

What's Noteworthy and What Needs to be Taken Note of: An Exploratory Examination of a Learning Center for Refugee Children

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Abstract

This paper examines the initiatives of a faith-based, non-governmental learning center set up to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to a group of Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia. Using the four criteria mentioned in the SAFE Approach; Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit, the purpose of the study is to highlight the noteworthy practices of the center as well as to identify what are some essential weaknesses that need to be taken note of in order for sustained teaching and learning to happen. Based on the exploratory nature of the research purpose, face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews and observations were used to collect the study data. Findings showed that while good intentions to serve the community seem to drive the initiatives, there is a dire need to see a shift in focus to training and development of human resources, particularly towards the teachers and volunteers who scaffold the children as they begin the challenging process of navigating a new educational environment. Finally, this paper concludes with some recommendations for a more sustainable program; particularly in the area of teacher/volunteer development.

Keywords: Noteworthy Practices, SAFE, Refugee Community

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Background of the study

The latest available data on refugees in the world, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020), showed the highest levels of displacement on record; 79.5 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes since 2019 and among them, 26 million are refugees. There are also millions of stateless people, who have been denied a nationality and lack access to basic rights such as education, health care, employment and freedom of movement. At least 1 per cent of the world's population have caused millions to flee their homes as a result of conflict or persecution and countries that account for two-thirds of today's refugees (68%) come from Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Myanmar.

In Malaysia, by end August 2020, there were 178,140 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia and from the registered numbers, some 153,430 were from Myanmar- 101,530 Rohingyas; remaining were ethnic groups from conflict-affected areas or fleeing persecution in Myanmar such as Karens and Chins. Rohingya refugees in Malaysia do not live in camps. They reside with the local community, often in overcrowded housing situations. Although the Rohingyas have been living in Malaysia since the 1990s, they are still without proper access to basic healthcare and education. Rohingyas in Malaysia are not allowed to work legally and do not have access to free healthcare and education in this country. To make a living, Rohingya men collect scrap metal for resale, work in the wholesale markets and try to find work doing odd jobs which are sometimes available in the construction site; the women stay at home to take care of the families. While some adult Rohingya refugees can read and write in Jawi from the religious classes attended on regular basis, many have not receive any form of formal education, thus are unable to read and write; however, most can speak the Malay language after years of living amongst Malaysians.

In the absence of access to public education, Rohingya refugees attend UNHCR-funded learning centers or community-based schools. More than 46,000 are below the age of 18 and of the school going age group, only 30 per cent are reported to be enrolled in schools (NST, 2019). Among the community, there are parents who consider education as essential in ensuring stability and a sense of normalcy for the children; the purpose of education is for their children to succeed and have a better life. They understand that acquiring literacy will ensure their children a better future, whether they are resettled or repatriated to a third country. However, there are also many parents who have more traditional mindsets i.e. girls will be married off by the time they reach puberty whilst boys are expected to help their fathers earn a living, usually as scrap metal or cardboard collectors.

Learning Centres

Many refugee children study in learning centres run by the community and faith-based organisations. After school hours, the children will attend religious classes which are usually taught by a Rohingya imam who heads the community's mosque or surau. While there is a small number of licenced learning centres which have been running for more than a decade, most centers are run on the goodwill of organisations, aided by volunteers who are usually not trained to teach; these centres are also not like schools in that they do not have the facilities, educational personnel and education policy of an established formal institution of learning. As such, the challenges faced in these centres

are numerous, for example staff movement and retention, lack of standardized teaching and learning, professional development and formal training in educational content and pedagogy. Parental involvement is also at times limited and dependent on the particular community; in a more traditional Rohingya community, girls' education can be severely restricted due to parents' unwillingness to send adolescent girls to mixed gender educational facilities. Some parents may also consider education to be of secondary importance compared to finding work to support the family, which means children can be taken out of these centres at any time.

Purpose of the study

This study documents practices which are noteworthy as well as to identify what are some essential weaknesses that need to be taken note of in order for sustained teaching and learning in a center set up to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills to a group of Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia. While the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards Framework (2010) is usually referred to for evaluating programs/organisations in disaster induced situations as it provides the minimum standards that a learning centre should have to provide quality education, this study will refer to the SAFE Approach; Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit instead. The SAFE Approach proposes that social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors can be taught using a variety of approaches, and this is vital when dealing with programs that involve children who come from varied backgrounds and experiences which include war, violence, abandonment and even death. While the INEE focuses on minimum criteria for quality education, the SAFE Approach focuses on social and emotional learning (SEL) which is the process through which knowledge is acquired and applied to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals in order to co-exist effectively with those around. Practices in the learning center were noted by referring to the four elements represented by the acronym SAFE-

Sequenced: Connected and coordinated activities to foster skills development

Active: Active forms of learning to help students master new skills and attitudes

Focused: A component that emphasizes developing personal and social skills

Explicit: Targeting specific social and emotional skills

The duration of observation/study was carried over one semester, a total of 12 weeks. The researcher visited the center on a weekly basis, and was involved in both consultative and teaching roles. Data gathered included indepth interviews with the Centre's management, volunteer teachers and children. Observations of teaching and learning sessions and document paraphernalia completed the triangulation of data for validity and reliability purposes.

Background of the Centre

Set up in the communal hall in the local mosque and operational for more than a year, the Centre is run by a religious non-governmental organization. The Head and Assistant Head are professionally qualified in fields other than Education, while the five full time

volunteers have attended 12 years of formal schooling in their respective countries of Indonesia, Myanmar and China. The occasional volunteers may come in on a once-a-week basis or could just do a one-time 'dropping by visit'.

During the morning class sessions, the communal hall of the mosque is partitioned by three curtains to form three classrooms corresponding to the three different learning levels. Tables are mobile makeshift planks which will be put away once school is over for the day. In the class for older children, girls and boys sit separately, as required by the parents, and the seating position is not conducive as the girls sit diagonally, against a wall, facing the boys, instead of the teacher in front. This causes a lot of distraction and very often, fights erupt. The cramped space also provides little opportunity for physical activities for the early childhood classes. There is no play area for these children and because of this, there is no physical education. During recess, the children's primary activity is to eat their meals the entire period, as there is no place for them to run about. On Fridays, a volunteer professional sports coach would train the boys in soccer and the girls in Frisbee at a neighbourhood playground which is a distance from the settlement. Teachers organise end-term excursions to the downtown area in the capital city and hikes to the nearby waterfall for the older children, and sometimes, these excursions are treats as a result of good behaviour or academic accomplishments.

There are 3 levels of schooling; Early Childhood Education which does not prescribe to any particular curriculum, while the Early and Upper Primary/Lower Secondary levels follow an American home-school curriculum which seeks to integrate character-building lessons into the academic context, with self-instructional activities designed to develop thinking skills and to create mastery learning. Materials are adapted to suit the culture and needs of the children (and community) and the students are taught using worktexts. Meanwhile the children attending the Early Childhood Level watch educational videos and do arts and crafts most of the time.

Evaluation of the Centre using the SAFE Approach

Sequenced: Connected and coordinated activities to foster skills development – Social and Emotional Outcomes

The teaching and learning is predominantly through a teacher-centred approach, even at the Early Childhood level. Most times, questions posed by the teachers were primarily factual or definitional in nature, offering very few opportunities for students to ask questions or engage in creative thought, while the children hardly probed concepts or received further explanation. The teachers award recognition for the children's learning efforts at the end of the school year - a progress report of their academic achievement and cooperative behaviour. The fathers of the children often express their aspirations to see tangible results of what their children learn at the centre and their primary wish is for their children to be awarded recognised certification from the internationally recognised SATs (or Standard Assessment Tests).

Active: Active forms of learning to help students master new skills and attitudes

Volunteers from a private university work together with the Centre by helping the children learn life skills. Using a Project Based Learning approach, projects such as

growing vegetables on a plot of land nearby the settlement and setting up a rabbit hatchery proved successful in allowing the children develop important life skills as they had to learn to work with one another. At the start of the planting project, the children were very competitive, almost to the point of destructive- they would stomp on and destroy the plants of someone else which were growing well. However, they slowly began to learn to work together as individual groups, and as a whole class once they realized each group had their own ‘secrets’ to growing the plants, and in order for everyone to succeed, they would need to share information as well as be humble to ask for help. See picture below of both boys and girls working together to grow their vegetables.



Figure 1: Children at their vegetable plots

Focused: A component that emphasizes developing personal and social skills

The children were given the opportunity to write their own class rules which included “do not fight with one another”, “don’t tell lies”, “listen to teacher.” Deciding on their own rules allowed them the opportunity to reflect on their own behaviour and what was (in)appropriate. The activity also provided the opportunity for ownership and management of their own (mis)behaviour.

In the Rohingya community, men and women have very specific roles, women are relegated to cooking and cleaning. However, volunteers created opportunities to create awareness on the importance of shared responsibilities through the Gardening Project; as the children’s garden bore fruit, they were able to harvest the vegetable for a meal. This activity provided the opportunity to work together, more importantly, both boys and girls were involved in the process of food preparation, cooking and cleaning up afterwards as seen in the picture below.



Figure 2: Cooking a meal together

Explicit: Targeting specific social and emotional skills

Occasionally, volunteers would take a class for various purposes for example, to give the teacher a break or to 'model' a particular teaching approach. These sessions were not part of the usual teaching and learning routine. On these occasions, all levels were combined and various activities incorporated so that no child got left out, regardless of age and/or capabilities. As these were 'stand alone' teaching classes, volunteers were able to showcase a variety of teaching and learning techniques and approaches, for example, tell stories, use play to teach or conduct art and craft sessions which were tied to a particular skill or theme. During a story telling session, the children were read a story, 'Soraya's Blanket' which is about a young girl who left her home country (and her grandmother) behind. The story resonated with many of the Rohingya children who left behind family members back in Myanmar. The question and answer session proved cathartic to them as they were given opportunities to recall who was left behind, and how they felt. Afterward, the children made cards to express their feelings toward particular family members or friends. Many cards contained expressions of gratitude, longing, remorse and according to the class teachers, this was a rare occasion that the children managed to express themselves. These sessions were particularly targeted for specific purposes, for example, stories with certain themes were chosen to teach a moral lesson or to allow children to speak their minds, music and craft was used for expression and creativity while games inculcated sportsmanship.

Recommendations and Conclusion

An area to note is the emphasis on empowering the children to be able to be a participant and contributor in whichever country of their eventual settlement. This is not only achievable through excellent grades but also to be exposed to the multifaceted aspects of people from other countries. Lessons should incorporate aspects of social studies, history, geography and literature besides the 3 main subjects of Math, Science and English.

Character-building which are universal and traits such as integrity, resilience, respect, cooperation, and the 21st Century skills have to be emphasised throughout the school years. Life skills that enable them to improve their financial prospects and well-being and vocational and technical skills should be incorporated into learning at the centre as it is expected of the children, upon reaching the age of fifteen or sixteen, to find work and contribute financially to the family.

An important group of people- the regular volunteers have to go through some form of carefully planned action plan for training. Through interviews with them it was found that there were some pertinent issues that needed addressing particularly in the areas of pedagogy and methodology. Additionally, there seemed to be little room for professional development as some of the volunteer teachers were without official documentation that allows for enrolment in local educational institutions. Therefore, it is not enough to have ad-hoc sessions to plug temporary gaps but rather, there should be a clear understanding of what is required to train the volunteers in. As the centre has been running for a while now, set ways and ideas may be difficult to change. From observations and as mentioned a 'start from scratch' approach should be considered, and a tailored teacher training package for non-experienced volunteers, and one that is contextually specific to Rohingya children, has to be put in place.

To conclude, while there are many challenges in providing quality education to the Rohingya refugee children at the learning centre, the paper has shown that there have also been a lot of innovative practices which catered to their social emotional development, an area that is often neglected due to preference over academics and tangible accolades. It is therefore necessary to note that it will not just be paper qualifications that will help pave the path for a better future for these children, the social and emotional aspects also need to be taken note of, and learning centres can play an important role in ensuring these children grow up to be well rounded adults who are able to contribute positively in the country they choose to call home.

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