Articles

Educational Integration of Refugee Children in Malaysia
A Scoping Review

Raudah M. Yunus

Malaysia is among the biggest hosts of refugees and asylum seekers (RAS) in Southeast Asia, of whom the majority are Rohingya Muslims. In Malaysia, RAS children are not allowed to enroll in public schools and therefore rely on a non-formal parallel education system that comprises learning centers run by refugee communities, NGOs, and faith-based organizations. To date, little research is available on initiatives that attempt to integrate RAS children into Malaysian society through education. This study aims to gather evidence on the current situation of RAS children's education in Malaysia and answer the following questions: (a) what is the current state of evidence? and (b) to what extent has existing research/evidence addressed the question of RAS children integration into the national education system? We conducted a scoping review that gathers and summarizes findings from existing studies using a specific strategy: selection of keywords and systematic search through online databases, followed by screening of papers based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Our findings showed that the overall body of evidence is small, with most studies describing the challenges and barriers faced by RAS children in accessing formal/non-formal and quality education. There was little focus and discussion on integrating RAS children into the national education system, which perhaps is due to the underlying assumption that Malaysia remains a transit country for RAS, and not a destination for permanent settlement.

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BACKGROUND

In Malaysia, there are close to 180,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (RAS), while the number of unregistered RAS is unknown (UNHCR, 2021b). Malaysia is among the countries that are not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. While the impact of not signing/ratifying this convention varies from one nation to another, in the Malaysian context, it has somehow contributed to the lack of a clear sociolegal framework that governs the rights of RAS populations.[1] As a result, refugees are not legally recognized and tend to be viewed as "illegal" or "undocumented" migrants (Hedman, 2008). This comes with a heavy toll to RAS, who are subjected to arbitrary arrests and are deprived of basic social services such as health care, education, and livelihood options. Access to public health facilities is restricted by exorbitant costs, fear of arrest, and language barriers (Chuah et al., 2018). Moreover, Malaysian law prohibits RAS from engaging in formal employment, thus pushing the vast majority of them into the informal sectors, known for their pervasive abuse and exploitation (Wahab, 2017). The limited livelihood choices that are open to them include construction work, cleaning, scavenging, and other unclean jobs—all involving danger, risk, and vulnerability.

Malaysia is generally viewed as a "transit" country and not a destination for permanent settlement for RAS. The common perception and expectation of the Malaysian government and RAS populations alike is that the latter stay for a limited period of time—perhaps a couple of years—before getting resettled in a third, western country (Joles, 2018). Petitions for resettlement are processed and facilitated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in collaboration with countries that have agreed to take refugees and ultimately grant them permanent residence status. Resettlement is considered one of the most durable solutions to the refugee crisis, as it "carries with it the opportunity (for every RAS) to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country" and become entitled to receive citizenship rights that they were denied in their countries of origin (UNHCR, 2021c). In 2018, it was reported that 27 countries accepted 55,700 refugees for resettlement. These host countries included the United States (17,100) Canada (7,700), the United Kingdom (5,700), France (5,100), Sweden (4,900), and others (UNHCR, 2021c).

Even though resettlement is seen as the most desirable option for refugees, there are other alternatives for sustainable solutions, which include voluntary repatriation and local integration. Malaysia does not adopt an official policy or provide a socio-legal framework to govern the lives of RAS within its territory nor is it a destination for resettlement. Hence, the general attitude toward refugees has ranged from indifference, at best, to outright abuse, at worst (Malaysiakini, 2016; SPF, 2020). RAS, from the perspective of the Malaysian government policy, are temporary residents who should be sent to third countries within a certain period of time. Therefore, local integration is not seen as an option or a possible pathway for RAS, despite the fact that many RAS—especially the Rohingya—have been staying in the country for decades and have embraced it as their own (Dalily, 2021; Razak, 2020). Many Rohingya children, in fact, are born in Malaysia and have grown up in the local culture and language, not knowing any other "home" (Letchamanan, 2013). Culturally, they have lived as native residents since their childhood, but without citizenship privileges.

In contrast to the "conventional wisdom" that RAS are meant for eventual resettlements, evidence and circumstances on the ground indicate a different reality (Fishbein, 2020). Resettlement is a long and tedious process, which involves complex steps and interconnected factors and requires RAS to wait for a long and uncertain stretch of time. That is to say, even when refugees are found eligible for resettlement, in reality they may still have to "face a potentially indefinite waiting period" (Karlsen, 2016, p. 4). Evidently, the rate of resettlement worldwide has fallen far short of the rate of the growing number of refugees, and the resettlement effort has not kept pace with its demand. For instance, by the end of 2020, there were over 25 million refugees, but less than 1% got resettled (UNHCR, 2021c). The majority remain stuck in limbo and uncertainty in the country of asylum. The COVID-19 pandemic that has restricted travel and movement worldwide caused further disruptions to resettlement activities (UNHCR, 2021d).

Given this reality, most RAS are likely to stay in Malaysia for an indefinite period of time and, perhaps, for generations to come. As much as Malaysia wants to believe that RAS will only stay temporarily, data and evidence contradict this presumption. Therefore, there is an urgent need to re-think the most suitable, durable solution for them. As voluntary repatriation is more complex and depends on the security status in the country of origin, the third option—local integration—remains the

most feasible and humane. For many RAS in Malaysia, particularly the Rohingya, local integration can be easily driven by factors such as the length of stay, familiarity with host culture and religion, and the ability to speak the local language as a result of long-time inter-mixing and acculturation.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Refugee Children and Education

Approximately 17% of the RAS population in Malaysia are children, with 90% comprising school-going ages (UNHCR, 2021a). As Malaysian public schools are not open to RAS children, they are largely dependent on schools or alternative learning centers (ALC) established by local and international NGOs, faith-based organizations, philanthropists, or refugee communities themselves. Official figures reported that 133 such ALCs currently operate in Peninsular Malaysia (UNHCR, 2021a). However, this is likely an underestimate, as many of them are not formally registered. While these learning centers play a crucial role in providing education that is otherwise unavailable to RAS children, they face a number of challenges and limitations. These include inappropriate school locations; many RAS schools are commonly housed in shop lots or commercial facilities without adequate safety measures and hygiene standards. ALCs also lack funds and other recourses, which translate into a shortage of textbooks and qualified teaching staff, inadequate physical infrastructure, a high turnover of teachers, and poor compensation for school personnel (WeiQian, 2019).

In addition to these obstacles, there are other factors that hinder RAS children's access to education, such as parents' poor awareness of the importance of education (especially for girls) and economic hardship that compels families to take their children out of schools to join the labor force (Palik, 2020; UNHCR, 2022). Parents are also concerned about their children's mode of travel to and from school, as they are unable to afford secure transportation as well as school fees. In addition, some tend to view sending children to school is not worthwhile as they are en route to resettlement in another country and as they are gripped by a climate of fear that commonly surrounds the lives of RAS (Badrasawi et al., 2018; O'Neal, Atapattu et al., 2018; WeiQian, 2019). These factors are further compounded by the rising negative public sentiment in Malaysia toward RAS, besides the multiple raids and episodes of arrest of undocumented migrants by immigration authorities during the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak

(Equity Initiative, 2020). According to the UNCHR, only 14% of RAS children in Malaysia are in pre-school, 44% in primary education, 16% in secondary education, and fewer still in tertiary learning institutions (UNHCR, 2021a). Corroborating these findings, a local survey reported low enrolment of RAS children in educational institutions in general, and that approximately 70% of them are out of school (NST, 2019).

Education as an Instrument for Integration

Successful integration into the local culture involves persistence in absorbing a set of cultural values on the part of refugees and a degree of opening up on the part of the host population. According to the UNHCR, integration is a "dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population" (UNHCR, 2014, p. 1). The UNHCR further elaborates on the conception of integration and regards it as a "complex and gradual process, comprising distinct but inter-related legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions, all of which are important for refugees' ability to integrate successfully as fully included members of the host society" (UNHCR, 2014, p. 1).

On the other hand, educational integration is defined as "a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 12). Even though there are many ways of integrating refugees into a society, integration through education is among the most effective and sustainable pathways, especially for children and youths. While there is no single, best model, different educational integration approaches exist in western countries that accept RAS into their resettlement programs. First and foremost, to make integration successful, the education system or institution needs to identify and consider the key needs of refugee children. These include the need to (a) learn the host country language; (b) continue to use their own mother tongue; (c) overcome interrupted schooling; (d) adjust to a new education system; (e) communicate with others; (f) bond and feel a sense of belonging; (g) develop a strong personal identity; (h) feel safe; and (i) cope with separation, loss, and trauma (Cerna, 2019). Educational integration models vary from country to country. Examples of strategies undertaken are early assessments and individualized learning plans (implemented in Sweden, Finland, and

the Netherlands), introductory and transition classes (implemented in Germany and Australia), language training and support (implemented in Germany, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Norway, etc.), mother tongue tuition (implemented in Sweden and other countries), and building an inclusive learning environment (Cerna, 2019).

However, strategies used in educational integration models for RAS children are beyond the scope of this study. Rather we attempted to answer a set of broader questions, such as; 1) what does the current evidence say about local integration of RAS children through formal education in Malaysia? 2) What are the knowledge/research gaps? 3) Have existing research and initiatives taken into account educational integration as a possible and durable solution for RAS children?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to Ager and Strang (2008), there are myriad domains of integration that complement and interact with each other for successful integration to occur (Ager & Strang, 2008). Other than employment, health, and housing, education is among the key markers that can foster social connection with the local community, which in turn facilitates acquisition of language and cultural knowledge that are ingredients for citizenship (Ager & Strang, 2008). Figure 1 illustrates the different domains and levels of integration as posited by Ager and Strang.

While this model is derived from a high-income context, the essence of integration proposed can be generalized and is applicable to different settings. Among the four markers/means demonstrated in the framework, in the Malaysian context, employment and health have been most frequently discussed both in the local media and by policy makers. In the health sector, for instance, due to the relentless advocacy by the UNHCR and local activists, and strong political will demonstrated by the Ministry of Health, meaningful progress has been made; registered RAS are now entitled to 50% medical subsidy at all public health facilities in the country. Nevertheless, access to formal education and national schools among RAS children has been lagging and elusive. While this can be attributed to many reasons, the question is whether such indifference or resistance to inclusion of RAS children in the national education system stems from the assumption/belief that local integration is not a potential long-term route for the RAS communities in Malaysia as an alternative to resettlement and repatriation.

Figure 1. A conceptual framework defining core domains of integration. Source: Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *21*(2), 166–191.

REVIEW OBJECTIVES

Given that evidence on educational integration of RAS children is scarce at the global scale, we anticipate a similar trend in the Malaysian context. We conducted a scoping review to gather existing evidence on the current state of RAS children with regard to their engagement with formal education as a pathway for local integration. Our research questions are as follows:

1. What does existing evidence say about RAS children in Malaysia and their involvement in formal education?
2. Have existing studies/programs/initiatives considered integrating RAS children into national schools as a path for integration?
3. At what level does the evidence cluster, and who are the stakeholders behind existing initiatives?

METHODS

The scoping review was conducted using three academic online databases (SCOPUS, ProQuest, and Google Scholar) and the websites of two international organizations (UNHCR and UNICEF). This was supplemented by citation tracking of selected papers to help identify relevant studies. When a paper could not be retrieved, the original author

was contacted. The search was conducted between 1 January 1990 and 18 September 2021.

Keywords included "*refugee OR refugees*" AND "*education*" and "*Malaysia*" in Title/Abstract/Keyword. We deliberately did not add more keywords/terminologies to avoid rendering the search too narrow or specific, which could exclude many potential papers. At the database search level, we tried to be as inclusive as possible, as not many papers were anticipated.

We applied the following selection criteria:

1. The population of interest in this scoping review was refugee or asylum-seeking children. However, papers that address different categories of children such as migrant children, undocumented children, stateless children, etc., were included. In addition, populations relevant to refugee children's education like refugee schoolteachers, parents, refugee education activists, NGOs providing education to this group, etc., were also considered part of the population of interest.
2. The focus of the paper/study was education in all forms; it can be primary or secondary or tertiary. It can also be formal or informal or non-formal education. The setting is ideally school, which can be a public or NGO-run or community based. It can also be termed differently, such as "alternative learning center" or "learning center" or "safe space." In this paper, the author did not restrict the definition of education or school in any way.
3. The setting of the study was restricted to Malaysia. This meant that the study must have been conducted in the Malaysian context (and involved RAS or migrant children in Malaysia). Investigations conducted by Malaysian researchers or institutions involving refugee populations outside Malaysia were excluded.
4. Regarding language, only studies/papers written in English were included.
5. No restriction was applied to the study design, but the paper must contain primary data.

Quality appraisal was not conducted, as the overarching aim was to obtain a broad overview of the current state of evidence, instead of assessing the impact or effectiveness of programs or interventions. Results were presented in a table, with more detailed analysis provided in a narrative manner.

FINDINGS

Online search in three academic databases and on the websites of two international organizations yielded a total of 115 papers. Following title and abstract screening, 85 were excluded. Among the 31 full texts analyzed, 11 were further excluded because they were not primary

studies, 4 were excluded because their study focus was not education, and 1 was excluded because the geographical scope was outside Malaysia. Even though the search began from 1 January 1990, the earliest papers (among the 15 included studies) were published in 2013. This could be attributed to the relative recent leap of interest among researchers in this field.

Figure 2 illustrates the flow of study selection.

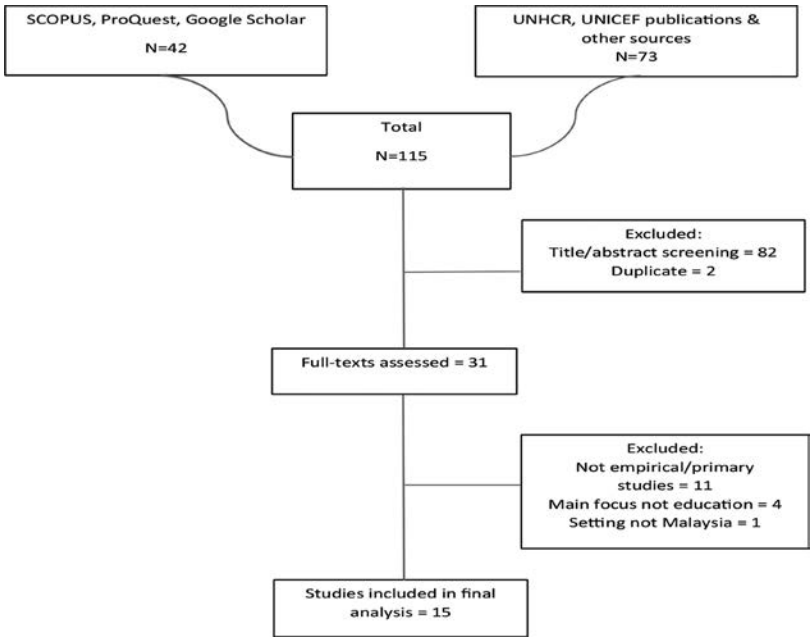

Figure 2. Flow of study selection.

In regards to the study objectives, four papers described learning centers or specific initiatives undertaken to provide education for RAS children, two explored students' perception and experiences, one measured students' academic performance, two measured program impact/effectiveness, one assessed the effectiveness of social media engagement by a local volunteer organization, two described barriers to education, one assessed teachers' mental health status, three explored teachers' perception, and one described children's educational needs. The distribution of study objectives is presented in Figure 3.

On the other hand, most studies employed a qualitative design, with 10 out of 15 using interviews as the main tool for data collection (Badrasawi et al., 2018; Birtwell, 2019; Eid & Diah, 2019; O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, Clement et al., 2018; O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, & Ong, 2018; WeiQian, 2019).

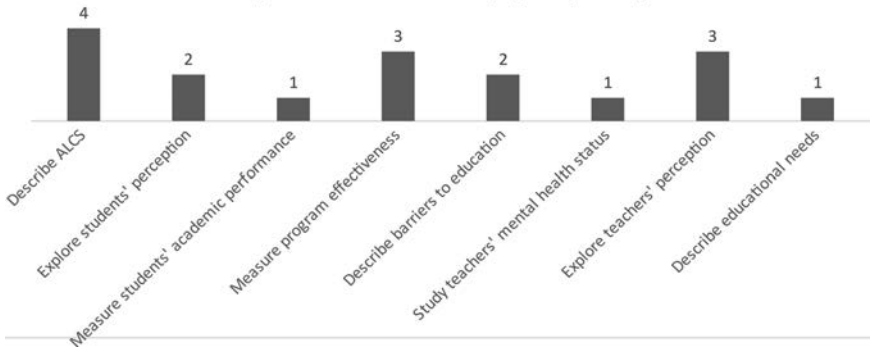

Figure 3. Study objectives of all included papers in the review. The total number of objectives listed are more than 15 because one study could have multiple objectives.

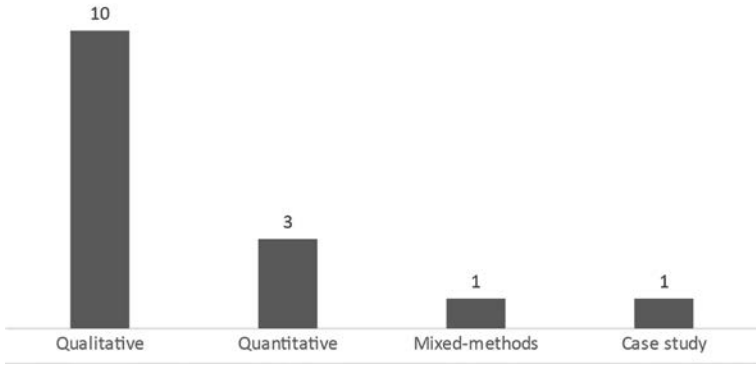

Figure 4. Study designs of papers included in the review.

Three studies employed a quantitative approach (O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, & Ong, 2018; Pang, Ling, & Tibok, 2019; Shekaliu, Mustafa, Adnan, & Guajardo, 2018), one adopted a mixed-methods design (Gosnell, O'Neal, & Atapattu, 2021) and one case study described its findings in a narrative form (Farzana, Pero, & Othman, 2020). Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of study designs.

Among the 15 studies, 6 had refugee or undocumented children as their main population of interest (or study respondents), 5 focused on refugee schoolteachers, 3 studied the role of NGOs or other service providers, and 1 had a general focus on education. In terms of institutional background or country of origin of the main author/researcher, almost half of the studies (7 out of 15) had the main authors from institutions outside Malaysia, while the other 8 were affiliated with Malaysian universities.

Table 1 presents the results of the 15 studies analyzed.

Table 1. Studies included in the final analysis, n=15

Author (Year)	Population	Objectives	Focus/ Main findings	Integration aspect
WeiQian (2019)	Refugee children of various ethnicities attending two learning centers (interview of teacher and admin staff)	To study the establishment of the learning centers, their vision and development, funding sources, and the problems and challenges they face.	Description of students' demography, syllabus/curriculum, problems and challenges.	1. UNCHR encourages schools to adopt Malaysian syllabus to facilitate integration (if the government changes its policy). 2. Author recommends that education about refugees is provided to Malaysian students as a way of integration (two-way). 3. Author questions the effectiveness of "Ethnic Relations Module," Islamic education a moral Education in public schools/universities.
Birtwell (2019)	Refugee students in higher education (interview)	1. To understand access from the students' perspective through a consideration of the ways in which they understand education. 2. To understand how students construct understandings about themselves.	1. Education is central to students regaining a sense of self. 2. A new socio-cultural context influences the understandings students develop about themselves in relation to education. 3. Concealing their refugee status influences their relationships with other students on campus.	No discussion on integration.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Pang et al. (2019)	249 refugee, stateless and undocumented children at an alternative learning center (aged 4–17)	1. To measure students' performance/ attainment at an Alternative Education Centre (MAEC). 2.To test the effectiveness of MAEC curriculum.	Improved achievement in religious practice, civics and citizenship, self-management, living skills.	No discussion on integration, except a minor highlight on UNICEF's recommendation for a more sustainable learning framework that can facilitate assimilation of AEP learners into mainstream Malaysian education.
Birtwell (2019)	Thirteen refugee students from the first four cohorts of the CERTE bridge course	To explore the impact of a short-term, intensive bridging program that aims to help youth with refugee backgrounds access to higher education in Malaysia.	Students gained social capital, cultural capital, soft skills, and other forms of capital that facilitate their access to higher education.	No explicit discussion on integration.
Shekaliu et al. (2018)	A small-scale volunteer organization that launches a program called "Let's Tutor a Refugee Child," in the context of social media (Facebook)	1. To determine the type and prevalence of social media posts, features, and functions of a volunteer organization's Facebook group. 2. To evaluate the effectiveness of the Facebook group used by the volunteer organization based on three variables: community reach, community interaction, and community action.	Findings were described in terms of a) organization level analysis; b) social media content; c) quantitative content analyses; d) effectiveness of social media in volunteer organization; e) community reach; f) community interaction; g) community action.	No discussion on integration aspect.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Eid & Diah (2019)	Palestinian refugees in Malaysia (interview)	To explore the barriers that prevent Palestinian refugee children from obtaining education.	Types of challenges/barriers: economic, institutional, parental, learning environment, and discrimination.	No discussion on integration.
Farzana et al. (2020)	Rohingya refugees from the lens of a local Rohingya community organization	A case study that illustrates the struggles and challenges faced by the Rohingya community in various aspects, with a focus on education.	Elaborates on the different types of challenges faced by the Rohingya protagonist and his community, and raises questions related to identity, forced migration, and statelessness.	No specific discussion on integration.
Khairi (2019)	Rohingya community in Penang Island	To explain the role of an NGO (REPUSM) in providing alternative education for Rohingya refugees' children in Penang and describe its activities and challenges.	Description of REPUSM's initiatives, the alternative learning center built, and the challenges faced by the NGO and Rohingya community.	No specific discussion on integration.
O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, Clement et al. (2018)	Refugee schoolteachers involved in a global consultation/ training program	1.To explain the author's experiences and processes of global consultation. 2. To explore the feedback collected from participants who underwent a training program.	Description of trainees' experiences and perception toward different components of the intervention, such as self-care, classroom management, emotional empathy skills, and others.	No discussion on integration.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

O'Neal, Gosnell, Ng, Ong et al. (2018)	Refugee schoolteachers (mainly Burmese) who participated in the Resilient Refugee Education (RRE) intervention program	To measure the effects of RRE intervention on refugee teachers' confidence, knowledge of classroom management, and self-care.	Significant increase in teachers' knowledge, confidence, and self-care were found for both groups (trainers and trainees).	No direct discussion on integration but did include mention on the importance of long-term sustainability of such intervention.
O'Neal, Atapattu et al. (2018)	Burmese refugee teachers	To examine the perspectives of Burmese refugee teachers on Burmese refugee student socioemotional issues and classroom management.	1. Societal pressures have an effect on the classroom environment. 2. Refugee student behavior and emotions ranged from externalizing to internalizing. 3. Refugee teachers relied on traditional Burmese methods for managing serious misbehavior. With mild misbehaviors, teachers employed more "modern," student-centered methods.	The author mentioned the need for a) countrywide efforts to include refugees in government schools, with international financial support; b) a culture-specific intervention approach and advocacy for longer-term impact on refugee communities.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Badrasawi et al. (2018)	Syrian refugee adolescents and Palestinian refugee families	To explore refugees' perceptions on their current situation and future orientations in terms of education.	Challenges faced by Syrian and Palestinian refugees include lack of formal certification, inadequate staffing and expertise, financial constraints, racism and bullying. Ambivalence about temporary education as resettlement was the bigger aim.	Author suggested ways to provide and improve the implementation of education in conflict zones, but did not directly link them to integration in the Malaysian context.
Lumayag (2016)	Migrant and undocumented children in Sabah, Malaysia	To outline the background of the educational needs of Filipino children and map out existing NGO initiatives that address the problems of illiteracy and poverty.	Description of community-based initiatives to provide education for undocumented children: 1. Humana Learning Centre 2. Stairway to Hope Learning Centre 3. Vision of Hope Learning Centre 4. Stairway to Success Learning Centre 5. Persatuan Kebajikan Pendidikan Kanak-kanak Miskin	Questions Malaysian current policy toward undocumented children with regard to education and other aspects. Implicitly hints at the need for long-term solutions and acceptance of these children into national programs.

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Gosnell (2020)	Refugee schoolteachers in Kuala Lumpur, primarily Burmese	To examine stress, mental health, and self-care among teachers in hidden refugee schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.	1. Refugee teachers have higher rates of mental health and stress, but lower rates of self-care as compared to their non-refugee peer teachers. 2. Macrolevel factors unique to being a refugee impact refugees' rates, experiences, and definitions of microlevel mental health symptoms, stress, and self-care.	No discussion on integration in the Malaysian context. Long-term solutions are viewed more from the resettlement perspective.
Letchamanan (2013)	Teachers and parents at two refugee learning centers	To examine the gap, and teaching and learning activities provided in refugee learning centers.	Description of the learning environment, condition of the learning centers, quality of education provided, and experiences of teachers and school administrators	Did not mention local integration specifically but highlighted the need to be realistic and to provide a more structured and sustainable learning pathway/ system for RAS children.

Among the selected studies (n=15), five brought up the issue of local integration, explicitly or implicitly. For instance, WeiQian (2019) reiterated UNCHR's call for adopting the Malaysian curriculum in order to facilitate local integration, besides recommending that Malaysian schools teach about refugees to local students as a way to reciprocate (WeiQian, 2019). Pang et al. (2019), echoed the call by UNICEF that encourages learning centers catering to RAS and stateless children to adopt a sustainable learning framework that can assimilate learners into mainstream Malaysian education (Pang et al., 2019). Conversely, O'Neal and colleagues, whose study focus was Burmese refugee teachers, proposed countrywide efforts to include refugees in government schools, with international financial support (O'Neal, Atapattu et al., 2018). Lumayag (2016), who studied migrant and undocumented children in Sabah, hinted at the need to integrate these children into the national, mainstream education (Lumayag, 2016), while Letchamanan implicitly pointed to the need to "be realistic" about RAS education, and provide a more structured and sustainable learning pathway (Letchamanan, 2013). Other studies did not specifically recommend or discuss local integration as a possible solution to RAS children—most seemed to have an underlying assumption that resettlement in a third country is the "by default" solution, thus arguments were made through this lens.

Research Gap and Analysis

The current body of evidence with regard to education of RAS children in Malaysia can be considered small. Most studies focused on describing (a) the barriers that RAS children encounter in accessing formal education; (b) the constraints and challenges faced by ALCs or NGOs that run them; and (c) the impact or effectiveness of a program/intervention. Fewer studies addressed students' and teachers' experiences and perception of different aspects of RAS education. None of the included studies directly addressed issues related to local integration, such as exploring students' or teachers' or parents' expectations and wishes in this regard, identifying existing initiatives to integrate RAS children through formal education, mapping relevant stakeholders that should be involved in integration plans and efforts, or measuring stakeholders' attitude to, and perception of, the idea of educational integration in Malaysia.

This "vacuum" could be due to the scarcity of research (hence the absence of published data or documented evidence) or non-reporting of existing initiatives owing to the politically sensitive nature of this topic. Alternatively, it could indicate that the lack of a sociolegal framework for

RAS in Malaysia and the country's continuous refusal to take responsibility for its refugee populations have somewhat created a subliminal and internalized notion among researchers, advocates, and activists that local integration is not a possible option.

Most studies (10 out of 15) employed a qualitative approach and only one used a mixed-method design. While the qualitative approach is generally considered more suitable for sensitive topics, the choice of study design depends largely on the research question (Baird et al., 2021). On the other hand, a mixed-method approach offers a number of advantages compared to either quantitative or qualitative design alone. For example, mixed methods can be used to "give a voice to study participants and ensure that study findings are grounded in participants' experiences," and are helpful in understanding contradictions between quantitative and qualitative findings (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013, p. 3). In addition, this approach is more intuitive, able to give a more complete "story" of the topic being researched, and provides methodological flexibility that can be easily adapted to various study designs to complement numerical data alone (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). Mixed methods have been proven useful in prior empirical studies that involved marginalized populations (Baird et al., 2021). The current review highlighted a huge gap in this regard, indicating a need for more mixed-methods studies.

Approximately half of the studies were conducted by authors/researchers from outside Malaysia. As mentioned earlier, this was not surprising because RAS are often viewed as a sensitive and politically charged topic to study or publicly discuss. Local researchers may feel discouraged by socio-political circumstances that often put RAS under a negative spotlight, the pervasive negative public sentiment, the "hard-to-reach" nature of this population, and the difficulty to obtain research funding. In contrast, foreign researchers and institutions may not have to deal with similar adverse consequences of researching RAS and openly advocating for them, as their affiliation with external organizations and foreign status may render them freer in expressing their views and criticizing Malaysia's stance toward RAS. Of equal importance is to find out if less engagement by local researchers in this topic is due to a sense of apathy or indifference to the refugee issue—and if so, why.

None of the 15 studies had educational integration or integration of RAS children into the national schools as their primary aim or focus. Five papers brought up the issue of bridging ALCs with the national education system in their discussions, while the rest either did not mention the idea

of integration at all or hinted at resettlement as the assumed solution (thus no consideration was given to local integration). Given Malaysia's position of not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the general and by default understanding is that local integration is not part of the national agenda (UNHCR, 2011). This could have influenced the overall lens or framework through which researchers, academics, and NGOs examine the issue.

Populations of interest in this review comprise mainly three groups: RAS or undocumented children, refugee schoolteachers, and NGOs or volunteer groups involved in providing services (education) for RAS children. While these three entities play a crucial role in the field of RAS education in Malaysia, the actual ecosystem of RAS education is bigger and more complex. Other stakeholders are in play, including international organizations (e.g., UNHCR, UNICEF), international and local NGOs not directly involved in running schools, religious bodies, community-based refugee organizations, private donors, academia, private/business entities, the Ministry of Education, and policy makers in Malaysia and beyond. The current state of evidence only covers a small portion of this ecosystem, leaving a huge gap that needs to be filled in. The roles, influences, experiences, and perspectives of myriad entities across the multiple levels of the RAS ecosystem remain unexplored.

Study Limitations

Our findings need to be interpreted in the light of several constraints. Search was limited to a specific time frame and language (English), thus limiting the breadth of potential studies that could be analyzed. Therefore, papers written in other languages—which could have provided rich insight—were systematically omitted. In addition, sources of grey literature were restricted to publications from two international organizations. In other words, grey literature was not searched exhaustively. There were many other potential sources of information in this regard, including unpublished studies, media reports, and government and NGO reports. Unfortunately, these sources were not thoroughly checked or investigated given the time and manpower limitations.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

An overview of the current state of what is known and what is not known about RAS education in Malaysia demonstrates huge gaps in several aspects. First, research foci have been mainly on barriers and challenges

faced by RAS children to access formal education, roles of NGOs and the obstacles they faced in providing services for marginalized children, teachers' and students' perception, and impact measurement of a program/intervention. Through our search strategy, we did not identify any study that primarily focused on integration of RAS children into the Malaysian national education system. This is an urgent call for researchers to delve into this important subject in the future. Local researchers and academics are in the best position to study RAS education given their physical proximity and firsthand knowledge of the local context, in comparison to foreign researchers or those from institutions outside Malaysia. Unfortunately, this advantage has not been fully used, as evidenced by the relatively low representation of local authors and researchers across the 15 studies. As mentioned earlier, this could be due to the unique restrictions faced by local researchers (political sensitivity, lack of funding, etc.), which are not always the case with foreign academics. Given that the prospect of local integration will be largely influenced by the Malaysian government's policies and attitude toward RAS, local researchers are ideally positioned at the forefront. They can easily capitalize on their familiarity with the local context and RAS circumstances in the country, and benefit from their social network to push for a change.

As one of the major hosts of RAS populations in the Southeast Asian region, Malaysia should reconsider its policy toward refugees and asylum-seekers, especially with regards to formal education for RAS children (Palik, 2020; Sulgina & Gopal, 2018). Questions should be raised with regard to local integration as an inevitable reality, as neither resettlement nor repatriation seems to be adequate or feasible to address the impact of protracted conflicts for the RAS communities in Malaysia (Solf & Rehberg, 2021; Taniparti, 2021). To begin with, Malaysia can consider to gradually incorporate RAS children into the national education system, with a long-term plan for local integration. For several reasons, this mission is not too difficult or impossible to accomplish. First, the number of RAS children is relatively small (in comparison to refugee children in other host countries like Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, etc.) (Fehr & Rijken, 2022; UNHCR, 2018, 2021b). Economically and infrastructure-wise, Malaysia is in a good position to facilitate educational integration. The country is an upper-middle-income nation with an intact and functioning education system run by the education ministry, known to be fairly efficient and competent (Bank, 2018; Zakaria, 2000). Second, there are hundreds of existing learning centers that house RAS children of varying ages that

provide primary—and to a lesser extent—secondary education. Initiatives can begin with gradual collaborations with, and incorporation of, these learning centers into the national education system. The nation's status as a signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC)—which recognizes the right of every child to education (Loganathan et al., 2021)—can be leveraged for this cause. While the reservation made to article 28 paragraph 1(a) of the CRC and the 2002 amendment to the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) have limited non-citizens' access to primary education (Loganathan et al., 2021; Lumayag, 2016), this could be an indication that positive changes or reforms can be made through legal means.

Third, the majority of RAS children are Rohingya, many of whom have adopted the local Malay culture and language. Therefore, including Rohingya children in public schools will be a strategic and feasible plan. As regards other ethnic groups, most of their children attend English-medium learning centers, or centers that offer English as one of the primary subjects. This is still an advantage because English is the second language in all public schools and that competency in English (other than Malay) often facilitates a child's ability to academically adapt. Lastly, educational integration can be considered a win-win strategy that can benefit Malaysia more than it does RAS themselves, for it will provide the country with future human capital. It is also a "window of opportunity" for capacity building and training of local (and refugee) teachers, and prevention of the risks of further disenfranchisement and social marginalization of RAS communities.

Future research should not merely focus on the conventional actors in RAS education (students, teachers, and NGOs). Researchers need to start paying attention to other stakeholders across the multiple eco-systems of RAS education, and include their perception, experiences, and recommendations. This will give a more holistic understanding of RAS education and its potential solutions while shifting the focus from problem descriptions to 'what can be done'.

A paradigm shift is vital to challenge the current underlying assumption; the framework of thought wedded to the notion that resettlement will solve this problem must be revisited and grounded in reality. Therefore, we call upon researchers, activists, NGOs, and all stakeholders who are passionate about RAS education to view this problem through the lens of local integration. Lived experiences, anecdotal evidence, and data on the ground are showing that most RAS will stay in Malaysia for a long time—for some, indefinitely—thus, the most practical solution is educational

integration, or assimilation of RAS children into the national system. This route will build social cohesion that is otherwise impossible to achieve with the existing disparities between RAS and Malaysian citizens.

Notes

1. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol form the legal foundation of refugee assistance and the basic statute guiding the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Many countries are signatory to the Convention and its Protocol, but many of the world's top refugee-hosting countries are not. The reasons for not signing/ratifying the convention are diverse, but one major impact is the restrictions on UNHCR to operate with and within the state. The actual situation of refugees in a country is complex and not always dependent on whether or not the state is a signatory to the Convention (and its Protocol), as it depends on multiple factors.

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