A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF REFUGEE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The present study is focused on the issue of refugee education in Malaysia and the premise for this study is rooted in Sustainable Development Goals of 4. As Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 United Nations convention and is not a signatory of its 1967 Protocol, refugee children in the country are unable to access public school systems. Their only means to obtain an education is via an informal parallel system of refugee community learning centres that are run across the country. It is therefore pertinent for policymakers, NGOs, UNHCR Malaysia and local communities to have a clear understanding of the issues concerning refugee education to propose sustainable solutions to ensure that no refugee child in Malaysia is left behind. A systematic literature review approach, guided by the PRISMA statement 2020 was adopted in this study to better understand the phenomenon of concern and outline the key barriers and facilitators in the context of refugee education in Malaysia. A total of 14 articles met the selection criteria and were within the scope of the research question. A thematic analysis was conducted and several themes emerged. The review acknowledges that the educational needs of refugee children in Malaysia warrant attention.

Keywords: Refugee Education, Refugee Community Learning Centres, Malaysia

Abstrak

Studi ini difokuskan pada isu pendidikan pengungsi di Malaysia dengan premis studi berakar pada Sustainable Development Goals ke empat. Malaysia belum meratifikasi konvensi PBB 1951 dan tidak menandatangani Protokol 1967 dimana anak-anak pengungsi di negara tersebut tidak dapat mengakses sistem sekolah umum. Satu-satunya cara mereka untuk bisa memperoleh pendidikan adalah melalui sistem informal dari pusat pembelajaran komunitas pengungsi yang dijalankan di seluruh negeri. Oleh karena itu penting bagi pembuat kebijakan, LSM, UNHCR Malaysia dan masyarakat setempat untuk memiliki pemahaman yang jelas tentang isu-isu tentang pendidikan pengungsi untuk mengusulkan solusi berkelanjutan untuk memastikan tidak ada anak pengungsi di Malaysia yang tertinggal. Pendekatan tinjauan literatur yang sistematis, dipandu oleh pernyataan PRISMA 2020 diadopsi dalam penelitian ini untuk lebih memahami fenomena yang menjadi perhatian dan menguraikan hambatan utama dan fasilitator dalam konteks pendidikan pengungsi di Malaysia. Sebanyak 14 artikel memenuhi kriteria pemilihan dan berada dalam ruang lingkup pertanyaan penelitian. Sebuah analisis tematik dilakukan dan beberapa tema muncul. Tinjauan tersebut mengakui bahwa kebutuhan pendidikan anak-anak pengungsi di Malaysia memerlukan perhatian.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Pengungsi, Pusat Belajar Komunitas Pengungsi, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Education is a basic human right for all and a sovereign right to the marginalized and often excluded refugee communities who are underpinned by international laws. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), education remains the organization's top priority as education serves as the "... foundation on which to build peace and drive sustainable development" (UNESCO, 2019). UNESCO has been tasked with coordinating the United Nation's Education 2030 Agenda, specifically focusing on the 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) "… to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." The main thrust of SDG 4 in relation to the refugee community is to ensure that the education received, empowers refugee children to fight poverty, prevent disease and build more resilient and peaceful societies in the future (UNHCR 2015). However, with the global predicament of the continued increase in the number of displaced children, the gaps in refugee education between refugee children and their peers remain. UNHCR (2020) reports that although 91% of the children in the world attend primary schools, only 50% of refugee children in the world are enrolled in primary education. These gaps in access and attainment in education amongst refugee children could be attributed largely to the fact that the majority of refugees (approximately 85%) are hosted in low and middle-income countries (UNESCO Inst. for Statistics & UNHCR, 2021). As of 2019, "…only two high-income countries – Germany and Chile, were among the top 15 refugee-hosting countries in the world" (UNESCO Inst. for Statistics & UNHCR, 2021). Moreover, with the recent disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, these gaps would only continue to widen (Refugees UNHCR, Sept 2020) and lead to the possible derailment of SDG 4 (Gulseven et al. 2020) as the pandemic has abruptly halted the implementation of initiatives related to SDG 4. Reports suggest that marginalized groups such as refugee children would be left further behind compared to before the pandemic (UN/DESA, 2020).

Although Malaysia has neither ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention nor is signatory of its 1967 Protocol, this developing nation located in Southeast Asia has practiced a long-standing tradition of upholding its humanitarian commitment to provide temporary asylum to diverse groups of asylum seekers and refugees who make their way through the country's borders (UNHCR 2009). According to 2018 data records, Malaysia was identified as a host country to the largest number of refugees in the Southeast Asian region who leave their home countries for a variety of reasons; to flee from war, persecution and punishment for racial,

national, religious, social, gender or political affiliations. Data procured in December 2021, reported that a total of 180 440 refugees and asylum seekers are registered with UNHCR Malaysia (UNHCR Malaysia Figures at a Glance 2022). A large majority of this figure comprised Myanmar refugees (155 400) from the Rohingya (103 380), Chin (22 570) and other (29 450) ethnic groups who had fled persecution from Myanmar (UNHCR Malaysia Figures at a Glance, 2022). According to reports (UNHCR Malaysia Figures at a Glance, 2022), the remaining 24 040 refugees and asylum seekers are from around 50 countries around the world, Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine to name a few, with males making up a majority of the refugee community (68%). While refugees are residing in almost all states across Malaysia, close to 100 000 of these refugees have made the Klang Valley (several parts of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur) their home as Selangor is also the most populous state and Kuala Lumpur, the most populous city in the country (UNHCR, 2021).

Children below the age of 18 years, who are of school-going ages are estimated to be at 23 823 with 1 234 children from this group enrolled in pre-school education, 5 046 students enrolled in primary education and 874 teenagers enrolled in secondary education (UNHCR Figures at a Glance, 2021). However, the refugee children and teenagers of school-going ages are unable to access the public education systems in the country as the Malaysian government does not legally recognize refugees and their status nor acknowledge the UNHCR cards given out by UNHCR Malaysia to be an official document, thus, denying refugees from accessing formal health, education or legal employment. The only means for the children and teens of school-going ages to obtain an education is, therefore, via an informal parallel system of approximately 130 refugee community learning centres (CLCs) that are located across the country (UNHCR, 2020 List of Learning Centres). A majority of these refugee community learning centres (CLCs) are situated in the Klang Valley; 100 out of the estimated 130 CLCs are in the city of Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor. Despite the establishment of CLCs in almost all states across Malaysia, UNHCR (2020) reports that only 30% of refugee children of school-going ages in the country are enrolled in these CLCs; implying that the remaining 70% are not enrolled in schooling programs.

While it has been acknowledged by several studies that access to education amongst refugee children and adolescents in their host countries is limited, clear reasons and indicators which reflect the gravity of the issue concerning education access, completion and attainment of learning outcomes are often not readily available by the refugees' home country and the host country (UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNHCR, 2021). This lack of clear indicators

makes coming up with sustainable solutions difficult. Besides, even when children and teenagers are able to access education in certain host nations, the quality of learning made available is often a cause for concern (UNESCO, 2019).

The Malaysian predicament in the context of refugee education is similar to the global one, given that, the monitoring of these refugee centres, their enrolments, operations, policies, teaching staff, medium of instruction and financial standings are not guided nor supervised by one governing body. Although a few of these centres are under the purview of UNHCR Malaysia, each of these centres has its own unique rules, policies, teaching and learning resources and fee structure. There are thus far, general brief reports on refugees in Malaysia by researchers (Siah et al. 2015 & Zhooriyati et al., 2021) and relevant global organizations (Smith, 2012) but a systematic review on 'Refugee Education in Malaysia' has yet to be published. Therefore, the focus of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review on refugee education in Malaysia by outlining the challenges and opportunities unique to the local landscape. The research question to inform this study is as follows: What are the key barriers and facilitators to Refugee Education in Malaysia? A systematic review on refugee education with a focus on this research question should provide a high quality of evidence to encourage stakeholders to advance their understanding of this issue and to put forward sustainable solutions so that the government of Malaysia could play an active role in upholding the basic rights of these children as it had in 1995, acceded to the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

METHODOLOGY

The systematic literature review conducted for this paper focuses on refugee education in Malaysia. The articles identified and selected in this systematic literature review were guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (with its 27 – item checklist), which lends itself to a rigorous search of key terms relating to the context of the present study. The step-by-step guideline and checklist were used to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize research studies relating to refugee education in Malaysia. Given that a methodologically effective systematic review is characterized by their rigour, transparency and replicability, for the purposes of this study, the following stages in the systematic review process were adopted with clearly defined parameters for each of the stages: search strategy, selection criteria and data extraction.

Search Strategy

Articles were identified using electronic databases, namely Elsevier's Scopus, Clarivate's Web of Science and Google Scholar. The web of science and Scopus databases were chosen as they are well renowned powerful search engines that host multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journals of high quality. The web of science database has over 24 000 journal titles while the Scopus database has abstracts and citations covering almost 34 000 journal titles.

There were three stages to the systematic literature review process undertaken for this study. The review was conducted in January 2022. In the first phase of the process, keywords pertaining to the phenomenon to be studied and the research question put forward were identified, and a search was carried out on all three databases. The search terms used for the query were a combination of keywords within 1) education, 2) area of study, and 3) status of migrants. For education, the search words used were "education," "class*," and "school," while for the area of study, the term "Malaysia" was included. The terms used to search within the status of the migrants were "refugee" and "undocumented migrants." A total of 983 articles were identified in this first phase, and 323 duplicated records were removed.

Selection Criteria

The second stage of the systematic review process involved the screening of the identified 660 titles and abstracts from stage one using pre-defined screening criteria. The selection criteria for the purpose of this systematic review was that each chosen paper met the following inclusion criteria 1) published in peer-reviewed academic journals (all other types of articles and publications in the form of book series, chapters, conference proceedings, and reports were excluded) 2) written in English 3) conducted in Malaysia. A total of 50 articles were selected at the end of stage two and the inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined in Table 1 below.

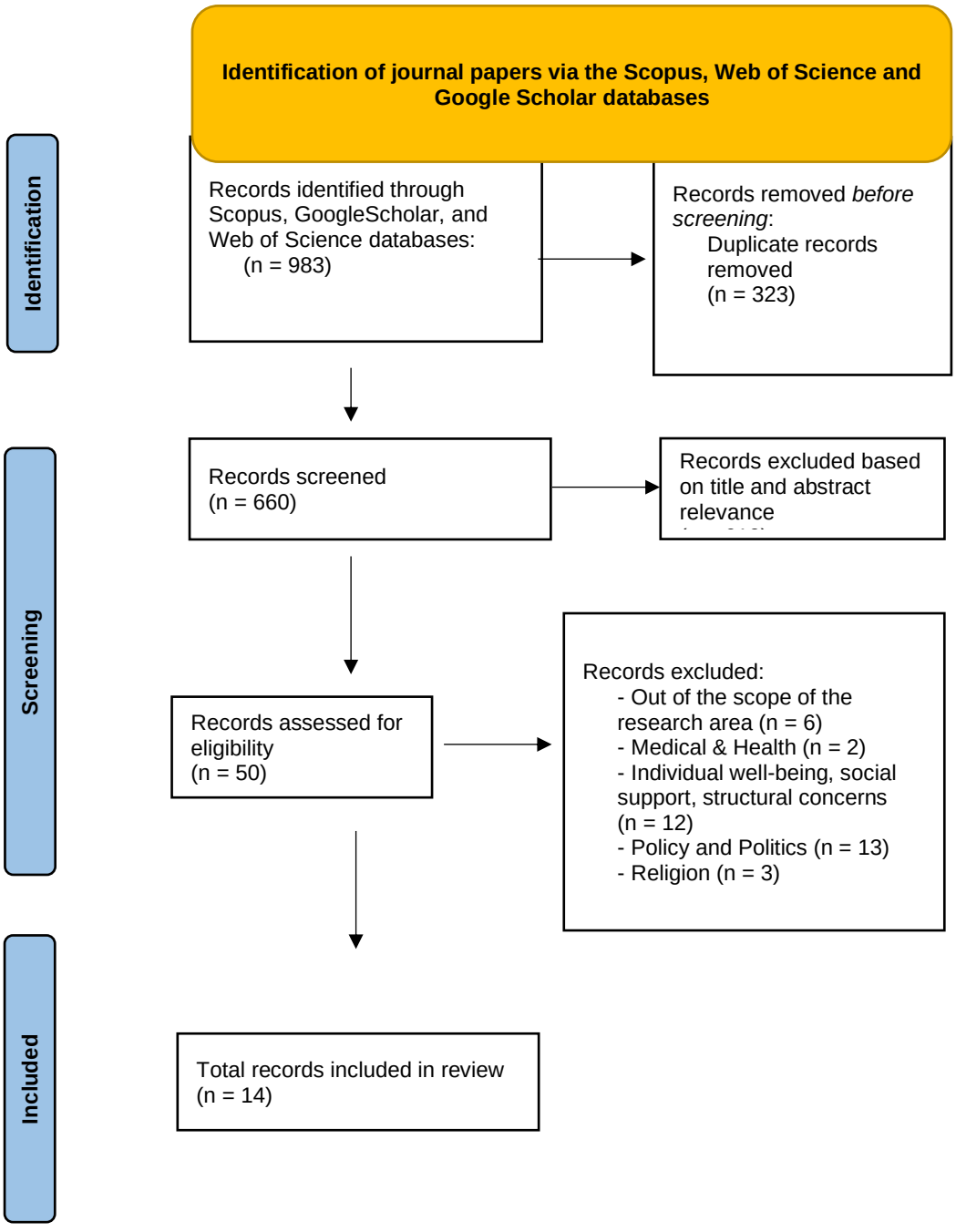
Table 1: Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Criteria	**Inclusion**	**Exclusion**
Article Type	Peer-reviewed academic journal articles only	Books, book series, book chapters, conference proceedings, reports, non-peer-reviewed journal articles
Language	Written in English	Non-English articles
Context	Conducted in Malaysia	Conducted in other countries or regions

Data Extraction

In the third stage of the systematic review process, two reviewers were involved in screening the 50 chosen articles from stage two. Independent full-text screening was conducted, whereby both researchers worked separately, and each made brief notes/comments against each of the 50 full-text papers as to why it should or should not be included in the study. The use of two reviewers was adopted in the study to reduce the risk of bias assessment in the data extraction process.

Figure 1. The Flow Diagram of the Systematic Review Process



(Adapted From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71)

After the full-text screening stage by the two reviewers, a short discussion was held with the two reviewers and minor disagreements were resolved. The relevant papers to be included in the study were finalized and disaggregated. Research papers excluded in this phase were those that were out of the scope of the research area (n = 6) and the remaining that were excluded were those that were out of the scope of the research question of the present study; focused on medical and health concerns (n = 2), centered around individual well-being, social support, and structural concerns (n = 12), concentrated on policy and politics (n = 13) or focused on religion (n = 3). Upon completing the third stage of the screening process, 14 journal articles were to be included in this systematic review paper. The summary of the data extraction process and eligibility assessment is as outlined in Figure 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 14 journal articles to be included in this study were classified according to their authors, year of publication, objective(s), study design, participants and location(s) of the study. The year of publication for the chosen articles spanned from 2016 to January 2022 (about 6 years). There was a spike in publications in 2018 because of President Obama's visit to Malaysia in November 2015. He visited a refugee centre as part of his call for more compassion to be shown towards the issue of the refugee crisis in the world. After this visit, the US Embassy started encouraging Fulbright recipients to research areas involving refugees when applying for Fulbright tenure positions in Malaysia (O'Neal et al. 2017). In fact, 4 out of the 14 chosen papers were published by American researchers on Fulbright tenures to Malaysia.

The 14 research articles generally investigated a variety of themes related to refugee education in Malaysia. While many studies were focused on student and teacher perceptions on discrimination, coping strategies, educational needs, pedagogical interventions, alternative education, rights to education, classroom management, socio-emotional issues, educational challenges faced, and limited access to education, one study was focused on the use of social media by a refugee education group and another on the ethical concerns in the context of ethics approval in research on refugee education. Qualitative research approaches to data collection were used more frequently by the researchers as opposed to quantitative approaches. Seven studies used one or a combination of the following qualitative data collection approaches: semi-

structured, in-depth interviews, observation, reflection, group interviews; five studies used the quantitative approach - primarily questionnaires; one study used key performance indicators and metrics for data collection purposes and one research paper was a reflection paper on ethical consent based on the author's prior experience of researching refugee education.

The informants of the 14 studies were mainly teachers, volunteers, administrators and students from refugee community learning centres (CLCs). Besides, a few studies included policymakers, community organizers and adult refugees. More than half of these studies were conducted in Selangor (the most populous state in Malaysia) and Kuala Lumpur (the most populous city in Malaysia) as approximately 100 out of the 130 CLCs are located in the state of Selangor and city of Kuala Lumpur whereas 3 studies included refugee children from Sabah, East Malaysia and one study on alternative education in relation to the Rohingya children was conducted in a Rohingya Learning Centre located in Penang – a state in the Northern region of Malaysia. Overall, almost 12 out of the 14 studies primarily involved refugee groups from Myanmar as they make up almost 85% of the total refugee population in Malaysia.

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the 14 chosen journal papers to be reviewed. This method of analysis required reading, identifying, analysing, selecting codes and subsequently constructing themes to answer the research question: What are the key barriers and facilitators to refugee education in Malaysia? The themes identified are categorized accordingly.

Common Barriers to Refugee Education

Upon close analysis, 7 major barriers were identified from the 14 papers reviewed in the context of refugee education in Malaysia. Each theme is forwarded and discussed in the section that follows:

Undocumented and Deemed Illegal (UND)

The Malaysian immigration laws do not discriminate between the terms 'undocumented', 'noncitizen', 'migrant' and 'stateless', hence, they are used interchangeably (Loganathan et. al, 2022); causing refugees to be clumped together with asylum seekers, stateless persons and illegal immigrants which has led to severely restricted access to education. Although the government of Malaysia has allowed them temporary stay, there is no government obligation nor policy to protect these groups (Khairi, 2019). A substantial number of children are referred to as 'invisible children' as they are marginalized and remain a hidden population with very limited opportunities for education (Loganathan et al., 2022). The

Rohingyas make up the majority of this group as "…they are not recognized as citizens of any country" (Loganathan et al., 2022). Learning center operators and non-government service providers concur that refugee children in the country are deprived of the basic right to education (Siah et al., 2019; Siah et al., 2021). They (refugee children) are not able to attend public schools (Khairi, 2019). In addition, the lack of legal status for refugees and their children has led to a state of uncertainty that CLC teachers reported that the children in learning centres exhibit a sense of hopelessness toward any form of educational engagement. The hope for resettlement is not permanent and as such these refugee children attach little importance to the informal education received. In fact, they view it as pointless (Cowling et al. 2021) as they feel "…this is my temporary life" (O'Neal et al., 2018a). Since the ban on educational access was imposed on non-citizens in Malaysia, there has been a 'huge vacuum' in the quality of educational provisions afforded to these undocumented children (Lumayag, 2016).

Unregistered and Unregulated Learning Centres (UNRLC)

Religious schools that accept refugee children remain unregistered and unregulated (Loganathan 2022) with no standardized teachers' credentials, thus, offering very low-quality education to these children. Refugee community learning centres exhibit similar inconsistencies in terms of syllabi, teachers and facilities (Loganathan, 2022). Another infringement of human rights is the fact that physical and mental abuse incidents go unchecked in these CLCs due to the lack of 'regulatory oversight' (O'Neal, 2017). The perpetrators are often parents, teachers or centre personnel which complexify the process of reporting and deter victims from coming forward to raise their voices (O'Neal et al., 2017). Another aspect that deserves attention is various individuals and organizations walking into these CLCs and hoping to research, collect data or learn more about the refugee groups. Participant consent that is sought from refugee children and parents to undertake these research studies is fraught with a relative power imbalance. Obviously, if the project is sanctioned or supported by UNHCR, the refugee parents and children are somewhat compelled or obligated to participate in it as they hope to get registered with the UNHCR and do not wish to jeopardize their chances of resettlement (Bailey & Williams, 2018). Besides, these refugee children and their parents are in such a vulnerable state and have no avenue of raising a complaint or disagreeing with any authority or internal or external stakeholders. Confidentiality and reciprocity are often non-negotiable and are problematic for this group as any compromise on their personal details, whereabouts and contextual backgrounds could get them detained (Bailey & Williams, 2018).

Lack of Parental Support (LPS)

These undocumented groups of refugees became more impoverished during the recent pandemic and were subject to arrests by the Malaysian authorities which in turn disrupted these non-citizen students' access to education. Loganathan et al. (2021) & Cowling et al. (2021) report that under financially strained conditions, families are unable to prioritize education instead refugee parents generally request that their children drop out of the learning centres and do odd jobs to supplement the family income. Refugee children have to pay a fee to attend established CLCs and given their parents' poor financial standing, they deem these fees very expensive (Lumayag, 2016). Learning centre operators are unable to take action against these refugee parents given that there is no legal mandate for compulsory education in Malaysia for non-citizen children (Loganathan, 2021).

Furthermore, due to the fact that the parents of refugee children do not place much importance or value on education, this indirectly has a negative impact on their children's motivation and commitment to their studies (Cowling et al. 2021). Parents oftentimes are also unable to ferry their children to and from these CLCs which has led to high absenteeism rates (Siah et al., 2019). To add to this predicament, refugee parents were unable to support their children's learning during the pandemic phase (which forced school closures for over a year), given their low literacy levels and their inability to navigate technological platforms/interfaces effectively (Loganathan, 2021).

Ingroup & Outgroup Discrimination (INOGD)

Outgroup discrimination is common at learning centres located in urban Sabah which have faced harassment and repeated closures due to instigation by the state government as they are accused of not meeting the minimum requirements set by the state authorities to qualify as a school (Loganathan, 2022). The fear of arrest/detention heightened during the covid-19 pandemic due to these types of discrimination toward marginalized groups which have made them stop their children from attending CLCs (Loganathan, 2021). Besides, even in Peninsular Malaysia the same was reported in several studies. Cowling et al. (2021) & Siah et al. (2019) stated that Malaysians generally looked down on the refugee community and even Malaysian teacher volunteers within CLCs held the same prejudice. Local Malaysians are of the view that refugee children who have very little access to resources may steal from them (Siah et al., 2021). This has led to several challenges for these refugee children, especially when it comes to the desire to integrate, assimilate and participate within Malaysian society; these refugee children tend to retreat and isolate (Cowling et al., 2021). A study that focused on sources of discrimination and coping strategies reported that the lack of access to public education in

Malaysia is also viewed as a source of out-group discrimination by refugee children who perceive it to be a hindrance to resettling in foreign countries or becoming an asset…" in their host country (Siah et al., 2021). These refugee children resorted to using the problem coping strategy to counter 'educational access' discrimination under such circumstances (Siah et al., 2021).

Ingroup discrimination was also observed in Siah et al. (2021) amongst the different groups of Myanmar refugees. The children surveyed at CLCs perceived this discrimination to be high due to their differing ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds (Siah et al., 2021). It has been reported that some refugees from certain ethnic groups are wrongly blamed for the persecution of the Rohingyas and as a consequence, given limited resources in comparison (Siah et al., 2019).

Lack of Resources at Learning Centres (LRLC)

Funding is generally the most significant issue faced by almost all the CLCs causing frequent operational problems in the centres. Heavy reliance of these centres on goodwill donations or those by given by churches or other organizations on an inconsistent basis proves challenging at every month end when bills and rentals need to be paid off (Cowling et al. 2021). This directly leads to the shortage of not only teachers; but qualified teaching staff due to the meager pay offered as a direct measure to cut back on operation costs (Gosnell, 2021). Due to this acute shortage of teaching staff, refugees (from various vocations) tend to step forward to take up teaching positions at these centres (Siah et al., 2019).

In order to remain unidentified, most of the CLCs do not have a signboard or name on their rented premises and most of these apartment blocks or shop lots were located in relatively isolated, low-income neighborhoods (O'Neal et al., 2017). A shortage of essential infrastructure and learning aids and facilities was apparent and as stated by the teachers, these CLCs operate out of apartment blocks with crammed makeshift classrooms (Cowling et al.2021 & O'Neal et al., 2017, O'Neal 2018b). The heat in the crowded spaces and the lack of tables and chairs affect the concentration of the students (O'Neal et al., 2018a). Even the Rohingya Community Organization (RCO) which is better off where resources are concerned in comparison to many other community learning centres, faces the challenge of securing consistent funding (Farzana et al., 2020) especially because the organization is prohibited from opening a bank account. This is further compounded by the ingroup competition that takes place as there are so many refugee community learning centres that are vying for recognition by UNHCR in order to access the same pool of money, which leads to the scarcity of financial

resources (Farzana et al., 2020). These centres also have to contend with the issue of a lack of a standardized curriculum as these CLCs are restricted from using the National curriculum. In several instances, they adopt an international curriculum that does not transition into the national curriculum system seamlessly at exit points.

Safety Concerns (SC)

The movement of refugee children is often restricted to within the CLCs because it is not safe for them to walk out along the streets as most of them are not registered with UNHCR (O'Neal et al., 2018a). Thus, many parents stop their children from attending CLCs as they fear for the safety of their children especially, while they commute to the CLCs and back home. There have been cases of these refugee children being robbed or extorted by the police (Siah et al., 2019) and subjected to abuse by local authorities (Lumayag, 2016). Instances whereby the students have been harassed by locals, are also common. In one situation, the CLC had to be moved to a new location as the surrounding community threatened to call in immigration authorities (O'Neal et al., 2017). Even when the children make their way from home to CLCs, there are frequent roadblocks set up by the police to threaten and intimidate them which often forces these children and teens to turn back and return home (Lumayag, 2016). While young children of primary school ages are not commonly detained by the police, parents worry more for the safety of their older teenagers who are around 17 years of age as they are at high risk of being detained by the police (Siah et al., 2019). Parents, therefore, tend to keep their older teens at home for their own safety (Siah et al. 2019).

Refugee Student-Teacher Stressors (RSTS)

The ratio of teacher to student remains high and mixed age groups and mixed ability classes are a norm, often leading to teachers putting up with heavy workloads, hurling abusive language and students exhibiting violent outbursts resulting in a high student-teacher turnover (O'Neal, 2018a & Gosnell, 2021). Such disruptive behaviors exhibited by students have been the major concern of CLC administrators (O'Neal et al., 2017). Thus, teaching is experienced as a high-stress profession in this context (O'Neal et al., 2018b) and teachers have to often put up with unfair employment practices (Gosnell, 2021). Corporal punishment is meted out by teachers (Gosnell, 2021) to assert their authority, as students adopt externalization to keep their outbursts of emotions in check (O'Neal et al., 2016). Given the lack of clarity with higher education and future employment opportunities, most refugee students are not motivated to study hard nor take their assessments seriously.

With the disruptions caused by the recent covid-19 pandemic, technological use has become another major stressor for students and teachers alike. Students are unable to follow lessons and complete their work during the prolonged school closures, simply because of a lack of connectivity or proper working device (Loganathan et al., 2021). Besides, teachers too were new to the technological interfaces, hence, were teaching with much struggle and difficulty (Loganathan et al., 2021). They lacked the training as they had thus far only been exposed to the conventional mode of teaching and learning.

Not being able to communicate effectively using a common language is another stressor for both teachers and students in CLCs. Teachers faced the issue of adapting lessons to suit the varied proficiency levels of their students while students had difficulty using English as a medium of instruction to cope with academic expectations as it was a completely new language to them (Cowling et al., 2021). Some teachers opined that the medium of instruction should not be entirely in English instead a mixed approach of teaching the children their mother tongue, as well as English, should be adopted. This is because these teachers felt that the probability is there that the refugee children could be sent back to Myanmar in the near future (Cowling et al. 2021).

Key Facilitators to Refugee Education

Although fewer in comparison, several themes were identified to be key facilitators to refugee education from the 14 papers reviewed. Each theme is forwarded and discussed in the section that follows.

Tolerance & Relative Acceptance (TRA)

Despite refugees not having any status in the country, the Malaysian police, immigration and Malaysians in general exhibit a sense of tolerance and relative acceptance toward these marginalized groups (Farzana et al. 2020) and the government allows them temporary stay based on humanitarian grounds (Khairi, 2019). Refugees in Malaysia live in town areas (Kuala Lumpur, Penang) which enables them to gain somewhat easy access to odd jobs or temporary employment (Khairi, 2019). The refugee children expressed through a survey that they have a low perception of discrimination when it comes to RELA personnel and police as they are not really exposed to such threats – are well protected by the established CLCs (Siah et al., 2021). Several of these centre operators comprise Malaysians who had good ties with the RELA unit and Immigration Department (Siah et al., 2021). While this might not be the

collective experience of all refugee children, it should be noted that there is a feeling of relative acceptance within larger Malaysian society toward these vulnerable individuals.

Accessible Refugee Community Learning Centres Across Malaysia (ARCLC)

The UNHCR 2020 list acknowledges the establishment of refugee CLCs in almost every state in Malaysia. These centres are allowed to operate and provide education for the refugee children in the country who are unable to access the national education system. Besides, these centres also serve as a safe oasis (O'Neal, 2018a) for these marginalized children; taking them off the streets, supporting their physical, mental and emotional development; thus, serving as a hub for welfare activities and a form of humanitarian assistance (Khairi, 2019). Many local NGOs and organizations have also come forward to establish learning centres and assist with operating costs and manpower (Khairi, 2019). Certain groups of refugee children acknowledge that they enjoyed attending CLCs instead of roaming in town or working at markets (Lumayag, 2016).

Support Programs for Teachers & Students (SPTS)

Many educational institutions and NGOs provide professional development training for the teachers in CLCs from time to time. These trainings have proved beneficial and increased teacher confidence levels and self-care, especially amongst the female teachers at CLCs (O'Neal et al. 2018b). Busy programs have also been introduced in some CLCs to support junior students. Senior students who exhibit a diligent and motivated predisposition are recruited to serve as peer buddies (O'Neal et al. 2018a). The assignment of buddies also reduces the burden of the teacher while empowering students to hone leadership skills.

Use of Social Media Platforms for Advocacy & Volunteerism (SMP)

The shortage of teachers at CLCs have motivated individuals to set up social media groups – "Let's Tutor A Refugee" to solicit volunteers for centres (Shekaliu et al. 2018). This has been an effective way to spread awareness on the predicament surrounding refugee education in Malaysia while providing a safe platform for individuals to discuss and solve the shortcomings in relation to teaching staff and resources at the many CLCs in the country. This group has been successful in spreading the spirit of volunteerism and promoting advocacy on the issue of refugee education (Shekaliu et al. 2018).

CONCLUSION

This review was aimed to provide a broad overview of the state of refugee education in Malaysia. The systematic review of 14 peer reviewed research papers on the topic resulted in 7 themes that pose challenges and 4 themes that facilitate stakeholders in the context of refugee education. This study is important as education is a lifeline for refugee children. As stated by HH Sheikha Moza, chairperson of 'Education Above All' during her recent visit to Malaysia, schooling can "enable [refugee children] to become future assets to their host countries and later support the rebuilding of their home countries" (The Peninsula Qatar, 2019). Although several regional and international organizations champion for the rights of education and recognize it as a universal right, refugee children in Malaysia seem to still be lagging behind as their only means to accessing education in their host country is through the informal means of community learning centres located within their vicinities. These centres seem to lack the necessary manpower, expertise, and resources to empower these refugee children, leaving many of them to inconsistently attend school or drop out altogether. Thus, resulting in a situation that they do not develop basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The government of Malaysia should take a step forward by creating conditions of inclusion via an integrated framework for refugee children into mainstream education programs such as those offered through the public school systems in the country. Besides, it is hoped that this review would serve to encourage refugee host countries such as Malaysia to play an active role in upholding the basic rights of these children as it had in 1995, acceded to the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The good governance of a nation is reflected in its inclusive policies and support given to marginalized communities. A nation that supports the provision of quality education for marginalized groups is one that promotes a sense of safety and security while upholding human rights and creating a nurturing and sustainable environment for all citizens.

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