school system. Theoretical courses are complemented with work experience and language courses in professional Swedish during the 26-week period. The outline of the course, which is the same for all groups nationwide, is threefold:

- Content courses
  - The Swedish school system, its history, organisation and values (8 weeks)
  - Social relations and pedagogical leadership (6 weeks)
  - Pedagogical relations, communication and learning (12 weeks)
- Course in Professional Swedish
- Workplace learning

To give participants quick access to course content, both Swedish and Arabic are used as languages of instruction, as well as English when needed. This entails that Arabic bilingual teachers are involved in the programme. Course literature is mainly in Swedish, with some translation into Arabic, depending on the availability of publications.

An important aspect of the fast track theoretical courses is developing teachers’ attitudes and pedagogical roles on their way to becoming a teacher in Swedish contexts. A particular focus is understanding the Swedish value system and its vision regarding pupils’ active involvement in classroom interaction: both are important characteristics of the Swedish curriculum for primary and secondary-school education, Lgr11 and Lgy (Skolverket 2011). Studies have shown that schools in Syria are often teacher-controlled and teacher-centred, with a transmission mode of teaching. Moreover, teaching in general is traditionally textbook-directed, focusing on mechanical practice rather than on meaningful interaction (Albirini 2006; Rajab, 2013).

The aim of this small explorative study is to focus on the participants’ reflections and understanding of the role of teachers in Swedish schools in realising the pedagogy targeted in the Swedish national primary and secondary school curriculum (in Lgr11
and Lgy), specifically the interaction patterns and student participation in learning processes. In addition, the study can shed light on issues of broader interest for labour market integration efforts and specific course design. Furthermore, the explorations are meant to identify relevant questions for further research on course design.

**Background**

In this era of migration, Western societies often receive professionally qualified immigrants from other parts of the world. In many western countries, research can be found on teachers with foreign-teaching qualifications and their integration with the educational system (e.g. Chassels, 2010; Cho, 2010; Collins & Reid, 2012; Deters, 2011; Dewilde, 2013; Rhone, 2007; Walsh, Brigham, & Wang, 2011).

This research reveals common issues concerning this group of professionals and their integration into the educational system of the receiving country. There are challenges in encountering a different role relationship between teachers and students, and among teachers themselves. The tendency for local teacher communities to devalue the qualifications and competences of foreign teachers is apparent in all countries. Discrimination in the form of “othering” (categorisation and exclusion due to accent, different pedagogy or culture of this group of teachers) is also frequently reported.

In Sweden, Sandlund (2010) problematised in her longitudinal study the role of existing discourses in the Swedish educational system that idealise the Swedish school and devalue the experiences and the knowledge of foreign teachers. Another study (Jönsson & Rubinstein Reich, 2006) followed up a group of foreign teachers after completing supplementary teacher training courses. These studies offer a discussion on how these teachers construct their professional identity in relation to – and often in contrast to – what they perceive as a “Swedish school culture”. A particular focus was what promotes or restrains possibilities of gaining employment. Teachers using an “assimilatory strategy”, which is adapting to the expected behaviour and norms of the local community, were likely to get permanent employment. On the other hand, using a “confrontational strategy”, that is insisting on one’s own beliefs and convictions, seemed to put teachers at risk of being regarded as uncooperative and unsuitable for further employment.

Bigestans (2015) studied the experiences of pedagogues with a foreign background who, after language and additional courses, started working in Swedish education. An important issue in the study is the challenges teachers face regarding participating in the school community of practise and communicating in Swedish as a second language. She connects these challenges to the teachers’ backgrounds in different educational systems, in which different teacher–learner relationships are prevalent. Against the background of differences in educational contexts, Bigestans hypothesises that foreign teachers coming from rather different school systems will find it difficult to understand both the required teacher role and the pupils’ active involvement in Swedish classroom interaction.

Empirical research in Syrian classroom culture is scarce. Against the background of a curriculum innovation promoting more communicative language teaching, Rajab (2015) examined current practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. He states that classrooms in Syria are mainly teacher-fronted, where the physical layout is uniform, with fixed double desks and attached chairs (citing Daoud, 1999).
Observations and interviews with six secondary teachers in EFL show that teaching was highly teacher dominated in general. The discourse analysis of the Syrian EFL classes revealed that teachers did not diversify their teaching styles to promote pair or group work in the classroom. Rajab summarises the observed practices as a “culture of recitation and dictation underpinned by authoritarian, transmissional, and knowledge-testing practices” (p. 241) and he underlines the “lack of pedagogical understanding of the importance of meaningful classroom talk that invites students to play an active role in the discourse” (p 241). Despite the limited available data, this study validates the relevance of including characteristics of traditional and more interactive teaching as relevant content in the fast track education for Syrian teachers in Sweden.

Against this background, it is thus important to explore teachers’ understanding of Swedish curriculum values and pedagogic approaches. This understanding can be considered a crucial factor for new teachers functioning successfully in the Swedish school system, that is playing their roles as teachers in the curriculum implementation (Goodlad, 1979; van den Akker, 2003).

This pilot study explores relevant aspects of course design within fast track arrangements that aim to integrate professionals with a refugee background into Swedish education. The teachers’ understanding of Swedish curriculum values and pedagogic approaches were prioritised in the designed course. From the perspective of both participants and teachers, this study examines experiences of how the fast track courses at Malmö University address the teachers’ role in classroom communication and learning.

Research questions were formulated as follows:

(a) In what ways do participants in two fast track groups for newly arrived pedagogues expect the Swedish school context to differ from Syrian contexts, and what challenges do they expect to meet as teachers?
(b) How do participants develop their understanding of student participation in interaction as a characteristic of Swedish education and curriculum?
(c) How do teacher educators perceive the two fast track groups’ understanding of Swedish classroom teaching?

From these explorations, recommendations regarding course design will be formulated and presented to Malmö University, which commissioned the research.

**Theoretical framework**

The study can be positioned in research on curriculum development and theory on learning in social interaction. Courses in the fast track trajectory reflect the expectation that pedagogical relations and classroom communication need to be discussed and understood by the participants on their way into the Swedish school. Goodladı́d’s (1979) curriculum theory offers a distinction at three curriculum levels that structure the study of courses like the Fast Track: the intended curriculum, the interpreted curriculum and the attained curriculum. Starting point is the formal course design, the intended curriculum. By studying teacher educators’ interpretations and participants’ interpretations and experiences, the relevance of the designed course can be examined.
Learning and social interaction is a second relevant field for the study. The traditions and routines of working individually, in small groups or as a whole group, and teacher interaction skills differ between countries: moreover, they may vary over time. The switch from more teacher-centred education to active-student participation in classroom learning is discussed in many publications during the last decades, e.g. Edwards and Mercer (1987). Theories and views of learning can be positioned on a scale that Sfard (1998) characterises by using two metaphors. She distinguishes between more acquisition-oriented pedagogies and more participation-oriented pedagogies. The first focuses on knowledge as something disregarding context, where teachers possess knowledge that they then convey or transmit to students. In short, one-way communication prevails. More participation-oriented pedagogies focus on students becoming participants in a certain community. This implicates a stronger emphasis on students learning from experience, which is discussed and reflected on in active participation in both whole group and sub-group work.

Reading course descriptions is insufficient as a means to ascertain how the fast track curriculum addresses the participants’ understanding of the Swedish approach to teaching and learning. Other approaches are needed to understand how teacher educators interpret the course descriptions and objectives, and how participants experience the course.

Teachers’ behaviour in classrooms will be influenced by what they believe to be appropriate and right. In her dissertation, Knežić (2011) studied student teachers’ understanding of learning in classroom interaction by measuring beliefs on learning. Beliefs are defined as “an individual’s judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgement that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” (Pajares, 1992, p. 316). Using Sfard’s metaphors of acquisition and participation, Knežić designed a Teacher Beliefs Questionnaire on Learning (TBLQ). Interestingly, this TBLQ has been validated for use by both Dutch teachers and Surinamese teachers, and it reflected differences in cultural educational contexts: the Dutch clearly having a more participation-oriented view than their Surinamese counterparts. Knežić added student–teachers’ written statements on learning and teachers’ roles as data to her study, and she showed how beliefs changed over time when they participated in an intervention in teacher training that focused on learning in interaction.

Data collection and methodology

Malmö University’s Faculty of Education was one of the institutes offering newly arrived pedagogues a 26-week long fast track course: the first group (32 participants) started in August 2016, and the second (46 participants) in November 2016. Malmö University immediately commissioned research connected to the first course group to gather components for course design. Table 1 displays the participants’ backgrounds.

Two independent researchers followed the groups during the course and gathered data, as described below, including notes on the experiences during data collection, the languages used and data preparation.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data in this explorative phase for a rather new research field was expected to strengthen the validity through triangulation. Data from different sources could be compared and could both question or
strengthen results (Denscombe, 2003, p. 185f). Given the short preparation time, a combination of the following was chosen: focus group interviews with a small number of teacher–students regarding their views on and experiences with pupils’ involvement in classroom communication; open, non-participant observations during relevant group discussions; and some quantitative data gathering. The following describes the methods used, that is, some notes on the experiences during data collection, the languages used and data preparation:

- Written open-ended questions asked participants to reflect on learning questions; they could choose to answer in Arabic, Swedish or English. Though the written reflection questions could be answered in any of the three languages, they were mostly responded to in Arabic. This material was then translated into English.
- Group and individual informal contact, pre- and post-interviews with the teacher trainers during the course, and relevant course characteristics were examined, all of which may influence the development of a good understanding of the characteristics of the Swedish curriculum.
- Interviews were conducted with focus groups with a small number of teachers and participants concerning their views and experiences with pupils’ involvement in classroom communication. A guide for the interview with semi-structured questions was used, which enabled follow-up questions to clarify answers. Interviews with participants through Swedish and English were carried out in connection to the first survey measurement in each of the two groups. In total, the four interviews lasted 35 minutes and were audio recorded. A selective transcription was made (Patton, 2002, p. 342ff).
- An effect measuring instrument was used to examine participant’s views on the role of language and learning in classroom interaction: Teacher Beliefs on Learning Questionnaire (TBLQ) (Knežić, 2011). The TBLQ consists of 18 statements, where respondents are asked to indicate agreement using a five-point Likert scale. The original English questionnaire was translated into Swedish and Arabic, and offered to respondents as a bilingual version. The TBLQ was presented two times. For the first group, this occurred after two weeks; while for the second group, it occurred on the second day of the course. The second measurement was carried out in the final week of the groups’ fast track course.

Although all data were anonymised, some participants did not want to give their names while writing their statements. Consequently, analyses had to be limited to group level. The data were read several times and a qualitative content analyses were applied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Teacher Education</th>
<th>Home country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>18 men</td>
<td>27–56</td>
<td>Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>29 men</td>
<td>28–58</td>
<td>Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 women</td>
<td></td>
<td>One from Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One from Dubai</td>
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</table>

a The participant from Dubai left early in the course and was not included in the study, whereas the participant from Iraq was.
to find repeating patterns, from which meaningful units were identified and categorised to find the most prevailing themes (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). These themes concerned physical context, curriculum goals, norms and values, home–school relations and interpersonal relations teacher–student.

**Results**

Results will be presented in five paragraphs: examining qualitative data from interviews with participants, written reflections by participants, observations of interaction, quantitative data from the Teacher Beliefs on Learning Questionnaire, and teachers’ views.

**Interview data**

The first research questions concerned participants’ experience of the correlations between Swedish and Syrian school contexts. Meaningful units traced in the material from the interviews will be introduced here, together with relevant quotations from participants and teachers. Another contribution to the result is the participants’ drawings of schools in Sweden and Syria. The following recurrent themes were identified: physical context, curriculum goals, norms and values, home-school relations and interpersonal relations teacher-student.

The majority of the participants disclosed that the physical context between the two countries differed. In Swedish schools, a rich environment was observed, with a lot of resources and equipment, e.g. computers, smart boards, and so on. However, this was not the case in Syria, where such resources were scarce. Moreover, it was revealed that high walls marked the boundaries of Syrian schools; one participant commented that “The walls around the schools can be seen as a safety aspect, but even as a caged environment”.

Class size was another observed aspect. In Syria, a class could comprise 40–50 students, and sometimes even a higher number; this affects classroom communication. Both the interview data and many of the participants’ drawings illustrated this fact.

Concerning the goals and content of education, the Syrian curriculum contains demanding and very clear and strict directions, as well as the time required for each goal. One participant stated, “Often the teacher gets punished because of his/her failure in following the timetable to finish the curriculum”, and “the goal of the teacher is to deliver the required information from the curriculum to the students” (SS2-13). Further, participants state that the main focus is to learn knowledge by heart and that the material to be used is strictly planned by the education authorities. This is in line with what other research results (Albrini, 2006; Rajab, 2013).

Several participants revealed that they expected the Swedish curriculum to allow them freedom in their planning and to focus on the students’ active participation and the development of their different abilities. One participant reported, “We do have a syllabus, but here in Sweden you can decide which books, texts or pictures you want to work with, or the perspective you want to use.” They appreciated this freedom although a textbook they were used to directed teaching (Albrini, 2006). In addition, the issue of the Swedish system of norms and values (“värdegrund”) was of great concern. Among others, questions about equality between the sexes and democracy among students were raised. At times, this was complicated to discuss, according to
both teachers and participants. Participants stated, “It is clear we should respect values, but it is strange to act differently,” and “It is strange to suddenly accept we have to learn new things; that will take time.”

Regarding Syria, participants asserted that the relations and contact between the students’ homes and the school were almost non-existent, whereas in Sweden the cooperation with parents was an important aspect of school. Moreover, they added that homework for Syrian students was more time consuming. Syrian students were more often given written tests and summative assessments. In Sweden, the participants appreciated the more formative approach, which explicitly uncovers goals and objectives for students.

In the Syrian classroom context, the majority of the participants acknowledged a clear distance between the teacher and the student, and an obvious lack of close relations: “There is a little bit of fear in the relation between the student and the teacher,” and “there is a notable lack of relations.” In contrast, there were closer and warmer relationships in Sweden: “Mutual love and respectful relations exist between the teacher and the students” and “The Swedish classroom is based on respect, sharing and cooperation.” This is in line with other research of teacher–learner relationship (Bigestans, 2015).

Written statements

Participants’ beliefs concerning classroom communication

In addition to the oral interviews, all participants were asked to write about their views on classroom communication in Syrian education and the expected differences with Swedish education. Mostly written in Arabic,3 the written data are quite rich and contain personal comparisons between the school systems. There are clearly individual differences within the groups, which might be connected to participants’ age and their experience in either more traditional or modern schools in Syria. The participants’ familiarity with Swedish schools varied greatly: some affirmed having no idea what to expect at all, whereas others had experienced Swedish classrooms to some degree, for instance in the role of a parent or grandparent.

The analysis of written reflections confirmed the outcomes (identified topics) from the oral focus group interviews. It should be mentioned that participants repeatedly expressed hesitation about, and wanted to avoid, a dichotomy between more traditional or more modern ways of teaching and learning.

The first impressions in teaching reveal differences styles and roles, like “exchanging knowledge” between teacher and pupils, and “gathering and respecting opinions.” Apparently, different roles and interpersonal relations caused the participants to contemplate issues of discipline and respect. Without explicit prompting, several respondents referred to the differences between Swedish and Syrian teacher–student relations:

I prefer to keep the barrier between the teacher and the student in order to avoid some problems. In some Swedish schools, the students treat the teacher as if he/she was his/her friend. The students might use swear words or hit the teacher in a joking way. That is why I prefer that the teacher stays a teacher and that the student stays a student. One of the most important terms of respect is not calling the teacher by his/her name without Mister of Mrs. (SS1-2)

Criticism also can be noted in this respondent’s comment:
Law rules the smallest details of the Swedish people’s lives at all ages and in all actions. The teacher has to respect the students, but the students are not obliged to respect the teacher” (SS2-32).

When asked about the classroom culture and teacher–student relations in Syria, responses clearly confirm major differences. Classroom communication is characterised as evidently different, with teachers there doing more talking and students having less-active engagement:

The teacher has an amount of information and a book from the Ministry of Education that he has to give to the student regardless to their response. The student plays the recipient’s role only, without any interaction or participation other than in a very weak way (SS2-12).

Differences are put into contexts, with references to group size, curriculum constraints and rules, and a lack of teaching materials – all of which make the teacher a very important source of knowledge:

The relation between teacher and student in Sweden is more interactive and dialogic than in Syria. In Sweden, students do not consider the teacher to be the main source of information because there are more resources, like books and the computer and outings outside school. In Syria, the teacher is the only source of information (SS2-13).

However, generalisations are dangerous. This is mentioned by one of the respondents, expressing variation between school contexts but also between private and state schools:

In the last years, modern methods entered Syria, and the learner got a role in communicating with his/her teacher and classmates, especially when using the new methods, such as discussion, brainstorming, induction and conclusion (SS2-28).

Even here, the given limitations in class size are referred to as hampering the implementation of a more interactive pedagogy.

These responses show that what Sfard (1998) called the acquisition versus participation metaphor, is a relevant issue in participants’ understanding of the Swedish classroom communication. Participants are aware of the importance of the dichotomy, although modern methods have entered Syria, as indicated above. The tradition to focus on transmitting knowledge is still a main theme in Syria, and the teacher is the only one who speaks, according the participants’ utterances: “the teacher is the only source of information”; “a non-interactive relationship based on imitation and lecturing”; “there is no communication between the teacher and the student”; “the teacher is the main speaker, he asks the questions and gives the correct answers”; “the main theme is that the teacher is the speaker and director, and the student is only a listener”; “only the teacher talks, and the students are rocks” (SS1-10). Contrastingly, the Swedish classroom is described as based on interaction and the role of the teacher as a facilitator: “All the stakeholders participate in talking (teachers and students). The main goal is exchanging knowledge.” It was also reported that the students in Syria more often worked in groups than individually; indeed, group work was mentioned as being a rare occurrence.

The outcomes of analyses of teacher reflections can be summarised at different levels: national, local and classroom. The following factors were disclosed as influencing teachers’ work in Swedish and in Syrian schools by participants in both groups, both in interviews and in written statements:
When asked in the written statements whether they expect that they have to change their teaching style in Swedish classroom communication, participants’ responses are varied (see Table 2).

Salient differences are noted, with references to non-existent phenomena in Syria, such as teachers dancing in the classroom in Sweden, engaging with parents in regular talks about students’ learning progress, or providing assistance with homework. But even here, the communication patterns in the classroom are disclosed as a dimension that most teachers expect they have to adapt their teaching styles to: becoming a guide rather than a director and making more space for student discussion.

**Observations of Swedish classroom interaction**

As part of the written questionnaire, participants were asked to comment on a classroom video clip from a lower-secondary mathematics lesson (see Appendix 5, Question 5).

The video clip, selected from the official website of Skolverket (the Swedish National Agency for Education) can be considered an illustration of classroom interaction befitting the intended Swedish curriculum. In the film, a math teacher presents a math problem to a lower-secondary class and then asks students to think for themselves. Thereafter, peer discussions in pairs take place; finally, the whole class exchanges their various solutions to the problem. The clip concludes with the teacher summarising and commenting on these solutions.

Evidently, the Swedish classroom interaction piqued the participants’ interest as they made every effort to describe the clip in detail, even reverting from English in the questionnaire to their native Arabic to capture the details more effectively. One participant in Group 2 underlining the effect of the clip as follows:

After watching this film, I started thinking more positively. I built a general idea about how things work inside the Swedish classroom. There is amazing thinking and discussing between the teacher and the students, and always a lot of new connected information. That leads to greater knowledge personally and generally. (SS2 – 16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Overview of data gathered.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher educator data</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participant data</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Teacher Beliefs on Learning questionnaire</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Measurement 1</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Measurement 2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Written statements</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus Interviews</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>With 6 participants, 6 September 2016</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
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The video comments were partly descriptive: describing the interaction organisation, student participation, use of the blackboard, and teacher moving around the classroom. Most answers also contained reflections regarding how the teacher worked. Furthermore, they expressed an awareness of the function of student participation: “Give the pupils time to think”; “leave space to think freely, thereby, offering space to solve a problem”; and “find solutions.” Promoting active pupil participation was connected to diversity in groups, such as “seeing differences between students” and “explaining in different ways.”

Remarkably, many participants explicitly appreciated the teacher role in the video clip (in Group 1, 10 out of 23; in Group 2, 22 out of 37). Among the comments were “wonderful”; “fabulous”; and “the best teaching way”. Several also claimed that this was the way they worked in Syria (4 in Group 1; 3 in Group 2). For example, “I like this way, and I followed it in my homeland”; “I give lessons exactly the same way”; and “It is just the way we do it in Syria; it is very positive and creates an atmosphere in which students should communicate and solve problems themselves.”

Even in this data, the connection was made to the constraints in Syrian schools regarding working more interactively, as group size hampered increased classroom participation.

**Teacher beliefs on learning questionnaire**

To answer the research question on participants’ development of the nature of Swedish classroom communication, the Teacher Beliefs on Learning Questionnaire was offered to both groups at the beginning and the end of the fast track period.

Results of the first observation of both groups (SS1 and SS2) were first gathered and then discussed during Fall 2016 (Table 3) and compared to a Swedish control group consisting of 28 lower-secondary teachers (högstadielärare). The TBLQ was repeated in a second measurement during the last week of the course. For both Group one and Group two, results are shown in Table 4.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the Acquisition and Participation scores for SS1 group observations 1 and 2. There is a significant difference for Acquisition and Participation scores between the two observations.

There was a statistically significant difference between Time 1 and Time 2 on both dependent variables (Table 5). For Acquisition and for Participation, there were no

<table>
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<th>Table 3. Overview of differences.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom context</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interpersonal relations, respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Group size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Interaction patterns and routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local and physical context</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- School culture (traditional/innovative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- State vs private schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Building, classrooms, teaching materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher tasks, including parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National context</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Curriculum status, guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Assessment and testing system</td>
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significant differences noted between the groups. This means that both groups agreed more with statements on A and P on the second measurement after following the course. However, the difference is much larger on Participation than on Acquisition level.

Relating these findings to the second research question, one may cautiously argue that both groups have become participation-oriented after following the course.

**Teacher educators’ views**

The third research question concerned how teacher educators of the theoretical courses perceived the fast track participants’ understanding of the Swedish classroom teaching. The teachers consider the language issue a great challenge for the participants. Even if the participants teach in Arabic, the teacher educators would like them to use Swedish predominantly over time. However, this has been difficult because of the participants’ limited level of Swedish. Another challenge is the teaching and discussion of the Swedish value system, which the participants have accepted and found important. In this respect, the bilingual teachers (Arabic and Swedish) played a crucial role in trying to bridge the gap between the system of norms and values of the two cultures. A clear gap was noted between what was discussed about Swedish values, and even agreed upon, and what actual materialised in the classrooms. One of the teachers said that it was fairly easy to get consensus in the group about equality between the sexes – everyone has the right to express his or her sexuality and to speak freely, and so on. However, during vocational training periods at the schools, several cases of culture clashes and misunderstandings occurred between the participants and the teachers and students at the workplace. This indicates the need for cooperation and/or consultations with all persons involved in the fast track programme. Importantly, all diverse perceptions need to be made visible, so individual cases can be acknowledged and discussed.

The teacher of Swedish asserts that the participants’ have a heterogeneous level of knowledge in the Swedish language, which makes the teaching difficult. No diagnostic tests of language proficiency are given. Further, she discloses that the primary part of the
course, “Professional Language,” lacks a curriculum and a course-description. The distinction between basic Swedish and Swedish required in educational settings is unclear and confusing. Additionally, there has been almost no cooperation between her and the rest of the teaching team regarding course content, mostly due to time restraints and colleagues being located at different faculties and buildings on the campus.

**Summary, conclusions and discussion**

**General**

The aim of this small explorative study was to form an overview of the participants’ views and understanding of the role of becoming a teacher in Swedish schools: primarily their realisation of the characteristics of the pedagogy targeted in the curriculum (in Lgr11 and Lgy), but specifically interaction patterns and student participation in learning processes. Main research questions addressed participants’ expectations of differences and challenges in the Swedish school context as compared to their experiences in Syria contexts, specifically the development of their understanding of student participation in interaction as characteristic of Swedish education and curriculum. From this, recommendations are formulated for the curriculum and for research that may contribute to future fast track trajectories.

Results on the TBL-Questionnaire showed development in both groups towards a more participation-oriented beliefs on learning. At the same time, acquisition-oriented beliefs became stronger. One may cautiously argue that both groups have become participation-oriented having followed the course. However, almost half of the participants were lost at the second measurement, mainly because they were absent at that time or because they had left the course.

Interview data and written statements reveal quite varied thoughts and experiences concerning not only traditional, governmental schools – with large groups of pupils and little equipment – but also private schools – with smaller classes that are better equipped and use more western pedagogy. Participants differ in age; gender; working experience, from preschool to gymnasium; and subjects, all subjects to specific subjects, such as mathematics, science and English. Both the written statements and interview data present rich information about relevant differences and similarities in teachers’ roles; classroom interaction patterns; expectations from teachers, students and parents; and national curriculum contexts. The main topics constitute classroom context, local context and national context. In addition, interviews with the teacher educators of the theoretical courses emphasise the knowledge of Swedish as being a crucial factor. Moreover, it is asserted that the values and norms of Swedish schools should be more in focus and discussed.

**Comments and discussion**

Nevertheless, caution should be exercised when studying Syrian teachers participating in the fast track training setting. The programme could easily be framed as a means to assimilate teachers into the Swedish way of thinking and working. This small study offers food for thought without drawing conclusions about what really is happening regarding the learning and development process for teachers transitioning into the
Swedish school setting. What kind of assimilatory strategies (Jönsson & Rubinstein Reich, 2006) are hard to discern from the material.

Given these limitations, it can be concluded that the role of students and teachers in learning and classroom participation patterns certainly are a relevant part of the fast track course. Not only are these elements an integral part of the course curriculum, but they are also visible throughout the course. However, course instructors note how participants struggle to understand values, relations and communication. Importantly, the participants consider the differences between Syrian and Swedish classrooms as crucial, and they are willing to take on their expected role.

The quantitative data confirm that participants change their beliefs on the importance of participation in learning processes. Having discussed this aspect with teacher educators, we hypothesise that participants were strongly motivated to enter the course on their way to finding a job in the Swedish educational system. We assume that a course introducing them to the differences in classroom and curriculum culture had been identified as important for them. The strong P-scales on the TBLQ may then reflect their motivation to succeed on the course. However, this does not mean that they abandoned their ideas about the importance of more teacher-centred knowledge transmission: scores on the acquisition scale do not change as strongly as on the participation scale. This reflects what Sfard (1998) addresses in the subtitle of her article, “the importance of not choosing one” of the metaphors.

Methodological comments and limitations
The study underlines the importance of carefully considering the choice of languages used in a multilingual research setting as well as the composition of a multilingual research team. Both Swedish and English were used in the oral interviews; however, at times participants had to translate into Arabic to other participants. Although the questionnaire was bilingual Arabic-English, reflections concerning the teacher–student communication could also be written Swedish. Answers in Arabic were translated into English by a Syrian teacher of English living in the Netherlands, who was not part of the group. This may have impacted our understanding of the responses, as the original words and formulations were lost. Reliability may also have been compromised by the translation of the questionnaire into English and Arabic by one of the teacher trainers.

Analyses show that offering the option to answer in different languages was important. Most participants chose to write in Arabic, as it appeared to be the language they were most proficient in and comfortable with. Allowing for other languages to be used may have affected the subtlety and depth of responses.

A closer examination of the item concerning the video-observation reveals that of the 23 respondents in Group 1, 1 response was written in English, 4 in Swedish, and 18 in Arabic. Of the 37 respondents in Group 2, 2 were in English, 2 in Swedish, and 33 in Arabic. The written answers were quite elaborated, with a length between 100–150 words, which might be due to Arabic using many of metaphors. The answers given in Swedish, however, had a length of between 20 and 40 words only. Interestingly, those respondents who had chosen English in other questions turned to Arab when answering this specific question.

Concerning the TBLQuestionnaire, it should be acknowledged that this instrument has not yet been validated in the Swedish setting, and the Swedish control group scores
show that further elaboration of the instrument is needed: scoring 3.67 on A-scales (SD .59) and 4.49 on P-scales (SD .28), whereas the fast track groups scored 2.46 (SD .48) and 4.29 (SD .45) at the first measurement (N = 67). Consequently, we cannot say how valid the instrument is in the Swedish setting. New items may be required to raise validity. Further, controlling the internal validity of the instrument made clear that Cronbach alpha for all groups and observations is .44 for Acquisition and .94 for Participation. This may signify that we have a problematic scale for Acquisition and a rather strong one for Participation. Still, development on the participation-dimension is significant for both groups.

Another limitation of this study is that the available time that did not allow us to follow the group during course activities, that is those not in the transition from the university setting to the workplace periods in schools. This means impressions of workplace experiences are anecdotal.

**Remarks on future research and comments on course design**

To understand the ideas of the teachers more in depth, the qualitative data are an important source. Interviews and written statements of participants show that the development of understanding a new classroom climate is a complex process. Key issues about how knowledge can be constructed also affect pedagogy in teacher education itself. Research could deepen the understanding of pedagogical choices that fit the participants’ background and needs; consequently, it would enable a utilisation of their previous experience. Further, the dimension of participants’ identity as teachers, that is, their professional pride, is at stake. It would be interesting to further examine how choices in fast track course design affect participants in the context of finding a new identity in a new society, and not just professionally.

Several important and interesting angles for future research around the fast track course were identified. In this study, we focussed on the theoretical courses; however, we could neither examine nor observe the course in Swedish or the workplace learning parts (APL). Both were mentioned in our data by teachers and participants, which raised the following thoughts.

The importance of communication skills in Swedish is obvious. In the groups studied, no strong connections between the course content and the language proficiency courses, under the heading “yrkessvenska” (professional Swedish), were realised.

However, communicating through Swedish cannot be distinguished from an understanding of teachers’ roles in classrooms. The intertwinedness between teacher roles, classroom communication and language proficiency is a complex one. Bigestans (2015) underlines the responsibility of schools to support further these teachers’ integration and understanding of Swedish education and to avoid blaming the teachers for missing language proficiency as the main reason for failure to integrate.

The way in which teachers guide conversations, work from a formative perspective, and integrate language and learning in school subjects (“språk och kunskapsutvecklande arbetssätt”) cannot be separated from the teachers’ language proficiency. The data in our study reveals this. As one participant noted, “I can’t be the teacher I would like to be without better knowledge of Swedish” (SS2- 12). The same holds for expressing and establishing interpersonal relationships in Swedish classrooms. Several participants observed the tension between a democratic classroom and classroom discipline, and
finding the balance is partly a matter of having the communication tools to position oneself as a teacher, thereby leading classroom communication. Even the theoretical courses have a connection to the development of the Swedish language, as core concepts cannot merely be translated from Swedish to Arabic by the teachers. Rather, the participants require negotiation of meaning of the Swedish language.

Therefore, we recommend that future courses could be strengthened through an integrated language and content curriculum (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003), which international research offers ample examples and guidelines of. Moreover, we advise a clearer focus on scaffolding language integration and content-based teaching in both Swedish and Arabic, where the knowledge and language goals are explicit (Gibbons, 2015; Hajer & Meestringa, 2014). Such approaches could be connected not only to future work and curriculum development in the subject of Swedish in vocational courses but also to teacher education. A closer analysis of required professional language may help define language objectives and course design with a natural relation between language and theory. This will affect the language policy within the course – how and when to use Arabic and Swedish, while further developing skills in Swedish.

Additionally, connections between the fast track and APL/workplace learning could be strengthened. In theoretical courses, participants read and talk about classroom cultures. However, how can one discern important features of classroom communication in real life? Responses to the short video from a mathematics classroom, part of the data collection in his study, show a high level of participant engagement regarding thinking about actual classroom recordings. Participants reverted to their mother tongue to fully describe and underscore their thoughts. This raises the following questions: how and when can observations in classrooms be part of the fast track education, and how can connections with workplaces be best utilised?

We are aware that we cannot interpret participants’ experiences of the transition process to be teachers in Sweden. Moreover, we cannot construe how all the actors in university courses or at workplaces could play a role in forming optimal preparation for work in Swedish schools. Future research can add to this gap through a case study approach, that is, following some participants through observation – both in work experience and in language courses and content courses. Examples of such case studies are given by Beijer (2006).

*Boundary crossing* (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) is a theoretical concept that is relevant to the fast track education. It describes how differences between cultural practices can be an object of learning. In a curriculum, one has to decide not only what content might be a good point of departure for discussing school cultures, but also where understanding could be furthered: be it in university courses, in workplaces themselves, or in the language course. The transition between theoretical courses and work experience at schools (APL) could be explored and studied. As the different parts of the course are currently not matched and synchronised, such course structures could be redesigned.

**Final comments**

During the first course, it became obvious that no job guarantee could be given. Moreover, a long trajectory – through existing courses for teachers with a foreign background (ULV) and other formal education – might be needed before gaining a teaching position could be considered realistic. The dropout rates (more than 25%
in both groups) might be explained in this context. Realistic expectations of the roles of newly arrived pedagogues are needed. Against this background, we underline the importance of future research on the roles and duties of “study counsellors” (bilingual teachers and classroom assistants) present in most schools, who support newly arrived students individually through their mother tongues. This particular teacher category could be of high interest to fast track participants.

Earlier studies in the 1980s and 90s have addressed the challenge to educate bilingual staff, who could act as culture mediators for newly arrived students; reanalyses of these studies may lend to a better understanding of and reflection on the potential of the many pedagogues who are awaiting the opportunity to enter the Swedish labour market. It is important to effectively utilise not only participants’ language resources in the context of multilingualism in Swedish schools but also their cultural experiences.

There is much international research on the interconnectedness of language identity, learners’ motivation and investment in their learning processes (e.g. Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). This explorative study also indicates that culture is an inseparable part of learning from language and of new professional identities.

Notes
2. All quotations from interviews are translated from Swedish to English by the authors.
3. Answers written in Arabic were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant, a Syrian refugee studying English in the Netherlands.
4. ‘En lektion från högstadiet. Division med tal i decimalform. NCM, Published 2012 as part of national professional development programme Matematiklyft. Shown minutes were 0–2.00 and 10.00–15.34.

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