



RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR RESILIENCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON REFUGEE CHILDREN IN A COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Refugee children are one of the most vulnerable demographics in society today, and their numbers are growing exponentially. In the region of Southeast Asia, Malaysia accounts for the majority of refugees and asylum seekers. Little is known, however, regarding the resilience or wellbeing of refugee children, particularly young refugee children's perceptions of their resilience. As a result, this study aims to add to the literature on resilience by going beyond secondary informants to investigate the variables that affect their resilience. Specifically, the study aims to evaluate the perceived risk and protective factors in three domains—family, school, and community—adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This qualitative case study provides a unique glimpse into the lives of six children aged 7 years old to 11 years old attending community-based learning centres in Malaysia. Following purposive sampling to select the participants, drawing activities to facilitate conversation were first conducted, followed by semi-structured interviews. Content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed some negative experiences such as bullying and lack of security that could impinge on their resilience. Nonetheless, this was counteracted by perceived protective factors including supportive parents and peers, helpful teachers, and caring neighbours. The findings highlight the importance of family, learning centres, and neighbours in fostering a positive transition for refugee children and helping maintain their resilience. Additionally, they provide significant implications for policymakers and mental health professionals with regard to welfare services, the maintenance of safe living spaces, and education.

Keywords: Middle-aged refugee children, resilience, positive factors, risk factors

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's strategic location and economic prospects make it a primary destination for refugees seeking to relocate within Southeast Asia. Refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia generally fall under the category of undocumented migrants and comprise approximately 189,340 registered under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 52,810 of whom are children (UNHCR 2024a). With the increase in refugees migrating to various countries, there was a need for protocols and guidelines to regulate their stay as countries sought to address their diverse needs. In tandem with this, the United Nations 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was initiated (UNHCR 2010). While the majority of refugee-bound countries have sanctioned this convention, Malaysia has yet to do so, resulting in multifaceted challenges faced by refugee children, encompassing legal, policy, and social considerations.

Refusal to endorse the 1967 Protocol presents a unique scenario whereby refugees in Malaysia are not protected by the law and thus do not have the legal right to employment. Nonetheless, these refugee communities must sustain a living, fending for themselves and their children. As a result, they regularly resort to working in low-wage labour in manufacturing and construction with some owning small businesses (Ghazali et al. 2020; Nungsari et al. 2020). However, since the Malaysian legal framework does not recognise refugees and brackets them with illegal immigrants, detentions and arrests are common. Refugee children are not exempt from the lack of legal protection as they remain at risk of arrests en route to community-based learning centres (Khosro and Hussin 2020). When refugee children are informed of potential police raids, they often avoid education centres for several days and seek refuge in forests to avoid imprisonment or detention (Chan and Gooch 2016).

One of the most significant obstacles for refugee children in Malaysia is a lack of access to formal schooling. Although the Malaysian government has attempted to expand educational options for undocumented children, particularly refugee and asylum-seeking children, legal implications have restricted its scope and implementation (Loganathan et al. 2022). Refugee children frequently experience enrolment challenges, such as language difficulty, financial constraints, and lack of legal documents, which might prohibit them from participating in the educational system (Loganathan et al. 2022). Despite the lack of formal registration or legal protection, the UNHCR and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are permitted to act on behalf of refugees in Malaysia (Kunapalan et al. 2020). These organisations are the foundations upon which the various refugee support centres in Malaysia rely. Most of these initiatives cater to their educational requirements manifested in setting up community-based learning centres. These centres, or schools as they are commonly referred to, are essentially rooms above a store in the city centre without open spaces for running or play (UNHCR 2024a). Approximately one-third of the 23,823 school-age children attend these refugee schools. While 14% are preschoolers, 44% and 16% of these children attend the equivalence of primary and secondary schools, respectively (UNHCR 2024b). The vast majority of these refugees originate from Myanmar, with the remaining being Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Yemenis, Syrians, Somalis, Iraqis, Afghans, and Palestinians, among others.

Child protection is high on the agenda of the UNHCR, who also work relentlessly to facilitate their access to health care. Younger groups of refugee children in particular are considered to be a highly susceptible group due to the adverse psychological impact actuated by the unpleasant experiences both in their homeland and during their quest for refuge (Sleijpen et al. 2017). Resilience is a concept that is gaining momentum in studies involving refugees who are forced to flee their homes. The concept is used widely in literature, synonymous with the terms well-being, positive mental health and psychological well-being, and commonly translates to "bouncing back" after trauma or adversity.

To some extent, with the help of the UNHCR, refugees have been gaining access to health benefits. To an even lesser extent or smaller degree, is the provision of psychosocial aid and mental health assessments or interventions for refugee children (Mohamed et al. 2021), leaving vulnerable groups of children even more susceptible to risk factors that could further undermine their resilience. Hence, their needs cannot be adequately comprehended and addressed without documenting their wellbeing or resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing Literature on Refugees in Malaysia

Limited access to education for refugee children in Malaysia is a long-standing issue as they continue to face substantial barriers to education. Ali et al. (2024) interview with stakeholders, Rohingya refugee parents and school teachers, revealed the absence of formal recognition of Rohingya refugees' status coupled with inaccessibility to education greatly hindered their academic progress. Despite the presence of alternative learning centres outside mainstream education, the financial constraints parents face as well as the lack of quality education and teacher qualification at refugee schools deprive refugees of opportunities to enhance their future prospects. This is supported by an earlier study in which Letchemanan (2013) examined the educational challenges faced by refugees and refugee learning centres in meeting academic demands. Due to the lack of recognition under Malaysian law, refugee children reportedly had no access to government-run schools with their education limited to informal learning centres such as flats or houses converted into learning centres established by NGOs. Moreover, the inadequacies in trained teachers, resources, space, and proper facilities meant poor quality education that reduces their future prospects.

Echoing similar issues of legal repercussion, Shuaib and Nordin (2022) cited past migration patterns and established community networks as strong pull factors drawing refugee families to Malaysia. In particular, Malaysia's transition from isolated refugee camps to urban dwellings attracted families as it not only promoted integration with locals but also greater employment prospects. However, the study acknowledges limitations in healthcare, education, and stable income. Similarly, Mat et al.'s (2023) study with refugee stakeholders including policymakers, NGO members, and refugee activists outlined the need for improved policies that would pave the way for better employment opportunities and access to health care. Refugees' lack of documentation has led to being taken advantage of at work and being denied access to medical facilities which refugees could barely afford. Mat et al. (2023) also provided an interesting insight into the stringent rules and regulations concerning refugees: refugees in Malaysia contend with xenophobic sentiments from the general public which end up influencing unfavourable policies.

Apart from government policies of restrictions on work and education, a major factor hindering the positive adaptations of refugees residing in Malaysia is negative stereotyping due to their status of being illegal (Lee 2023). This is manifested through prejudice and racial discrimination (Ziersch et al. 2020; Lee 2023). Refugee studies in Malaysia allude to the notion that social isolation and discrimination, particularly when embodied by authoritative figures and adopted by the wider community, may have a greater impact on the psychological susceptibility of refugees, leading to negative adaptations (Low et al. 2014). Thus, even when refugee children in Malaysia are not being singled out, the mental consequences of witnessing discrimination faced by parents from public transportation drivers, employers, and other members of society eventually trickle down and take a toll on their bearings (Low et al. 2014).

While legal rights mainly in the form of educational and employment opportunities have largely formed the basis of research in Malaysia, there are also a modicum of studies addressing issues of mental health and wellbeing. In one such study, Shaw et al. (2018) reported instances of elevated emotional distress among refugee adults in Malaysia. Symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression were exacerbated by the stress of living in an unpredictable social and legal context. Nonetheless, accessing mental health care was difficult for these refugees due to a number of factors, such as stigma, language barriers, financial limitations, and little awareness of available resources with the minimal outreach to these populations. Meanwhile, Taheri et al. (2021) identified anxiety in nine refugee children, aged 6 years old to 12 years old, at two refugee centres in Malaysia. Their investigation on the effect of child-centred play therapy (CCPT) on the social-emotional development of these children had a significant positive impact. Specifically, the children displayed better ability to express their emotions, relayed a greater happiness overall, and developed better social skills.

In another study that took into account perspectives of middle-aged refugee children, Kok et al. (2021) focused on unearthing perceptions on family life and coping mechanisms through photo collages and resulting interviews. Participants aged 10 years old to 12 years old reported suffering from isolation and helplessness after separation from relatives pre-migration. This was further aggravated by less time spent with parents while away at work, after gaining some form of employment in Malaysia. The disruption to their lives and daily routines also affected them emotionally. However, they still relied greatly on family members for emotional support. Key members of society including supportive teachers and religious leaders were similarly instrumental in their adjustment to life in Malaysia. Apart from that, children expressed their belief that familial play was important in overcoming adversity, though materialisation of this play itself was not reported.

Despite the insinuations of a hostile political and social environment, how refugees fare in their areas of resettlement is still a grey area, as the majority of research on refugee children in Malaysia does not address their wellbeing. Consequently, little attention has been extended to aspects of resilience which is vital to vulnerable refugee children who have resettled in a foreign land and face new challenges and adaptations. To meet the unique difficulties experienced by refugee families and children in Malaysia, these local studies emphasise the need for focused support services and stress the vital role that families play as a stabilising influence in children's lives. At the same time, they also hint at the interwoven social and legal fabric that a child is a part of and thus, their resilience cannot be assessed at a singular level. As Ungar (2008) had pointed out in his conception of resilience, "resilience is influenced by a child's environment", and "the interaction between individuals and their social ecologies will determine the degree of positive outcomes experienced". Synonymous with the terms well-being, positive mental health and psychological well-being, resilience has been used widely in literature to translate to "bouncing back" after trauma or adversity. However, whether refugee children in Malaysia can navigate their way towards resources or are equipped with the means to maintain their resilience is relatively unknown, creating a gap in the proper documentation of information relating to refugee wellbeing. As such, the current study aims to delve into refugee children's perceived resilience risk and protective factors.

Friends and Peers

Uprooted from their familiar surroundings and thrust into a foreign environment, the absence of social networks and peer interactions that were once integral to the lives of refugee children can leave them feeling alienated. In a rare qualitative study with refugees aged 9 years old to 12 years

old living in Canada, McEwen (2007) identified playtime and social engagement with friends as two of the most important factors that helped foster positive adjustment and transition to their new life. Similar findings were found in semi-structured interviews with sixteen refugees, the majority of whom were from Africa and the Middle East, conducted in the Netherlands (Sleijpen et al. 2017). They were imbued with a sense of security as they received encouragement and support from their school peers. Ultimately, forming peer relationships and learning about regional customs and practices helped close the gap between the refugees and their community (Sleijpen et al. 2017).

The quality of friendships formed can sometimes triumph over acquaintances and new peer relationships. For example, Afghan refugees in Kanji and Cameron's (2010) study residing in Canada (aged 13 years old to 17 years old) reported a difference in the comfort and familiarity of their pre-resettlement friendships compared to their more recent ones (Kanji and Cameron 2010). The participants also reported experiencing challenges in forming friendships as a result of parental reservations or the identity formation typical of adolescence, which further exacerbated the situation. Interestingly, one of the participants emphasised that friendship formation and socialisation were easier when he was younger, in primary school. This highlights a vital demarcation in the ease of socialisation, and may prove significant in studies involving younger groups of refugee children.

At the same time, studies on protective and risk factors also identify peers as barriers to resilience, weakening defences and destroying self-esteem. This mostly manifests as bullying brought on by racism and discrimination, which are widely observed in studies with refugee children (e.g., Hek 2005; Rana et al. 2011; Guo et al. 2019). Variations in accents, ethnic backgrounds, and Islamophobia have particularly been linked to bullying and exclusion (Haffejee 2015; Bešić et al. 2020). In distinguishing between wellbeing and bullying experiences between older and younger groups of 149 refugees in the United Kingdom (UK), Samara et al. (2020) conducted interviews with children aged 6 years old to 10 years old. At the same time, older groups of teenagers were given self-report measures while parents acted as secondary sources for the younger group. While the adolescents in the study recorded significantly lower self-esteem, the younger group had more issues with peers, with 31% reporting instances of bullying.

Social Support and Community

Negative determinants that weaken the resilience of refugee children can be countered by social components such as being enrolled in schools and simply having positive and beneficial interactions (Rana et al. 2011; Kiteki 2016; Sleijpen et al. 2017; Mohamed and Thomas 2017; Guo et al. 2019). Feelings of inclusion, comfort, and acceptance are natural following the suffering and misfortune the refugees had to endure. For some, embracing a new culture while preserving cultural roots by bonding with similar individuals is the ideal coping mechanism (Carlson et al. 2012; Sleijpen et al. 2017). Despite intentions to seek support from the community, the integration process is sometimes slowed down by a lack of trust in the system, and having to deal with a foreign society and culture (Smyth et al. 2015; van Os et al. 2020).

However, a climate of distrust and caution fostered by the media and public perceptions can negatively impact how refugees are treated (Parker 2015; Brown et al. 2017; Rebelo et al. 2018; Bozdağ 2019; al-Al-Dabbagh and Amro 2020). Class teachers and administrators are not exempt from this, either. As is the case with peers, they sometimes participate in discriminatory conduct and ignore bullying that occurs in the classroom, which further alienates refugees (Guo et al. 2019; Bešić et al. 2020). As evidenced by the case of the Canadian children who were attacked

while praying in a mosque, prejudiced views can occasionally result in physical abuse and other forms of violence (Guo et al. 2019). Resultantly, an environment designed to foster resilience via social connection and religious practice becomes one of fear and anxiety.

Family

For young children who are unable to fend for themselves, the protection of parents or other family members is perhaps the most essential. Without the support and familiarity of loved ones who provide imperceptible barriers to outside threats, the resettlement and local integration of refugees would be extremely difficult. For instance, Dehnel et al. (2022) highlighted parents' role in boosting resilience. The study's sample, comprising 339 Syrian refugee children and adolescents aged 10 years old to 17 years old living in Jordan, recorded low to moderate levels of resilience. Parents served as a major safeguard against elements that potentially hindered their children's resilience including depression.

On the other hand, although parents are crucial to a child's growth and general welfare, they can also hinder resilience. An additional risk comes from pre-migration circumstances including parental incarceration and harassment by the government in politically unstable countries like Syria (Yaylaci 2018). Compounded by mental health issues including PTSD, anxiety, and depression that parents succumb to (Collishaw et al. 2016; Behere et al. 2017), breakdown in family relationships and marital conflict ensue (Browne et al. 2021), a tense and possibly hostile atmosphere is created for the child.

When unaccompanied minors find themselves in a foreign country without the support and safety of their family at a crucial juncture, the presence of a parental figure in attenuating the negative effects of migration is quite significant (Alarcón et al. 2021; Höhne et al. 2022). However, there are also cases of young refugees who, despite all the odds, prove to be remarkably resilient. According to Keles et al. (2018), almost 60% of refugees who had settled in Norway exhibited satisfactory levels of resilience. Nonetheless, being in a foreign environment and attempting to cope with the additional stresses and difficulties that come with it negatively impacted their wellbeing, eroding their capacity for effective coping. While resilience factors were not specified in this study, it adds to the growing literature on the life stressors and daily encumbrances refugee children face upon resettlement that lead to a gradual weakening of their resilience.

Considering both local and global literature on the topic of resilience, the majority of available knowledge regarding the state of middle-aged refugee children has been dictated by secondary sources, including guardians, researchers, and significant others. Ultimately, the voices of these children have either gone unheard or have not received much attention. This raises questions as to whether the paucity of data on their wellbeing has led to a lack of awareness and, as a result, an inadequate level of concentrated effort to address their needs. It is also important to note that how children paint their social realities is markedly different from adults (Killaspy 2016). Consequently, their conceptions of what constitutes resilience or wellbeing may diverge, resulting in a profound understanding of the phenomenon and eventually more effective intervention plans tailored to their needs. Endeavours to give them a "voice" appear to have been hampered by constraints, dilemmas, and doubts while attempting to make sense of their experiences. This uncertainty partially stems from a lack of knowledge about the best means of approaching children for research (Tay-Lim and Lim 2013) and partly from erroneous stereotypes of children being "incompetent" (Capaldi 2011) or "immature" (George 2009), deeming them incapable of being contributing meaningfully to studies.

With researchers now tapping into creative forms of eliciting responses from children, and studies exhibiting that children as young as three years old are capable of conveying their thoughts and feelings about their realities and experiences via photos, drawings, and interviews (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. 2019), it is important to recognise and fully utilise their roles as contributors and agents of change. Hence, the current study aims to aid in filling this gap in documentation by adding to the field of resilience research with middle-aged refugee children being the primary data source.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory serves as the basis of the study, providing a comprehensive framework for exploring the various contexts, interactions, and relationships involved in the resilience of refugee children (as cited in Sigelman and Rider 2012). The child's immediate environment and the surrounding sociocultural contexts act in a bi-directional manner that is key to a child's development (Sigelman and Rider 2012). The child is thus depicted as an active agent influenced by and reacting to their surroundings. These factors mostly serve as opposing sides of the same coin; negative experiences or relationships formed in any aspect of the child's life can culminate in a risk factor, whereas positive relationships and events that counteract them can result in protective factors (O'Connell et al. 2009). However, this study focuses primarily on the microsystem, the first level in Bronfenbrenner's model that encapsulates the immediate surroundings closest to the child. The most direct contact for a developing child is the family they are living with, namely the parents and siblings. Thus, interactions at the initial stage are limited with parental influence playing a central role in resilience building (Sigelman and Rider 2017). This circle widens to include other microsystems explored in the study: neighbourhood, school, resulting peer relationships formed, and religious institutions.

In line with the theory's underpinnings, the study specifically aims to explore: (1) perceived resilience risk and protective factors in middle-aged refugee children in relation to the familial domain; (2) perceived risk and protective factors in middle-aged refugee children in relation to the school domain; and (3) perceived risk and protective factors in middle-aged refugee children in relation to the communal domain.

METHODS

The study employed a case study design primarily tailored to probe deeply into a phenomenon, acquiring a more comprehensive awareness of it and any underlying novelties (Creswell 2012). As the study comprised a young group of participants, aged 7 years old to 11 years old, drawings were used to facilitate talk. In particular, Driessnack's (2006) draw-and-tell technique of illustrations followed by interviews was utilised to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and insights of six middle-aged refugee children with regard to resilience. Purposive sampling was utilised in selecting the study participants. One of the researchers was a volunteer teacher at the participants' community school which aided in facilitating access to the refugee children. While the participants were not the researcher's students, casual encounters along the corridors and exchanges of pleasantries in between lessons created a familiar presence. Thus, rapport was easily established and paved the way for in-depth data.

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, the participants were provided with white paper, coloured pencils, crayons, and a pencil. Providing them with these choices imbues in them an element of control, empowering them from the start (Driessnack 2006). To assess protective factors, they were asked to draw any aspects of their life in relation to home, school, and the

community that they believed kept them safe or helped them adjust to life in Malaysia. People or objects that hindered their adjustment or made them feel unsafe were considered risk factors. Rather than interpreting or attempting to gauge symbolic representations, illustrations are an invaluable facilitating factor in interviewing children (Guillemin and Drew 2010). Due to the catalytic effect of drawings, participants could express feelings that were either hidden or difficult to describe.

Additionally, the triangulation of data through the drawings, the written notes participants provided as descriptors for some of their illustrations and the raw data from interviews add to the study's trustworthiness, enhancing its validity (Archibald 2016). Each draw-and-talk session was done individually in an empty classroom at the refugee centre. Audio recordings of the children's explanations of their drawings were documented and then transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis with a deductive-dominant approach that involved inductive development of codes to a lesser degree was utilised in analysing the raw data with the assumption of certain categories prior to data collection (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). In this case, home, school, and neighbourhood adopted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory formed the core categories. A repeated reading of the transcribed data, and exploring words, phrases, and statements to develop a degree of familiarity with it was vital in avoiding misrepresenting quotes. Through back-and-forth evaluation of the transcripts and possible categorising of codes, subcategories and codes were determined (Krippendorf 2013; Armat et al. 2018). The fact that the core categories are defined at the beginning does not mean that unexpected coding units do not arise during the coding of raw data as the participants are free to verbalise any instances related to their life. In this sense, coding also becomes inductive as the developing codes may not fit into the categorisation matrix or expected set of predefined themes (Armat et al. 2018). Resultantly, new concepts may arise, adding to or expanding on the main categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants are of varying ages and origins. Steps were taken to ensure anonymity with the use of pseudonyms and the omission of any identifying information. Safa (12 years old), and Saera (7 years old), are cousins who migrated from Somalia about three years ago. Jamal and Salma (10 and 11 years old), respectively, are siblings from Myanmar. Amad is 9 years old, from Pakistan, who arrived in the country when he was about 5 years old, while Asha (11 years old), left Myanmar with her parents and siblings when she was 9 years old.

Jamal was slightly more reserved at the start but once the drawing activity commenced, he dropped his inhibitions and gradually turned more animated. Asha was quite excited to start the draw-and-tell sessions, impatiently poking her head through the door while waiting her turn. Saera exuded a calm demeanour and took her time colouring the images she had drawn. Similar to Saera, Amad carried himself in a poised manner. Meanwhile, Safa was quite expressive from the start and was eager to share her drawings in vivid detail.

Content analysis resulted in eight main themes from the interview data: (1) affectionate and present parents versus lack of warmth; (2) supportive family; (3) friends and peers; (4) bullying; (5) sympathetic teachers versus discriminatory attitudes; (6) food security versus food shortage; (7) caring neighbours; and (8) lack of safety and security.

Affectionate and Present Parents versus Lack of Warmth

One factor that reportedly assisted the participants in adjusting to life in a foreign country was having caring parents. Children spend most of their time at home, where they feel safe and loved by family members. Amad illustrated the importance of ties among family members by describing his mother as someone who “loves” and “takes care” of him. Asha mirrored similar feelings of warmth and love in her relationship with her father.

For refugees, relocation could entail the existence of close family members who travelled with them. This meant affection and care were also manifested in shared activities or time spent with extended family members. Jamal, for instance, was happy to have his uncle at home to “play” and “read” with him, especially when his mother was at work. In the absence of his father and his mother’s occupancy with work, Jamal’s uncle acted as a parental figure by spending quality time with him.

Similarly, time spent with a parental figure was evidenced in Amad’s description of his illustration of himself and his mother (as shown in Figure 1). “We go to the park and we play at the park. We have lots of fun. And then, she buys me an ice cream”.



Figure 1: Amad’s drawing on time spent with his mother.

Family time is usually an issue concerning children with working parents and leads to maladjustment (Heinrich 2014). For Amad, having a single working mom engaged in menial labour was further compounded by the absence of siblings. However, the amount of time spent together, to the point of accompanying her to work seems to have given him that feeling of love and security. Meanwhile, Asha had this to say: “My father and me, after finish all work, sit and watch TV” (as shown in Figure 2). Television was an activity Asha treasured with her father and would engage in it often after he came home from work. These narrations are consistent with Iraklis’s (2020) study of middle-aged refugee children of diverse backgrounds residing in Macedonia. When asked about things that kept them safe, caring parents who were within proximity and engaged with them in play were listed as a resilience factor.

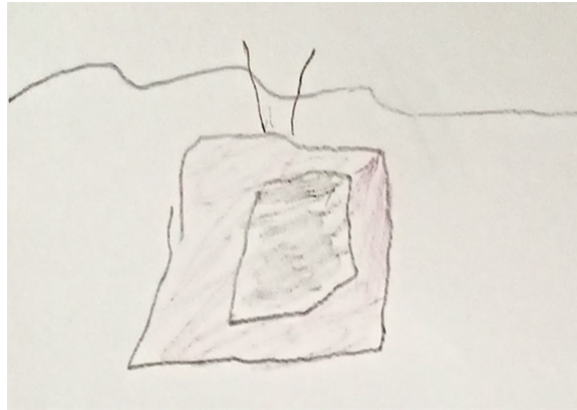


Figure 2: Asha's drawing on time spent with her father.

Nonetheless, Asha revealed a perceived lack of parental warmth concerning her mother who “don't love me” and “only loves my brother and my sister”. Her younger sister and older brother reportedly had different interests and did not usually engage in play with her. Despite the initial sorrowful tone, Asha spoke passionately of her time with her father which seems to have somewhat compensated for the warmth she sought from her mother.

Supportive Family

Apart from the role of caring parents, supportive caregivers were also expressed as a protective factor that contributed to resilience. When asked if her father was also someone she shared problems with, Asha expressed her father's advice in most situations. “My father says no fighting. Love all our brothers”. Conversing with her father provided solace when dealing with both issues at home and those she faced at school which she raised later on during the interview.

Safa found comfort in phone calls with her grandfather who she maintained contact “a lot” with and deemed her “best friend”. Despite having to migrate to another country due to refugee protocols and thus not being physically present, the bond shared with her grandfather remained strong with frequent communication. These conversations covered “everything” including school occurrences (as shown in Figure 3). “When school is hard or something, I come back to the house and he makes study fun so that's why it makes me continue learning”.



Figure 3: Safa's drawing on a supportive relationship with her grandfather.

Despite previous studies depicting a breakdown in family communication due to various prior and post-migrating factors (e.g., Browne et al. 2021), the findings of the study are in line with that of Eltanamly et al. (2022) which concludes otherwise. In his research, parents and caregivers reported greater involvement in the face of stressors, particularly when attempting to solve their children’s problems. Moreover, as was the case with the refugee children in Dehnel et al.’s (2022) research, the present study’s findings also highlight the interplay of resilience factors. In particular, the support from parents and caregivers acted as a significant buffer against adverse circumstances encountered at school and among peers that could compromise resilience.

Friends and Peers

For refugees, arriving in a foreign country can be extremely intimidating and alienating. Friendship and socialisation form a huge part of a child’s life; thus, the isolation is keenly felt. Schools provide a great opportunity to develop friendships. One key conclusion from this study concerning friendship formation was that most participants identified play and fun as crucial to supporting their friendships and socialisation opportunities. Among other participants, Asha singled out lunch break as a time to socialise with her friend while eating. She also saw this as a time to “read novels” and “draw”, engaging in activities that she found entertaining (as shown in Figure 4).

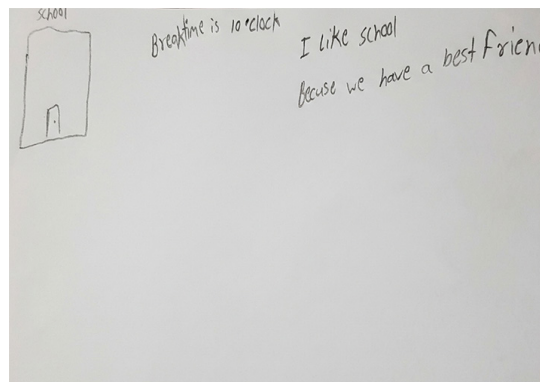


Figure 4: Asha’s drawing on socialisation during lunch break.

Some participants welcomed the interjection of levity and humour into the classroom. Amad in particular drew two boys in his English lesson to demonstrate the camaraderie he shared with his peers. “They make joke...a funny joke and I laugh. Then they often play with me”. In like manner, Jamal expressed the joy he received from partaking in a shared interest of playing cards with his peers: “They give me cards and we play”.

Peer relationships also proved useful in times of academic difficulty, with Amad adding that the friends he formed “help me understand the question on the board”. Saera also sought aid from peers who would “explain” any instructions she did not understand. This lessened the possibility of any academic stress, especially in situations when a teacher’s assistance was not sought out or made easily accessible. Similarities were recorded in the study conducted by Bešić et al. (2020) whereby peers and friends were deemed “important support networks within schools” by the majority of the participants. They warded off loneliness by playing, chatting, and spending free periods with the refugee children. At the same time, coming from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds meant a lack of ability to speak the local language, further hampering their education. Consistent with the results of the present study, these friends alleviated some of the burden by translating instructions during lessons.

Bullying

Unfortunately, the shared commonality of being refugees did not preclude instances of bullying. Saera described a boy in her classroom as “always mean” but did elaborate on the verbal abuse. Asha, moreover, was understandably upset narrating a classmate who ignored and alienated her. This would turn physical as the classmate would also “hit” her. While recognising this oppressive behaviour as “Bat” (bad), Asha also expressed her emotions of sadness, and not being “happy” with the bullying (as shown in Figure 5).

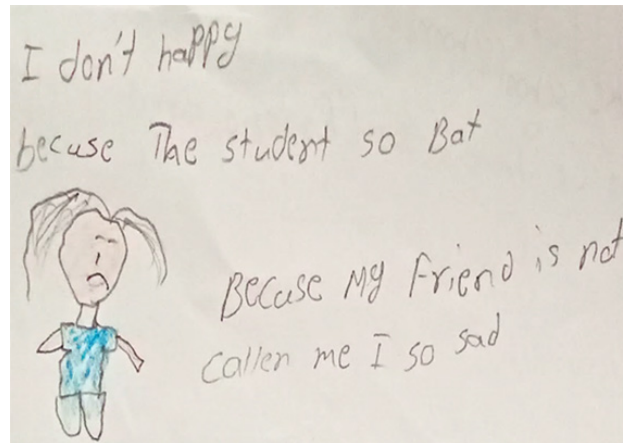


Figure 5: Asha’s drawing on bullying.

Bullying was also spoken about by Safa who clarified that it was not her peers who engaged in this behaviour. “Only the older ones. Like they’re in grade nine”. Unlike Asha who was not fortunate to have anyone stand up for her, Safa had loyal friends who would come to her aid during instances of bullying. “Maalika, so many times I lost count...Hiba...I remember once I was getting bullied and she just stood up and she was like: ‘Don’t you dare!’”.

Bullying and discrimination act as barriers to resilience, with past studies pointing to peers weakening defences and destroying self-esteem (e.g., Correa-Velez et al. 2010; Hastings 2012). Samara et al.’s (2020) insightful study into refugee children of varying ages revealed that the younger age group encountered problems with peers at a greater degree compared to adolescents in the sample, with 31% falling victim to bullying. Similar to the findings of the current study, this was manifested in the form of both physical and verbal abuse.

Asha’s reluctance to voice her distress at such an unpleasant experience to her teachers or school authorities would often weaken one’s self-esteem and resilience especially if harboured over time (Guo et al. 2019). During this period, the close bond she shares with her father and her habit of sharing problems with him becomes vital in granting her the solace she requires and eventually counteracting the detrimental effects of bullying.

Sympathetic Teachers versus Discriminatory Attitudes

Most participants emphasised positive relationships with their teachers who were instrumental in their learning endeavours, using terminology associated with care such as “kind” and “helpful”. Saera was full of praise for her teachers: “The teachers are so helpful and they help me learn about a lot of stuff...this makes me feel so comfortable”. Echoing similar sentiments, Amad stated, “The teachers help us study more and more and learn about life”.

Tolerance and patience were also traits that were alluded to. For instance, Safa described the appreciation she had for her teacher who portrayed gentleness when a student perceivably misbehaved instead of being harsh or employing punitive measures. “She doesn’t shout or yell or beat you. If you do something wrong, she makes you understand that it’s not good”.

Several studies with refugee children have delineated supportive teachers who provided guidance when required, ultimately aiding with lesson adjustment. In one such study, Mohamed and Thomas (2017) documented the encouragement and support refugee children received from teachers at mainstream schools in the UK. The overall favourable attitudes portrayed were key in fostering their sense of resilience.

On the other hand, a teacher’s profound impact on students can also negatively affect learning and lead to undesirable outcomes. The favouritism and lack of kindness reported by Safa resulted in just that as she professed to lose motivation for something she once aspired to be. “In grade 4, my dream was to be a scientist. But then, my favourite teacher was changed to another teacher so he’s really mean towards all the people except this one girl, because he knows her father. From that day on, I hate science and I don’t understand it. On this subject, every time I fail”.

Even though it has not been widely documented, similar discriminatory attitudes were reported in Guo et al.’s (2019) focused group discussions with Syrian refugee children. This largely came in the form of bias towards refugee children and dismissiveness of their struggles with peers. Meanwhile, a mixed response was elicited in Rana et al.’s (2011) study in terms of teacher attitude. While some gave accounts of a constructive relationship with their teachers who would go beyond delineated academic duties to stay back and aid with homework after school, others were frustrated at the lack of understanding and low academic expectations.

Thus, even while teachers in these classrooms with refugee children generally exhibited positive attitudes, a lack of readiness to work with pupils from different backgrounds can occasionally impede the process and pose an obstacle to school integration. The participants in this study come from community-run refugee schools rather than mainstream institutions, which is the subject of previous research. This creates a unique scenario and lessens the added difficulty of teachers expecting students to integrate into a fixed school culture with local students in mind. This may be the reason that, in contrast to previous studies, there were negligible issues with lesson integration, language obstacles, or racial prejudice.

Food Security versus Food Shortage

Despite studies generally focusing on nutrition as either a protective or risk factor in younger groups of children, the subject of food was brought up by all the participants in one form or another. When asked how their parents or caregivers help improve or ease their lives, some uttered statements such as “she helps me with food” and “I eat food. He gives me the food”. In particular, Jamal spoke positively of his uncle’s presence at home, emphasising his uncle helping out by giving him money for the food he buys for the household: “I bring the food and we eat”.

On the contrary, a few participants also raised the issue of food shortage. Salma confessed to not having sufficient food when money was tight, and at the same time having to share food with other refugees in the neighbourhood: “When it is not enough food, we can’t do anything. We have to share our food and we have less energy because not enough money”. The effect also weighs heavily on the parents as Salma further explained that her mother “feels so sad” with the inability to feed the family on a constant basis (as shown in Figure 6).

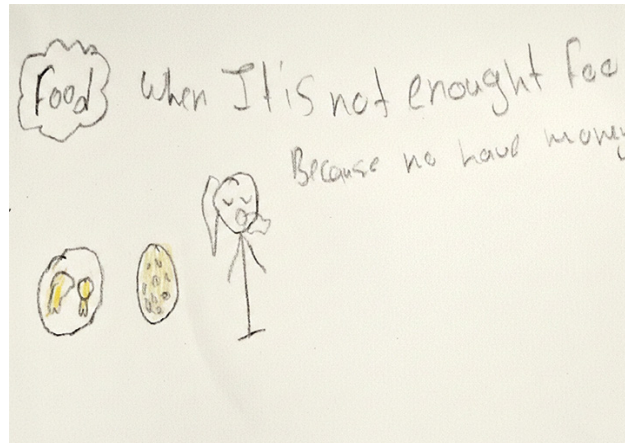


Figure 6: Salma's drawing on lack of food.

In countries where refugees are recognised as part of the system with active integration efforts, there is often more abundant support from the government and greater allocations from NGOs (Donato and Ferris 2020; Shaffer et al. 2020). The reason why refugees within the local context typically have to fend for themselves is likely due to a lack of resources and support for essential necessities. Additionally, lack of jobs and newfound poverty after resettlement usually play a role in the scarcity of this basic need (Rizkalla et al. 2020). Not only does the lack of nourishment affect their health, but it also impairs their ability to function academically (Kaar 2022). Considering that refugee children already lag in their education, this could further negatively impact academic progress.

Moreover, with formal employment being illegal for refugees in Malaysia, parents usually face difficulties attaining permanent jobs with fixed wages to make ends meet (Ghazali et al. 2020). Coupled with the lack of welfare provisions, this puts them at a greater risk of malnourishment. In line with the bi-directional nature of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the challenges and pressure parents face affect the child who embodies these stressors. This is reflected in Salma's troubled tone when reporting her mother's feelings of desolation at her ability to gather enough money to provide for her children.

Caring Neighbours

On the whole, participants were not vocal about their neighbours, with some reporting a lack of relationship. In the past, instances of negative experiences such as unfair treatment and marginalisation by members of society that stem from their illegal status have been reported by school-going refugee children who travel to and from community-based schools within the local context (Hoffstaedter 2012; Low et al. 2014). This has led to a sense of isolation and fear among some members of the refugee community in Malaysia who are reluctant to socialise with local citizens (Low et al. 2014). In light of this, some of the study's participants may have adopted an air of caution when associating with community members.

Neighbours were, however, painted in a positive light by Asha and Amad. Interestingly, Amad described an intriguing support system involving neighbours. He described feeling "good" about the food-sharing system recently started by individuals, both locals and foreigners, in an adjacent building every Tuesday afternoon (as shown in Figure 7). "These are the people in the building. We are sharing the food. Like we use the rope and throw it at another building and the people will give the food".



Figure 7: Amad's drawing on food-sharing system.

Stronger, more personal bonds were created between Asha and her neighbours. Not only did she feel her neighbour was “very kind” as she would “cook” meals for her but she also bonded with her daughter, Suraya. Asha specified her lack of friends in the neighbourhood and spoke of the value of this friendship. The only friend she had outside of school, and with the added difficulty of making friends, Suraya helped ward off a sense of loneliness: “I don’t have friends. “She comes ...she comes to me and together read”.

Communities that are close-knit and cultivate a spirit of unity and mutual support either bring these customs with them or practice a culture of togetherness upon relocation. For example, the Somali refugees in the United States (US) were highly dependent on one another and groups that had arrived earlier concerning school application, interacting with neighbours, and handling discrimination and identity crises experienced when trying to fit in (Betancourt et al. 2015). The present study’s participants benefited from similar support from fellow countrymen and locals within their community regarding food and companionship. Though friendship formation per se was not scrutinised in Betancourt et al.’s (2015) study, identity formation was a more pressing factor. The age gap could account for this difference with the sample comprising adolescents in contrast to the current study’s younger age group that has not reached the developmental stage of identity formation.

Lack of Safety and Security

Regardless of the experiences refugee children were subjected to before or during migration, they all share the commonality of having lost a home and neighbourhood. As refugee children resettle in a new neighbourhood, ensuring their safety and security in a foreign milieu becomes crucial for fostering resilience (Kaluarachchi 2018). At this point, safe spaces to navigate and play outside of their homes are pivotal for resiliency and positive adaptation to new surroundings particularly in middle-aged refugee children (MacMillan et al. 2015).

However, the participants hinted at a lack of safety that came with the unfamiliar surroundings. Salma narrated an anxious moment of being separated from her mother when out in her neighbourhood and feeling lost as if she were in a “dangerous place” surrounded by “bad people” (as shown in Figure 8). “I was crying and I was so scared. It’s difficult to find way. I shouted ‘Please help! Help! I cannot find my way’ and someone come ‘Where did you stay?’ they ask. They show how to go. I was happy when I find the way home, so happy. And I say to them ‘thank you’ for help me find the way”.

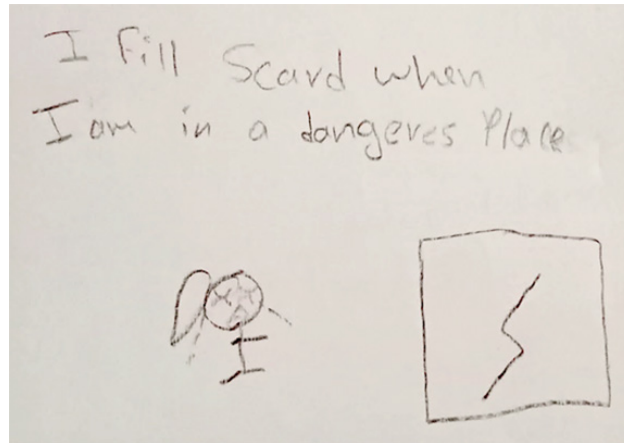


Figure 8: Salma's drawing on feeling lost and unsafe.

Jamal spoke of his neighbourhood being dangerous due to the utility poles on roadsides (as shown in Figure 9). In the poor residential areas where refugees live, inadequate infrastructure is common. He describes his fear: "I scared. I don't go there. I go another side".

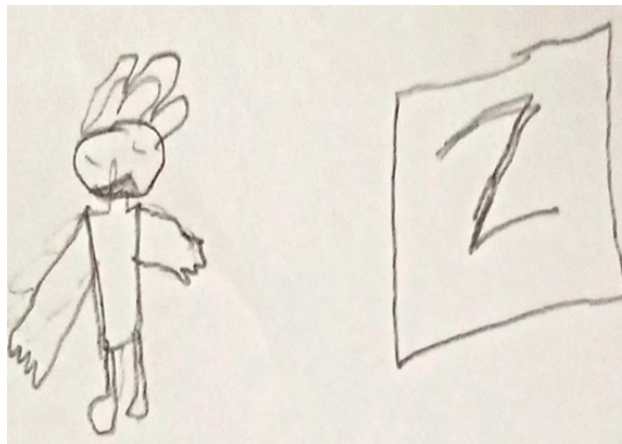


Figure 9: Jamal's drawing on hazardous utility poles.

Despite the changes in living arrangements from city outskirts and jungles to urban residential areas, their lack of legal recognition as refugees signifies an inability to dwell in safe surroundings with suitable living conditions. As a result, refugee families in Malaysia face significant challenges in securing adequate housing, often residing in precarious and hazardous living conditions (Nungsari et al. 2020). In the present case, safety was compromised by the presence of electric wires. Jamal is aware of the potential hazard of electrocution and takes the necessary precautions yet it still limits his movements around his neighbourhood due to a sense of insecurity.

Children who are displaced also face an unclear future, which may involve being resettled in areas where they are subjected to deportation or incarceration. In addition to the fear of electrocution, Jamal voiced his wish to return to his homeland of Myanmar, fearing the overhanging threat of law enforcement: "I don't like Malaysia...In Malaysia, police come". Due to either awaiting a refugee permit or being rejected, many families in Malaysia are of illegal status, meaning the risk of arbitrary detention and incarceration is high (Nungsari et al. 2020).

The participants' emphasis on the lack of a sense of safety in their speech may be indicative of their plea for an environment that is both mentally and physically secure. In a period when everything else in their life appeared out of control, a setting that might provide them with a sense of control over their lives would have given them comfort and alleviated some of their stressors.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There is no doubt that refugee children in Malaysia experience both protective and adverse factors brought about by their interactions with their surroundings. It is hoped that by drawing attention to the positive adaptations and challenges the participants faced, relevant parties can have a more systematic understanding of these events and be able to act accordingly. Specifically, the UNHCR, in conjunction with other humanitarian aid organisations can provide a more targeted, evidence-based intervention that takes into account protective and adverse factors when addressing the mental health or psychological well-being of refugee children in Malaysia. Though the UNHCR has in recent years unveiled measures to promote and implement psychological wellbeing and resilience among refugees under its Mental Health and Psychological Support initiative, this is still a slow and gradual process due to both a lack of awareness and insufficient mental health practitioners (Tay and Balasundaram 2021; Mohd and Alhadjri 2022). Thus, creating awareness of mental health for refugee children through schools, which are environments they generally feel safe in and are receptive to such initiatives is key. Additionally, the allocation of a larger number of mental health professionals who can dedicate some of their time to assessing their needs is also something that could be implemented with funding from the government.

Apart from that, the study also presents policy implications. With little or no access to mainstream education, integration opportunities, and welfare, the research findings may also aid in solidifying the case of the UNHCR and NGO entities in their persistent endeavours of persuading policymakers to play a bigger role in inducing a more welcoming environment and better adjustment for these refugees. This can range from welfare provisions to inclusive educational practices, and safe spaces within immediate communities such as play areas to foster integration.

Additionally, due to the relatively small number of participants in this study and their idiosyncrasies, there are limitations to results being generalised to broader asylum-seeking and refugee groups. Nevertheless, the fact that commonalities were identified across contexts and with individuals from different cultures and circumstances, as well as the fact that the findings correspond with past research indicates that these findings are of value. The study would, however, benefit from a larger sample in a mixed approach to the study that incorporates quantitative methods of collecting data that would provide external validity and further generalisability of the study. Hence, additional research is required on the topic of resilience among refugee children in Malaysia to further investigate this phenomenon and engender more concrete findings.

Further research is also needed to explore nutrition's impact on the resilience of middle-aged refugee children. While research on the significance of food and nutrition as a resilience factor in refugee children generally centres on a much younger age group due to the developmental needs of a growing child, further exploration into the role of nutrition can have extensive implications on academics, food insecurity, and even undernourishment.

It is also important to note that the protective and risk factors found in previous studies (e.g., Carlson et al. 2012; Smyth, Shannon and Dolan 2015; Sleijpen et al. 2017; Keles et al. 2018) were found in samples of adolescents and older groups of refugees. As a result, crucial components of resilience that these younger populations (Betancourt et al. 2015; Mohamed and Thomas 2017; Bešić et al. 2020) portray are overlooked. While most factors such as supportive peers and teachers, welcoming neighbours, and bullying overlap with past studies, there were novel findings in the current study with regard to nutrition and what exactly constitutes a safe environment. Therefore, studies that examine risk and protective factors that influence a middle-aged child's resilience are very much needed as components vary not only between contexts and environmental settings but also with age and maturity (Southwick et al. 2014). Moreover, developmental tasks change in type and magnitude as a person moves from middle childhood to adolescence and can affect risk and protective factors (Kumpfer 1999; Uhlenborff 2004).

CONCLUSION

The present study's findings offer novel insights into the perceptions of middle-aged refugee children concerning resilience factors. This has been achieved by delving into protective and risk factors influenced by their interactions with their immediate environment and surroundings. While both positive and negative experiences were recorded, positive adjustment was indicated by the participants overall, fostered by parental relationships and school connectedness.

Despite not having access to a more comprehensive and wholesome education at mainstream schools, community schools stepped up to provide them with the support they need. Teachers who were encouraging understood their circumstances and exercised patience in dealing with them. Additionally, the community schools created an important space to build friendships that most children suggested could not be found outside school. Making friends in a classroom or school under the supervision of a reliable adult is easier, safer, and less stressful than making friends with strangers in unfamiliar or unsafe surroundings. Ideally, parks would serve as a vital space for refugee children to socialise and bridge the gap with community members (Wachter et al., 2021). However, the community school appears to have compensated for the lack of interactions at parks or involvement with parks in the first place.

Furthermore, the support and involvement of parents and immediate family members played a key role in overcoming obstacles. As the refugee children navigate the challenges of displacement, disruption, and adaptation to either a new environment or one where they are marginalised, the presence and support of their parents and immediate family members serve as a vital anchor providing stability, nurturing, and guidance needed to build resilience and help them navigate their way in a foreign environment.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

The study was subjected to a rigorous process before being endorsed by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (RECUKM). In compliance with ethical considerations, informed consent forms were first sent to parents through the learning centres

with the students, who were also made aware of the details of the forms. These forms contained an information sheet outlining the nature of the research including the risks, benefits, and intent of publication. Parents were made cognisant of the fact that their child would be allowed to discontinue participation at any point without any repercussions. Furthermore, verbal consent was still sought from the children themselves before participating in the study and they were once again briefed about their involvement in the study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

NOTES

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