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Challenges of Refugee Teachers in Malaysian Community-Based Learning Centers

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Abstract

Because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the children of refugees living in Malaysia are deprived of any formal education. Children are taught mostly by the refugees themselves, many of whom are volunteers. Most of the community-based learning centers, which encounter many academic and management problems, are also sustained by the refugees. This qualitative study aims to apply the framework of resources and demands theory to explore the work demands encountered by these refugees' teachers and whether they have enough resources to meet the demands, as the learning centers are self-supported or supported by non-governmental organizations. This study collected data using the focus group method, recruiting participants through purposive sampling. Participants were organized into eight groups, each with seven volunteer participants, and open-ended questions were used for the participants to fully express their views and experiences. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The result showed that participants are burdened by academic and administrative tasks, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, and self-incompetence. The findings of the study proposed that more non-government organizations, local communities, and other stakeholders provide expertise and financial assistance to these community-based learning centers as education is the human right of each child.

Tantangan Guru-guru Pengungsi di Pusat Pembelajaran Berbasis Komunitas di Malaysia

Abstrak

Karena Malaysia bukan merupakan penandatanganan Konvensi Pengungsi 1951, hak anak-anak pengungsi untuk mendapat pendidikan resmi telah menjadi sebuah masalah yang tidak begitu diperhatikan. Kebanyakan anak-anak ini diajar oleh guru yang terdiri dari para pengungsi yang bekerja sebagai sukarelawan. Pusat pembelajaran berbasis komunitas dikelola dan dikendalikan oleh pengungsi sering menghadapi pelbagai isu dari segi akademik dan manajemen. Studi pendekatan kualitatif ini menggunakan teori sumber daya dan permintaan sebagai kerangka kajian untuk mengetahui apa saja tuntutan pekerjaan yang dihadapi guru pengungsi dan apakah mereka memiliki sumber daya yang cukup untuk menghadapi tuntutan tersebut, karena pusat pembelajaran bersifat swadaya atau didukung oleh Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat (LSM). Sumber pembelajaran yang tersedia perlu dikaji supaya cukup menampung serta memenuhi permintaan kerja. Pengumpulan data menggunakan metode *focus group* dan partisipan direkrut melalui *purposive sampling*. Partisipan dikumpulkan ke delapan kelompok, masing-masing kelompok terdiri dari tujuh partisipan sukarelawan. Pertanyaan terbuka (*open-ended questions*) digunakan untuk mendapat pandangan serta pengalaman berkaitan isu yang dikaji. Data dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil temuan menunjukkan bahwa para guru memikul beban yang berat dalam menjalankan tugas akademik serta administrasi. Mereka juga menghadapi isu kurangnya sumber daya, keadaan infrastruktur yang serba kekurangan serta keyakinan diri dalam kompetensi mengajar. Temuan studi ini mengusulkan agar lebih banyak LSM, masyarakat setempat, dan pemangku kepentingan lain menyumbangkan keahlian dan bantuan keuangan pada pusat-pusat pembelajaran tersebut karena pendidikan adalah hak asasi manusia bagi setiap anak-anak.

Keywords: community-based learning center, education, refugee teachers, resources

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1. Introduction

As of April 2019, Malaysia had about 170,460 registered refugees and asylum seekers (Eric Paulsen, 2019). About 24.8% of these reported refugees were below age 18 (UNHCR). The refugees are from Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and Sudan. Refugee children are often denied access to basic education and health care (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations 1951 refugee convention agreements or the 1967 protocol. As a result, refugees in Malaysia are considered asylum seekers even though some are registered with the UNHCR (Kaur, 2001). Many of these refugee children exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and agoraphobia caused by social isolation, poverty, and exploitation by immigration officers (Burnett & Reel, 2011).

Education is important to refugee children, as it is the means for them to be resettled to a third country. It also could serve to help them cope with the changing situation in their home countries if they eventually return to their countries of origin. In Malaysia, education for refugee children is provided by community learning centers, which are operated by local non-governmental and faith-based organizations with assistance from the UNHCR. There are about 128 such learning centers, located mostly in the Klang Valley in Selangor and the states of Johor and Penang (UNHCR, 2019). Most of the learning centers are found in flats or garages in low-income isolated neighborhoods where there are a large number of refugee communities. These learning centers are not conducive to learning as they lack basic facilities such as proper comfortable classrooms, which are too crowded with no proper partitions or ventilation. Since there is no differentiation between age groups or learning levels, children often find it difficult to study (Letchamanan, 2013).

The majority of the teachers in these community learning centers are either from the refugee community themselves or are local or foreign volunteers. These teachers are dealing with their own stress as refugees and have little education in the face of overwhelming classroom demands (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Most of them do not have formal training and have experienced long-term exposure to stressors and inadequate self-care support (O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, & Ong, 2017). Teachers who are recognized by the UNHCR are provided with the insufficient monthly compensation of RM300. Learning centers run by the ethnic faith organizations paid the teachers a monthly compensation of RM50, if there was any compensation at all. The teachers are required to teach in ad hoc informal school settings with no proper training or educational resources. The high student-teacher ratio of 80:1 (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), in addition to discrimination and fear of arrest outside the classroom, leads to refugee teacher burnout.

Refugee teacher mental health and long-term exposure to stressors due to in balance between what is demanded by their job and the availability of resources may affect student learning and motivation generally. (Shen et al. 2015). Prior studies in Malaysia have mainly investigated the mental health of refugee children (Low, Tan, Kok, 2018), the coping abilities and social support for teenage refugees (Kok, Lee, & Low, 2016), and peer refugee teacher intervention and self-care (O'Neal et al., 2017). However, relatively little is known about the job demands and resources available for refugee teachers teaching in community-based centers. This study uses the perspectives of the refugee teachers to explore the challenges encountered by these teachers while trying to effectively educate post-conflict refugee children. Through the findings, non-governmental organizations and the UNHCR may organize and provide relevant and necessary training and teaching resources to assist the refugee teachers in providing quality instruction in an uncondusive environment.

According to the job demands-resources model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), the interaction between job demands and job resources is significant in the development job stress and motivation. Consequently, a high demand-low resources working environment could result in high stress and low motivation for the employee. In the context of the teaching environment of the refugee teachers the lack of space and teaching resources did not match the demand of the job. The model also proposed the importance of job resources in buffering the impact of job demand, which might result in job stress. Job demands refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job, while job resources are social support, autonomy, and performance feedback, which may instigate the motivation process (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The working environment, a heavy workload, and the post-conflict traumatic stress may be associated with burnout among refugee teachers.

2. Methods

Participants and procedure. Potential participants were recruited from the community learning centers or schools involved in teaching refugee children in the state of Selangor and Klang Valley, in which 53% of the total population of refugees in Malaysia live (UNHCR). A total of 52 refugee teachers participated in the study. The teachers were from Myanmar, Pakistan, and Malaysia. All community learning centers use English to teach as the children are from different countries. Criteria for inclusion for this study is the ability to converse in simple English. The sample consisted of 84.62% females and 15.38% males ages 20 to 40 years ($M = 32.62$, $SD = 10.56$).

After obtaining approval from the University Scientific and Ethical Committee to conduct the study, the researchers approached the participants who had earlier participated in a workshop organized by the UNHCR. The participants were briefed on the purpose of the interview and assured of confidentiality. Those who agreed to participate were asked to sign informed consent documents. The fifty-two participants were arranged into eight groups with four groups meeting the morning and another four groups meeting in the afternoon. Each group consisted of six to seven people. Each focus group was conducted by a researcher following the steps suggested by Morgan, Krueger and King (1998). These are (1) deciding the research design, (2) collecting data, (3) conducting analysis, and (4) reviewing results and reporting. Focus group interviews were used as they involved group interaction in exploring the experience, attitudes, and needs of the participants. The discussion was conducted in English based on the following questions concerning job demands. (1) What are the demands from your organization? (2) What are the challenges in teaching the refugee children? (3) What are your daily routines in the school? These questions focused on the objective of the research, which was to explore the challenges encountered by the refugee teachers. During the group discussion, the teachers were prompted to share the challenges they encountered while teaching the children. The discussion was recorded on an MP3 recorder.

Data Analysis. A research assistant not involved in the study transcribed the audio recording to ensure the accuracy of the analysis. The transcript was coded by the research team separately. After the coding process, the data was analyzed, conceptualized, and categorized into broad themes (Krueger & Cassey, 2000). The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis process that followed the five stages of qualitative analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman: organizing the data, categorizing ideas and concepts, building themes in the data, validating the data, and finally searching for plausible explanations for the finding. Themes that occurred regularly were assigned labels. The themes were then validated by three independent researchers using the same approach. Identified themes were reviewed, and researchers discussed to reach a consensus for disagreed themes and categorization of data.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analyzed data, three major themes on the challenges encountered by the refugee teachers were revealed. They were the lack of teaching resources, the languages barriers, and classroom management.

Lack of teaching resources. The major challenges the teachers encountered is the lack of teaching resources

and lack of standardized curriculum, which results in the use of different teaching approaches depending on the availability of teaching resources in the same teaching centers. The teaching resources may have syllabi from Oxford, Cambridge, and Malaysia, as most of the books are donated by non-governmental organization or provided by the UNHCR. Students do not have access to any of these textbooks, so the teachers have to search for their own teaching materials in their lesson preparation. They also have to spend time preparing teaching slides and activities handouts for their students. As most of the teachers are untrained and/or volunteers, they encountered problems in preparing suitable and effective education activities. Some will try to seek help from their colleagues or the principals of the schools. There is frequent turnover of teachers, as volunteers are paid a monthly allowance that may be as small as RM50. This resulted in teachers having to take over the teaching responsibilities of those who left.

Teachers have difficulties teaching big classes with students of different levels and ages. This challenge is further intensified by the student's poor English language proficiency, as English is the medium of instruction. Some teachers resort to using their country of origin language in conducting their lessons, which disadvantages students who don't speak that language. Some teachers commented:

Students are weak in English and do not complete their homework and they are not interested in their studies. Students drop out rate is high and are forced to work at a young age to assist the family financially. As they speak a different dialect they failed to communicate and to understand one another thus creating behavioral problems (group 1).

Lack of teaching materials, space, qualified teachers, textbooks and workbooks made lesson preparation very difficult as we need to look for materials in the internet and share among the teachers (group 4).

When we cannot do something, we will turn to our colleagues or inform the principals. Most of the untrained volunteers are weak so we will have extra class after school (group 6).

Language barrier. Language is one of the major challenges the teachers encountered. A class may be made up of students from Pakistan, Somalia, Myanmar, Sudan, Cambodia, and India, all with different cultures. The students' different backgrounds and mother tongue communication posed the problem of acculturation. The lack of one common medium of communication with

the low English proficiency resulted in poor interaction and understanding among the students. Fights and other disciplinary problems among the students were daily interruptions teachers must handle in addition to academic demands. This challenge was further aggravated by the poor educational environment where classes are largely overcrowded with no proper chairs and tables. Since English is a second language for many and some of the teachers use their own mother language in teaching non-English subjects, the teaching of mutual understanding among the different ethnic groups and respect for each other's fundamental rights were often absent. The education generally did not incorporate cultural sensitivity, adaptation, and acculturation for refugee children. The inability to understand the lessons, in addition to family poverty, caused many adolescent refugees to drop out of school to find work to supplement their family financial income. The failure to communicate well caused misunderstanding and behavioral problems among the students. The lack of positive interaction with peers and teachers may also impede the student social emotional development. The ability to interact with peers helps in the development of self-esteem and social competence. Some teachers commented:

We don't have proper schools. Our classrooms are in rented flats where there are only three rooms. All the students are put in two rooms. We have to mix the young students with the senior students and they are being bullied by the older students (group 5).

As the students are from different backgrounds they tend to speak in their own languages. We can have 5-6 languages in the same class resulting in disciplinary problems (group 1).

Students from the same clan tend to gather together using the same mother's language as they find it easy to communicate. The minority ethnic group felt that they have been left out by the majority (group 2).

Classroom Management. Most of the teachers shared that classroom management is the most difficult challenge. The lack of knowledge and training in proper management make it difficult for them to handle students with behavioral and social emotional problems. The students are aggressive, not interested in their studies, and fear discrimination and punishment. Some students are from broken families, and many have to work to help the family financially. Most of the teachers have difficulty helping the students due to differences in background and culture and communication problems. The teachers spent most of their time disciplining the students instead of conducting the planned lesson. Their

lack of skills and knowledge to manage students of different age groups and behaviors in a small classroom made teaching very stressful for the teachers. Some teachers seemed frustrated as the students were not interested in their studies. Some of the problems with the students could be associated with parents not being interested in their children's education, as the parents are faced with social and economic problems. Some parents are not able to communicate with the teachers because of language problems. Given the demand by the UNHCR to use more student-centered approaches in classroom management, some teachers found it difficult to discipline the senior students who are rebellious and not motivated to study because they view their stay in Malaysia as temporary. The turnover of temporary teachers was also an obstacle in classroom management. On average, about 30% of the teachers leave the school as they do not get paid for their job (O'Neal et al., 2017). With the shortage of teachers, the salaried teachers had to take over the tasks of those who left. Some teachers lamented:

Some of the students are aggressive they fight and refuse to write or listen to the teachers. We really don't know how to handle this type of students who disturb the class while we were trying to conduct the lesson (Group 4).

The children are not interested in their studies and some of them come to school without even any exercise books or pencils. As they need to share with their friends resulting in quarrel and fights (Group 6).

We really lack the management skills of handling children with disruptive behavior and also those from different age groups (Group 7).

When I went to see the parents of those children who has been absent for a few days I have difficulty in communicating with them. I need to get my colleague who can speak their home language (Group 8).

Responses gathered from the focus group interview of the 52 participants revealed three major challenges encountered by the refugee teachers teaching in community-based learning centers.

Firstly, teaching resources are lacking because the refugee students are deprived of attending Malaysian public schools, and the refugee teachers are teaching in ad hoc informal school settings. Most of the teaching materials provided by the UNHCR or non-governmental agencies are limited and ill-equipped to provide quality teaching and learning (Letchmanan, 2013). Teachers have to share the provided teaching materials, which are not adapted to the students of different levels.

Furthermore, the workbooks provided by private publishers are aligned with syllabi found in the public schools in Malaysia and not relevant to the refugee students. The high refugee student-to-teacher ratios, the lack of teaching resources, and the administrative demands resulted in high levels of teacher stress (O'Neal et al., 2017). In addition, the learning environments of these community centers are not conducive for learning; classrooms are located in flats without proper lighting and ventilations.

Secondly, the language barrier between the students and the teachers negatively impacted the development of a rapport between students and teachers. The low motivation, anxiety, and negative attitude of the students using English, a foreign language, may hinder them from active classroom communication. In addition, the poor classroom environment impedes the students from active involvement in classroom activities. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of other studies (Keong, Ali, & Hameed, 2015; Wang & Roopchund, 2015). The influence of students' mother tongue and students' fluency in English became the stumbling block for the students when interacting with their peers and teachers. Prior studies revealed that attitude and motivation are influential factors in learning a foreign language. The more negative attitude and lack of motivation the learners have toward speaking, the less willing they are to participate in classroom activities (Gardner et al., 1985; Zeinivand et al., 2015).

The last challenge that teachers faced is classroom management when trying to actively engage the students in the learning process. The unbearably poor ventilation in the classroom caused the students to exhibit rowdy behaviors, as they had little opportunity to release their energy. Some teachers had to rely on corporal punishment to manage serious behavior problems, even though this is prohibited. With younger children often in the same class with the older children, the teachers found it more difficult to manage the class. Most of the teachers did not have explicit strategies in classroom management and were frustrated by students' poor concentration, participation, and class attendance. In addition, the teachers lacked the psychological knowledge to deal with post-conflict students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds studying in an overcrowded classroom. They preferred a combination of modern and traditional techniques in classroom management. (O'Neal et al., 2017). The teacher felt that managing the class with rewards and good student-teacher relationships may lose students' respect and cooperation. The findings of the study are consistent with other studies where a combination of a firm authority and culturally responsive classroom management approach is more effective for handling these refugee students (Brown, 2004; O'Neal et al., 2017). As

Lansford (2010) indicated, if punishment is a norm in respective cultures, teachers, parents, and students may view punishment as effective form of classroom punishment. An appropriate approach in classroom management is the creation of a design that is culture specific with a combination of modern classroom management strategies.

Implications. This article highlights some of the challenges encountered by refugee teachers teaching in community learning centers with minimum support. We recommend continued support from local and international partners to provide collaborative assistance to these teachers financially, physically, and emotionally to enable them to provide more proper education to the post-conflict refugee children. Based on the job demand-resource model used in this study, it is clear that more resources are required to meet the job demands of refugee teachers. Guided by a training consultation model (O'Neal et al., 2018) international and local partners could provide culture specific models of teaching with sustainable education interventions and programs. A standardized curriculum with a combination of academic and skill-based educational structures may provide more intrinsic motivation for the students to feel committed to education. The skills will provide them with more resources to combat the discrimination and exploitation by local Malaysians. Likewise, the local government may provide the registered refugees the legal right to seek official employment. As asylum seekers, the teachers are volunteers teaching the students without any compensation, resulting in high turnover of teaching staff. These teachers experienced social-economic discrimination having to teach and work illegally to support their families (Low, Kok, & Lee, 2014). Generally funding, recruiting, and continuous training for the refugee teachers will be obstacles in maintaining the provision of education for refugee children.

Limitations. The limitation of this study was that the findings were limited in generalizability. Participants were from refugee community learning centers identified by the UNHCR. The study was deliberately designed to examine the demands those educating refugees in these centers. A study of teachers, students, and parents would provide better perspectives on how stakeholders can collaborate and cooperate in providing a proper and effective education for the refugee children. While the refugee teachers complained about their academic demands, it would be worth studying the administrative demands and the availability of resources in the learning centers. Finally, this qualitative study is based on focus group interviews; future study may incorporate a quantitative measurement for the students, parents, and teacher, thus having a holistic perspective of the challenges of the refugee in Malaysia.

4. Conclusion

It is clear the educational needs of the refugee children in Malaysia deserve attention. These children are often the longest asylum seekers in Malaysia, and they are deprived of public schooling. Without a purposeful education, they are deprived of their chances of employability and financial situations when they have the opportunity to return to their countries of origin or are resettled in other countries. Quality education requires proper planning and coordination between the different international and local partners that are involved implementing the education intervention in these community-based learning centers (Letchamanan, 2013).

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