INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION: SHOULD MALAYSIA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM ENROLL REFUGEE LEARNERS?

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Abstract

Refugee children of school-going age in Malaysia continue to face significant barriers to accessing inclusive and equitable quality education. A central debate in addressing this issue is whether Malaysia should integrate refugee learners and local students into its public education system. This paper contributes to the discourse by offering evidence-based insights to guide stakeholders, particularly policymakers, in making informed decisions on refugee education. It presents a systematic literature review on the current educational landscape for refugee children in Malaysia, supplemented by qualitative analysis of public perspectives drawn from key informant interviews. Findings reveal limited progress in integrating refugees into public schools, with most educational access occurring through resource-constrained, humanitarian-led alternative learning centres. Given the protracted nature of displacement and continuous forced migration in the region, the integration of refugee learners into the national education system must be anticipated as an inevitable and necessary policy direction. The paper argues that Malaysia must move beyond this fragmented approach by fostering strategic, multi-sectoral partnerships and adopting inclusive education models already implemented in other refugee-hosting nations. Ultimately, expanding access to education for refugee learners is a moral imperative and a strategic investment in Malaysia's social cohesion, economic development, and long-term national resilience.

Keywords: *refugee education, public schools, alternative learning centres, Malaysia, inclusive education*

INTRODUCTION

Education for all, including refugees hosted in this country, is key for enhancing human well-being and a country's development, and has a potential positive impact on Malaysia's social and economy (Todd et. al., 2019; Yunus, 2023). According to data from TheGlobalEconomy.com (2023), Malaysia's enrolment rate for primary school students was 98.8%, while secondary school enrolment was 85.5%. However, Malaysia's performance in refugee education lags behind the global average enrolment rate (Table 1), particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. This disparity highlights that the country's national capacity to provide quality and equitable education has not extended to marginalised non-citizen children and youths.

Currently, around 30% of school-aged refugee children and youths are enrolled in 145 alternative learning centres (ALCs) across Peninsular Malaysia, with only 36 of these centres offering secondary education (UNHCR, 2025c). Among the 192,800-refugee population in Malaysia, 89% originate from Myanmar, while the remaining refugees come from over 50 other countries (UNHCR, 2025b). Rohingyas from Myanmar account for almost 60% of the total refugee population, while children under the age 18 comprise 28% (UNHCR, 2025b).

Table 1: Comparison of Education Enrolment Rates, Global and Local 2020/21

Category	Year	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)	Tertiary (% or persons)
Global (Refugee)	2021	68	70	6 %
Malaysia (Refugee)	2021	44	16	48 persons

Sources: (1) UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2021) website; World Bank (2022) (2) All Inclusive – The Campaign for Refugee Education (UNHCR, 2022); (3) Education in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2025a).

A study comparing education models from six refugee-hosting countries - Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon - recommended a gradual integration of refugees into the national education system to address their prolonged stay in Malaysia (Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2024). The study also found that these six countries have begun shifting their education policies and implementation toward more integrated refugee education for this reason. Among them, only Turkey has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, while Malaysia remains the only country that has yet to grant refugees access to public education.

Research conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) estimates that granting refugees in Malaysia the legal right to work could lead to a net economic gain of approximately RM3 billion (around USD720 million) annually (Todd et al., 2019). Recognising both the economic potential of refugees and the role of education in their development, many host countries have expanded access to their public education systems to increase refugee student enrolment (Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2024; Morris & Salem, 2023; Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023; Unlu & Ergul, 2021).

Contrary to this approach, UNICEF's (2015) recommendations on improving refugee education in Malaysia did not prioritise integrating refugee learners into the public education system. A relevant case study is Jordan, which initially adopted an integrated education model but later shifted to a separate system due to the strain on under-resourced public schools and the challenge of maintaining education quality for both local and refugee students (Morrice & Salem, 2023). In Malaysia's context, while enrolling refugees in public schools could improve the quality of education they receive as well as their long-term economic contributions, it may also act as an additional pull factor for migration and provoke resistance to an integrative education system.

Recognising the significance of inclusive and quality education for both refugees and Malaysians, along with the valid dilemmas discussed earlier, this paper explores whether Malaysia - the country with the highest number of refugees and asylum seekers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020) - should enrol school going aged refugee learners in its public education system.

This study is particularly relevant as the global refugee population has been steadily rising, reaching a record 36.4 million in mid-2023, marking a 35% increase from 2019 (UNHCR, 2023). Additionally, as over 65 percent of global refugees reside in neighbouring countries of their origin (UNHCR, 2023; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019), the continuous political instability in Myanmar means a growing number of forced migrants will inevitably migrate to Malaysia. Given that fewer than 1% of refugees worldwide have been resettled in recent years and the average duration of exile has ranged between 10 and 15 years since the late 1990s (Devictor & Do, 2017), the urgency for sustainable education solutions has never been greater, especially as forced displacement is expected to rise further due to ongoing conflicts and climate-related crises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review emulates a systematic approach (Booth et al., 2021; Mulrow, 1994), following the 27 checklist items suggested by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020. It encompasses four phases: (1) identification, (2) screening, (3) eligibility, and (4) inclusion. In Phase 1, past peer-reviewed literature and grey literature were identified using key terms. In Phase 2, literature with duplicated citations were identified, and only one citation is included. In Phase 3, those who did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. The criteria include irrelevant abstract and research population or sample; unclear research design, outdated findings; and defunct journal. Phase 4 involved tabulating details such as the title of the paper, authors, publication, summary of findings, etc., into an Excel sheet.

Table 2 provides brief information on the selected 15 references from this study's systematic literature review, including their research methods and the education system they examined, either ALCs and/or the public education system. Additionally, this Literature Review section includes theoretical analysis relevant to these papers.

Table 2: Selected Literature on Refugee Education in Malaysia

No	Author/s & Year of Publication	Title	Research Method	Education System of Focus	
			Qualitative	ALCs	Public
1	Loganathan et al. (2023)	Barriers and facilitators to education access for marginalised non-citizen children in Malaysia: A qualitative study.	In-depth interviews	Yes	Yes
2	Cowling & Anderson (2021)	Teacher perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of education amongst Chin refugees in Malaysia: A qualitative analysis.	Interview	Yes	No
3	O'Neal et al. (2022)	Removal of Refugee Protections: Impact on Refugee Education, Mental Health, Coping, and Advocacy.	Interview	Yes	No
4	Letchamanan (2013)	Myanmar's Rohingya refugees in Malaysia: Education and the way forward.	Interview	Yes	No
5	Loganathan et al. (2022)	Undocumented: An examination of legal identity and education provision for children in Malaysia.	Desk review & interview	Yes	Yes

6	Siah et al. (2023)	Improving the education quality for refugee children: perspectives from teachers at refugee education centres in Malaysia.	Focus group discussion	Yes	Nil
7	Loganathan et al. (2021)	Education for non-citizen children in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study.	In-depth Interview	Yes	Nil
8	Palik (2020)	Education for Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia.	Desk review & interview	Yes	Yes (minimal)
9	Low et al. (2014)	Perceived discrimination and psychological distress of Myanmar refugees in Malaysia	Narrative enquiry and in-depth interview	Yes	No
			Reviews	**ALCs**	**Public**
10	Thuraisingam et al. (2022)	A Systematic review on refugee education in Malaysia.	Systematic (14 papers)	Yes	Yes (minimal)
11	Yunus (2023)	Educational Integration of Refugee Children in Malaysia: A Scoping Review.	Scoping (15 papers)	Yes (minimal)	Yes
12	Morozova et al. (2023)	Leaving No One Behind: Educating Refugees During the Pandemic	Desk Review	Yes	Yes (minimal)
13	Imam Supaat, (2014)	Refugee children under the Malaysian framework.	Secondary Research	Yes	Yes
			Quantitative	**ALCs**	**Public**
14	Low (2018)	The mental health of adolescent refugees in Malaysia.	Survey	Yes	No
			Mixed Method	**ALCs**	**Public**
15	Diode Consultancy & Wan (2022)	IDEAS and UNICEF: Refugee and asylum-seeking children's rights to education and healthcare must be protected now	Questionnaire & Interview	Yes	Yes (minimal)

Theoretical Review

Among the selected 15 peer-reviewed papers, only three explicitly link the discussions of their findings on refugee education or social relations to a specific theory: (1) Low et al. (2014) with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 2000); (2) Loganathan et al. (2022) with Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989); and (3) Yunus (2023) with the conceptual work on Core Domains of Integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Low et al. (2014) applied Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (2000) to examine the psychological distress and discrimination faced by refugees in Malaysia through in-depth interviews with six teachers from refugee learning centres. The findings highlighted the potential for cultural tensions in an integrated education system. Bronfenbrenner and Morris' bioecological model, along with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, is widely used to analyse the socio-educational development of refugee learners in both public schools and community-based learning centres. Notable examples include Özel and Erdur-Baker's (2023) study on the challenges faced by refugee-receiving schools in Turkey, Adams-Ojugbele and Mashiya's (2020) literature review on interventions supporting refugee children's integration in primary schools across the United States, Europe, and parts of southern Africa, and Correa-Velez et al.'s (2010) research on the social inclusion of refugee youth in Australia. Another academic paper by Abu Bakar and Subramaniam (2024) utilised the bio-ecological model to develop and recommend social relationship models for refugee education providers in Malaysia, such as public schools and ALCs, to enhance the quality of education offered.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) proposed that a student's ability to find meaning in education and remain engaged in developing their skills, motivation, and knowledge is influenced by the interaction of four key elements: person, process, context, and time. Expanding on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (2000), the model outlines five interdependent layers that shape a learner's development: (1) microsystem (direct environments such as home and school); (2) mesosystem (interactions between different microsystems); (3) exosystem (external environments that indirectly influence the learner; (4) macrosystem (broader cultural and societal influences) and (5) chronosystem (the impact of time and life transitions on development). In line with the studies mentioned above, this research also employs Bronfenbrenner and Morris' bioecological model to discuss its findings.

Loganathan et al. (2022) thoughtfully applied intersectionality theory to highlight how individuals' experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of their diverse social identities. Their analysis revealed that among refugee groups such as the Rohingya, Cham, and Bosnians, the Rohingya often face the greatest disadvantages. Findings from this study's literature review also suggest that, within the Rohingya community, school-aged girls are perceived as more marginalised than their male counterparts.

Hence, these layered perceptions of refugee identity must be carefully considered when assessing the integration of refugee learners into mainstream public education. Such perspectives directly influence policy development, resource distribution, and the inclusivity of educational initiatives, ultimately determining refugees' access to quality education and their long-term potential for social integration.

Contrary to the aforementioned potential negative experiences of social engagement among refugees, Yunus referred to an integration conceptual framework to highlight the positive role of the education system in the social integration of refugees by Ager and Strang (2008). The authors suggested ten domains for social integration, dividing them into four levels: Level 1 - foundation (rights and citizenship); Level 2 - facilitators (language and cultural knowledge, and safety and stability); Level 3 - social connections (social bridges, social bonds, and social links); and Level 4 - markers and means (employment, housing, education, and health). This theory was also referenced by Morrice and Salem (2023) in understanding the integration experiences of Syrian refugee students into the national education system. However, Yunus' paper did not delve further in linking this theory with her research design and results, leaving a gap in understanding the practical application of these integration domains in Malaysia's refugee education context.

Refugee Education Approaches

Among the 15 papers reviewed, most discussions on refugee education centred on the role of ALCs (Loganathan et al., 2021; Cowling & Anderson, 2021; Letchamanan, 2013; Thuraisingam et al., 2022; Diode & Wan, 2022; Palik, 2020; Siah et al., 2023). Yunus (2023) was the only study that examined the integration of refugee education into the national education system, identifying two key gaps: (1) the lack of research on local integration of refugees through public schools and (2) the absence of refugee students' and teachers' perspectives in existing studies on refugee education. She attributed the first gap to the prevailing assumption that refugees' presence in Malaysia is temporary. Adam-Ojugbele and Mashiya (2020) contend that while some research has examined socio-educational interventions for refugee education in both public schools and community-based centres, much of the existing literature on refugee populations has predominantly centred on post-traumatic stress disorder, leaving important gaps in our understanding of their educational experiences. Notably, the scarcity of academic research on the enrolment of refugees into public education systems is not unique to Malaysia but represents a global challenge.

While the majority of studies listed in Table 2 focus on ALCs, they offer valuable insights into the wider refugee education landscape in Malaysia, including key recommendations and factors that could enhance the quality of education for refugee learners. Loganathan et al. (2023), for example, identified three socio-ecological levels that influence non-citizen children's access to education, applicable to all refugee education providers: (1) legislative and policy frameworks, (2) individual and family circumstances, and (3) community and educational institutions. Similarly, Thuraisingam et al., (2022) in their systematic literature review of 14 studies, highlighted seven primary barriers to refugee education: (1) undocumented status and legal constraints, (2) unregistered and unregulated learning centres, (3) lack of parental support, (4) inadequate resources in learning centres, (5) discrimination between groups, and (6) safety concerns. Among the 15 studies, Diode and Wan (2022) was the only one to apply a mixed-methods approach, categorising barriers to refugee education into two socio-ecological perspectives: challenges perceived by refugees and their families and challenges perceived by ALC representatives.

Regarding the preference for ALC education among the 15 studies she reviewed, Yunus (2023) identified two key reasons. First, ALCs are seen as better suited to preparing refugee learners for resettlement. Second, key stakeholders perceive refugee enrolment in the public education system as unfeasible due to the inconsistency and lack of clear direction in past educational policies and programs, particularly for marginalised non-citizens.

Research Methodologies in Refugee Education

Figure 1 below illustrates the correlation between research methodology and the number of studies among the selected 15 papers, highlighting the predominance of qualitative methods. Similarly, a systematic literature review by Thuraisingam et al. (2022) revealed that the majority of their selected studies, seven out of fourteen, employed qualitative methods. Despite the widespread use of qualitative research, none of these studies explored informants' perspectives on integrated education for refugees. This paper addresses this gap by contributing to the discourse on refugee enrolment in public schools through key informant interviews, including insights from interviewees with refugee backgrounds, thereby capturing the perspectives of refugee students and teachers, as highlighted by Yunus (2023).
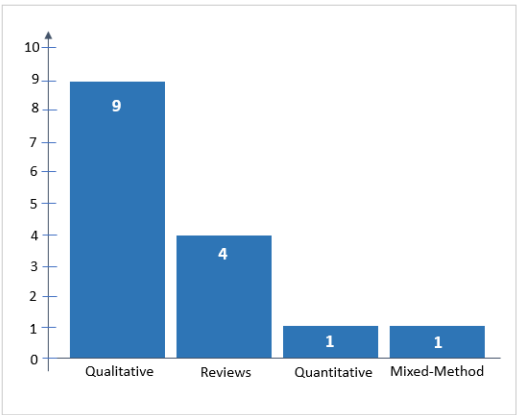
Figure 1: Research Designs of the Selected 15 Studies Relevant to Malaysia (Source: Authors' compilation.)

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore and understand the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders in refugee education (Creswell, 2014). Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted to examine views on whether refugee learners should be integrated into the national education system and the necessary preparations for such an initiative. The data were derived from a broader study on refugee youth education and its impact on social well-being, which received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malaya under the code UM.TNC2/UMREC_1186.

The KIIs were conducted with individuals who are well-informed and actively involved in refugee education, selected for their diverse perspectives, including both mainstream and minority opinions (Kumar, 1989). Participants came from the following backgrounds: management and teaching staff, volunteers and supporters, and parents. With the assistance of ALC management and refugee community leaders, participants were purposefully selected, with some identified through snowball sampling. A Research Information Sheet was provided to each interviewee, and before the interview commenced, they were briefed on the objectives and aspects of confidentiality.

Informants were required to meet the following criteria: (1) a minimum of three years of close engagement with refugee education and/or refugee students, (2) at least four years of residency in Malaysia, and (3) for those who had left Malaysia, their time living abroad had to be less than four years. The interviews were semi-structured, with participants informed in advance about potential questions tailored to align with their backgrounds. The informants delved into the

sub-topic of enrolment of refugee learners to public education and ALCs through guided questions, while a handful shared their views as the topic emerged.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted primarily via Zoom. All interviews were carried out in English, except for one, which required a translator to interpret from Rohingya to English. With the interviewees' consent, audio recordings were made. The interviews were concluded when responses became noticeably repetitive (Legard et al., 2003), aligning with scholarly recommendations that a sample size of 12 participants is generally sufficient (Guest et al., 2006; Muellmann et al., 2021). In total, 15 interviews were conducted between July 2022 and March 2023.

DATA ANALYSIS

The demographic profile of the KIIs is given in Table 3. Thematic analysis was conducted, and in working towards trustworthiness, six phases guided were followed: Phase 1 – familiarisation with data; Phase 2 – coding; Phase 3 – searching for themes; Phase 4 - reviewing themes; Phase 5 - defining and naming themes; and Phase 6 – writing report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Table 3: The Demographic Profile of Key Informant Interviewees

No.	Code	Origin Country	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Location of ALCs
1	KII#1-Director1	Malaysia	F	63	Chinese	KL/Selangor
2	KII#2-Director2	Malaysia	M	65	Chinese	KL/Selangor
3	KII#3-Director3	USA	M	65	Caucasian	Penang
4	KII#4-Director4	Malaysia	M	36	Malay	KL/Selangor
5	KII#5-Director5	Singapore	M	59	Chinese	Penang
6	KII#6-Principal1	Malaysia	M	38	Malay	KL/Selangor
7	KII#7-Principal2	Myanmar*	M	31	Chin	Penang
8	KII#8-Principal3	Indonesian	F	53	Chinese	Johor
9	KII#9-Teacher1	Myanmar*	M	31	Rohingya	KL/Selangor

10	KII#10-Teacher2	Malaysia	F	31	Malay	KL/Selangor
11	KII#11-Teacher3	Malaysia	F	23	Indian	KL/Selangor
12	KII#12-Parent1	Pakistan*	F	47	Pashto	KL/Selangor
13	KII#13-Parent2	Liberia*	F	37	Basse	KL/Selangor
14	KII#14-Parent3	Myanmar*	M	47	Chin	KL/Selangor
15	KII#15-Parent4	Myanmar**	M	45	Rohingya	KL/Selangor

Note: * - Refugees in Malaysia, ** - Refugee who formerly lived in Malaysia and are now resettled in the USA for not more than 4 years

The age range of the informants is between 23 and 65 years. Six are from Malaysia, and the non-Malaysians, nine informants, are a mixture of refugees and non-refugees. The diverse backgrounds of these informants produced rich and varied views. For example, those in their late 50s and 60s are primarily humanitarian actors of varied professional backgrounds who left their career to support education for refugees. While the youngest informant was a university student who volunteered teaching at ALCs for slightly more than two years, who had also written an academic paper related to refugees' health. One informant who resettled in the United States of America (USA) provided meaningful real-life insights on the impact of education and social life in Malaysia on his children upon resettlement.

The interviews revealed key themes at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, three main themes emerged: (1) long-term strategic direction, (2) gradual implementation, and (3) partnerships. At the micro level, two themes surfaced: (1) social integration, and (2) motivation to pursue education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is organised according to the key themes from the KIIs. As noted earlier, the perspectives shared come from informants with diverse backgrounds rather than being limited to specific refugee communities. Although the Rohingya constitute the largest refugee group in Malaysia, they represent a smaller proportion of the refugee student population. Hence, the informants were not selected based on the distribution of refugee nationalities or ethnicities.

Long-term strategic direction

Regarding this theme, three informants - all directors of ALCs - highlighted concerns about the lack of a clear roadmap and the need for continuity in strategic implementation if refugees were to be enrolled in public schools. Their concerns align with the historical trajectory of education policies for marginalised non-citizens in Malaysia, including refugees, which Abu Bakar and Subramaniam (2023) and Loganathan et al. (2021) have detailed, highlighting a lack of clear direction. One director emphasised the importance of maintaining consistency in the education system, stating:

> "The system can't be interrupted, so the refugee students can't be forced into the national curriculum. There is no easy answer. If the priority is for the benefit of those coming into the system, then a continuous way of studying must be provided." (KII#5-Director5).

Another director highlighted the impracticality of restructuring public education solely for refugee enrolment, while a third questioned the overall readiness and commitment of stakeholders to an integrated education system, implicitly advocating for a continued focus on ALCs:

> "Theoretically, the idea is good and seems we can do this, but I am unsure if we are ready. To be ready, every party needs to be involved… I think that it is already good that the government approves alternative learning education for refugees." (KII#4-Director4).

In developing a long-term roadmap toward an integrated education system, some informants suggested pre-enrolment training in public schools, focusing on national language acquisition and cross-cultural relations for both students and teachers. However, opinions on language proficiency varied, with considerations extending to future resettlement, employability in Malaysia, and potential repatriation. These differing perspectives are reflected in the following statements:

> "We are teaching the children in English, and the government school is teaching in Bahasa. This is already a gap. We had this discussion and felt that English is more beneficial, especially if they resettle to another country." (KII#3-Director3)

"If they use the national language and later go back to their country, then the language is of not much use." (KII#2-Director2)

"To prepare for work in Malaysia, they need to learn to speak Malay." (KII#14-Parent3)

"No problem for children to go to public school. But they need to speak the same language as in the school." (KII#15-Parent4)

All interviewed ALC directors and one teacher advocated for strengthening the existing ALC curriculum to better equip students for resettlement rather than naturalisation as Malaysian citizens or for enhancing employability during prolonged stay. Consequently, they favoured English as the primary medium of instruction at ALCs. Some noted that Malay language lessons would only be introduced if public school enrollment became mandatory.

In contrast, one parent (KII#14-Parent3) of Chin ethnicity, who had encountered workplace challenges due to language barriers, strongly supported teaching Malay at ALCs. Given that most refugees spend years in Malaysia before resettlement and that employment is critical for their survival, he viewed proficiency in Malay as essential for both employability and daily life. Acknowledging the importance of excelling in both contexts, resettlement and prolonged stay, one principal (KII#8-Principal3) explained that her ALC prioritises instruction in both English and Malay for this reason.

Several studies on the challenges faced by refugee-receiving schools in Turkey highlight that any effective school-based intervention must first address language barriers and sociocultural differences. If left unaddressed, these gaps can lead to tensions within the school community, particularly between refugee and local students (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory, these dynamics involve multiple layers of influence, particularly within the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. Figure 2 illustrates the socioecological context of refugee students currently enrolled in Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs) in Malaysia (Abu Bakar & Subramaniam, 2024). Key actors in this immediate environment - such as peers, teachers, staff, and volunteers - play a significant role in shaping refugee students' experiences. However, these actors will shift when refugee learners are within the public-school setting. As such, anticipating and engaging new stakeholders who can help address the anticipated challenges, as identified by key informants, becomes essential. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model to this new educational

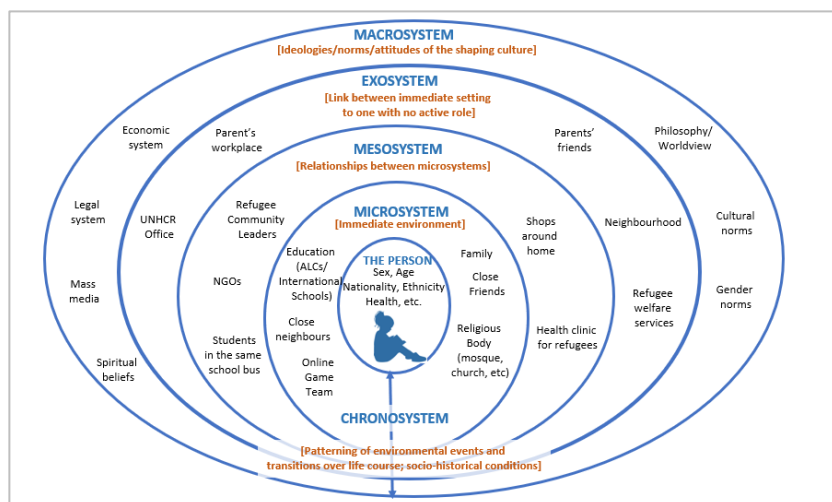context provides a useful framework for understanding and responding to these evolving socioecological dynamics.

Figure 2: Application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model to Refugee Student Context in Malaysia
(Source: Abu Bakar and Subramaniam [2024].)

Gradual implementation

A few informants noted that the idea of integrated education has been discussed for decades, but the overwhelming execution challenges - lacking strategic planning and implementation - make enrolment in public schools unlikely within Malaysia's context and institutions. Additionally, one principal emphasised the difficulty of implementing any plan, even with the government's approval for refugee learners' enrolment in public schools, citing his experience of these students ultimately turning to the ALC he is affiliated with:

> "Some parents would like to send their children to national schools, especially those in the humanitarian program for 3000 Syrians during Najib's time. They are supposed to receive the privilege to study at national school, as per written on the paper. But, it is just on paper and has not been materialised until today." (KII#6-Principal1)

Against this backdrop, gradual implementation by prioritising improvements in the quality of education provided by existing ALCs was

frequently mentioned. One volunteer teacher argued that the primary barrier to integration is the lack of awareness among Malaysians regarding refugee issues. Indirectly, she suggested that this attitude dampers the drive to look at refugees' needs for equitable and quality education.

Therefore, enhancing the quality of education in current ALCs presents a more realistic approach. Describing the quality of some ALCs, a teacher originally from Myanmar shared the following:

> "I have visited many ALCs in different states in Malaysia. I saw many things to improve. First, the standard syllabus. They just taught using textbooks. They had disqualified teachers who were not trained in teaching methods. The learning environment was also not very good. The sound from one class was loud, disturbing other classes. The administrative system was not good, and there was no management team to manage the ALC well." (KII#9-Teacher 1)

In conclusion, the interviews suggest that gradual improvements should occur simultaneously, enhancing ALCs while actively collaborating with policymakers and key stakeholders to explore possibilities for an integrated education system, despite acknowledging that each has a different set of challenges.

Partnerships

In relation to expanding refugee enrolment in Malaysia's public education system, KII#1-Director1 proposed starting by limiting refugee admissions to a few designated schools, piloting integrated schooling initiatives near refugee communities. This highlights the importance of coordination and partnerships between ALCs and public schools in facilitating refugee learners' enrolment.

Meanwhile, KII#4-Director4 emphasised that any task force can only be effectively implemented with official government directives. For instance, KII#1-Director1's recommendation would require a top-down approach that fosters collaboration among key stakeholders - including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), refugee communities, and ALCs - to ensure empowerment at all levels. These partnerships make scaling up such a pilot project more feasible when implemented gradually, following comprehensive studies and ensuring readiness for change among Malaysian students.

Their emphasis on partnerships aligns with studies by Diode and Wan (2022), Thuraisingam et al. (2022), Loganathan et al. (2023), and Letchamanan

(2013) (Table 1), which stress the need for engagement across various socioecological levels in Malaysia, as well as with the individuals directly affected. Similarly, findings from interviews with 15 school counsellors in Turkey revealed that refugee-receiving schools must not only support students and their families but also address conflicts among Syrian refugees and between refugees and local students (Özel & Erdur-Baker, 2023). In addition to the interactions among the socioecological levels, as illustrated in Figure 2, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) argue that the context, nature, and duration of engagement are equally important.

Recognising the complexities of integrating refugee and local students, KII#4-Director4 proposed learning from other countries, particularly regarding school space utilisation:

> "We should conduct a benchmark study on how other countries use school buildings during weekends and afternoons. Can the space be utilised for refugee students? A gradual approach is needed, as a sudden move may lead to backlash. For example, locals may respond by saying, 'You can give your home then.'" (KII#4-Director4)

This suggestion underscores the importance of macro-level partnerships to learn from best practices, challenges, and recommendations of other refugee-hosting countries that have integrated refugee students into public schools. Such an approach would enable Malaysia to make informed decisions on refugee education policy.

Social integration

Within the theme of social integration, refugee-background informants identified public schools as a potential avenue for fostering social cohesion. In contrast to the perspectives of non-refugee interviewees, these informants conveyed strong enthusiasm and confidence in refugee learners' readiness to participate in public education, despite recognising that the current system is not yet fully equipped to accommodate them. One parent (KII#15-Parent4), who expressed no significant concerns, did note the importance of providing Malay language training. Additionally, three refugee-background informants explicitly highlighted the resilience of refugee learners in navigating challenges within national schools and higher education institutions, emphasising that the long-term benefits outweigh the present shortcomings of the system. Their views are as follows:

> "No concern at all. I don't think there will be any major problems because children adapt very easily. Every society will always have differences, but

they will bring positive change. Exposure to different cultures at an early age is good for children and for their knowledge …. They need this for their future. This is a good opportunity, and there will be no issue." (KII#12-Parent1)

"I think it is good to have access to national schools. I think when there is a change, there will be challenges like any other situation. If refugees have access and are accepted to go to a national school, refugee communities will do everything to go through this." (KII#7-Principal2)

"Our children have adapted to the environment. Our life has been a struggle, so we adjust to the environment. Maybe one or two weeks at a public school or university may not be easy. But they will get used to it." (KII#13-Parent2)

Similarly, KII#11-Teacher3 underscored the broader benefits of integrating refugee students into national schools:

"I think when they start working here, they will mostly work with Malaysians. So, studying in national schools is a plus. When it comes to changing attitudes, it shouldn't just be the refugees who need to adapt - Malaysians should as well." (KII#11-Teacher3)

In terms of preparing refugee students to acculturate well with the local community and maintaining their belongingness with the co-ethnic community, two parents expressed the importance of integrating religious subjects or programs at the school. One parent whose family has resettled reflected that spiritual development can help youngsters make wise decisions with the freedom that they have in a country like the USA.

"Now that we have resettled in the USA, we have access to everything. There is so much freedom and some young ones went stray smoking weed at school. As Christians, growing spiritually will help to nurture good values. In Malaysia, the ALC that I know runs bible study and this helps the students in growing positive characters." (KII#14-Parent3)

Another parent mentioned that religious teaching is part of his Rohingya community traditions, and thus, learning Islam enriches the children's socio-cultural experience making school life more relatable:

> "My child said he likes learning English and Islam. I do not have much education. In Myanmar, I only went to a school that taught Quran. It is good that my son's school teaches Islam." (KII#15-Parent4)

In contrast, none of the interviewed directors, principals, or teachers emphasised the importance of integrating religious education or programs that preserve refugees' cultural heritage, religious traditions, and values.

Motivation to pursue education

As for motivation to pursue education, discussions frequently centred on the role of parents in encouraging their children's education, as well as the legal and safety challenges that hinder access to any type of educational provider. Three informants emphasised the need for intentional engagement with refugee parents as a key factor in advancing their children's education. One principal explained:

> "Families and young people who have spent more time in Malaysia are more exposed to education and its role in employment. Those who arrived in Malaysia at an early age may prefer attending school, while those who arrived later may prioritise work." (KII#7-Principal 2)

Another principal further elaborated the influence of parental roles in school dropout decisions:

> "For refugees to attend national schools, motivation is key. The Rohingya culture traditionally accepts young girls marrying at an early age. Encouraging both the children and their parents is crucial in helping them see the opportunities they can achieve in life. We need to guide them and help shift their perspectives." (KII#8-Principal 3)

Recognising the importance of parental involvement, UNHCR's ALC *protection letter* includes it as a requirement. Additionally, interviewees highlighted the need for parents to be aware of essential aspects of their children's well-being, such as maintaining good health, emotional stability, and parenting skills. This includes providing nutritious meals, teaching safety in public spaces, and guiding children on using public transportation. Parents interviewed also expressed the need for support with school transportation and home *WiFi* sponsorship to facilitate online learning for their children.

Several interviewees elaborated that the primary reasons for students dropping out of ALCs are directly associated with their families' expectations and cultural norms. Their views resonate with the findings by Muslim (2022) and Kok et al. (2021) on refugees' communal values that prioritise family needs, typically, boys earning an income and girls assisting with household chores. Diode and Wan (2022) also identified a lack of interest in education among children and parents and financial constraints as major barriers to schooling.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper examined the pressing question of whether Malaysia should enrol refugee children in its public education system. This issue is increasingly important, given the global surge in forced migration and Malaysia's ongoing role as a refugee host country within ASEAN. Refugee education is a matter of human rights and national interest related to social integration, economic development, and long-term national resilience. The discussion highlighted that the integration of refugees into Malaysia's public-schools hinges on whether such a system can support the holistic development of both refugee and citizen learners.

The central argument of this study is that Malaysia's well-established public education infrastructure, if adapted strategically, has the potential to serve as a practical and inclusive platform for providing quality education to refugee learners. This approach is particularly relevant given the increasing number of refugees who remain in the country for extended periods due to protracted displacement and limited resettlement opportunities. As many refugees already contribute to the informal workforce, investing in their education is a moral imperative and an economic asset.

Globally, the establishment of ALCs and Community Learning Centres is often driven by the social organisation and commitment of refugee communities themselves (Damak, 2018). In Malaysia, the continued reliance on ALCs as the primary educational provision for refugees is unsustainable, as these centres frequently operate with limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and minimal institutional support, hindering their ability to deliver consistent, quality education. Such challenges are common across many refugee hosting countries. However, unlike regional counterparts such as Thailand and Indonesia, Malaysia has yet to formally pursue an integrated education model.

To move forward, it is recommended that Malaysia take the first strategic step: establish a national steering committee on refugee education. This body would be tasked with coordinating stakeholders, guiding policy development, and facilitating long-term planning at all levels of the socioecological system. This

steering committee could model its approach after the Economic Planning Unit's framework for the implementation of Malaysia's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The framework should incorporate key components such as institutional structure, policy development, financing, training and advocacy, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. At the micro level, data and indicators from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UNHCR including educational attainment, literacy, enrolment, learning quality, and safety (UIS/UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNHCR, 2021) should be integrated into national planning efforts. A structured, phased implementation process, supported by centralised resources such as the UNHCR ALC webpage, can ensure accountability and alignment.

International examples also offer valuable insights. Examples on integrated education model include the *shift school* model, where citizens and refugees attend classes at different times, and the *host community school* model, where students from diverse backgrounds study together in the same classrooms at public schools. Turkey's integration of 3.5 million Syrian refugees into its public education system, supported by the EU and the Turkish Ministry of Education, offers a good demonstration of how regional cooperation and shared responsibility can lead to success. Malaysia could adopt similar strategies, including securing support from non-refugee-hosting nations for financial, human, and material resources.

Launching micro-level pilot programs in public schools near refugee communities at the national level could mark a transformative step toward educational inclusion. This could begin with small-scale collaborations between public schools, ALCs, and NGOs, focusing on shared learning spaces and extracurricular programs that promote cultural exchange and leadership development. Gradual exposure to public school environments and collaborative activities, like sports games or community service initiatives, can build trust, social skills, and mutual understanding among refugee and citizen students.

To further enhance refugee educational pathways, Malaysia should consider allowing ALC students to sit for Malaysia's secondary education certification, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), as private candidates (Diode & Wan, 2022; Letchamanan, 2013). This alternative is considered more financially viable than the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) or the General Educational Development (GED) exams, which are prohibitively expensive for most refugees. Enabling refugees to contribute towards their SPM examination fees opens pathways for further education and employment and fosters a stronger connection between refugees and their host country.

While legal status, safety, and social integration challenges are inevitable, they can be addressed through carefully designed policies and inclusive practices.

Both ALCs and public schools must recognise the unique needs of refugee students, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework suggests that ALCs, despite resource constraints, often foster stronger community-level support systems. Therefore, any integration model must consider the interplay of multiple ecosystem factors - home, school, community, and policy.

Moreover, partnerships with the corporate sector remain a largely untapped resource. Companies can play a pivotal role by supporting refugee learners with internships, apprenticeships, infrastructure sponsorship, and professional development for ALC educators. Such involvement would help meet refugees' basic needs and prepare them for long-term livelihoods.

This paper recommends a multifaceted and inclusive approach that builds upon existing strengths while addressing current gaps. Malaysia can move toward a more equitable education landscape by establishing a national steering committee, piloting integration models, strengthening both ALCs and public education systems, and promoting cross-sector collaboration.

The stakes are too high for inaction because refugee education directly affects national stability, labour market sustainability, and social unity. The call to action is clear: Malaysia must begin by coordinating stakeholders through a formal national task force and take decisive steps toward inclusive educational reform. With thoughtful planning, political will, and sustained partnerships, Malaysia can uphold its humanitarian commitments while investing in a more resilient and inclusive future for all children, citizen and refugee alike.

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