

Education for Urban Refugee Children in Malaysia: Pathway to Peace

Leong Shook Yee, International Christian University, Japan

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Abstract

This research focuses on the educational experiences of urban refugee children in Malaysia, examining the expectations of parents, NGO of educational projects for urban refugee children in Malaysia and investigating if the education space contribute to peace through intergroup contact. The conceptual framework for the study is based on intergroup contact theory which is based on the belief that interaction between individuals belonging to different groups will reduce ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension which could contribute to peace and conciliation. Although literature does provide for how education contributes to building peace, the lack of reporting by the media in Malaysia on refugee issues, the situation of refugees in Malaysia is not widely explored and this is especially true in relation to the education of refugee children in Malaysia. As such, this research intends to fill the research gap in literature by providing a more in depth studies on the educational experiences of urban refugee children, exploring the expectations of parents and key NGO of education projects and examining if indeed education for urban refugee children in Malaysia does fulfill these expectations and contribute to reduced ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension.

Keywords: Intergroup contact, education, friendship

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Introduction

According to UNHCR Malaysia, as of the end of April 2016, there are 154,140 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia out of which, 34,600 are refugee children below the age of 18.¹ The majority of the refugee population are from Myanmar, most of them ethnic Chin and Rohingya.² Despite being one of the main destination countries for new asylum seeker, it does not have any mechanism to process asylum seekers and refugees when they arrive in the territory. The absence of a legal or administrative framework in place to address the refugee situation in Malaysia causes the education provision and support for these urban refugee children to be limited. Despite the fact that the Government of Malaysia is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child³ which requires the Government to take action in ensuring education for all primary aged-children in Malaysia⁴, urban refugee children do not have access to free or formal national education programmes in Malaysia^{5 6} The only access the urban refugee children have in Malaysia is through education projects run by UNHCR in partnership with Non-Governmental Organizations or community-based education schools, organized by the refugee communities with support from non refugee groups such as faith based groups. Despite the National League for Democracy's landslide election victory in the recent general election 2015, with more than two thirds of the contested seat calls for an end to decades of military backed rule⁷ there is possibility that Myanmar ethnic minorities to be marginalized more if there is little or no representation of ethnic minority in the country's political institutions.⁸ Apart from the conflict between the Burmese and the ethnic minority group, there is also the religious conflict in Myanmar between the Muslims and Buddhist community which led to communal violence especially in the Rakhine state.⁹

Considering the educational space provided by the education projects in Malaysia maybe the a rare opportunity for children from different ethnic groups from Myanmar to assemble in the same space, it is essential to examine if the intergroup contact can promote reduction of ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension that is prevalent in their country of origin.

¹ UNHCR Malaysia, Figures at a Glance, available at http://www.unhcr.org/my/About_Us-@-Figures_At_A_Glance.aspx

² *ibid*

³ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.htm>.

⁴ *ibid*

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

⁵ Bar Council Malaysia, 'Developing a Comprehensive Framework for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Malaysia' (20 June 2011)

⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Vernor Muñoz Villalobos: addendum : mission to Malaysia*, 20 March 2009, A/HRC/11/8/Add.2, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/49f06efd2.html>

⁷ BBC (13 November 2015) Myanmar election: Suu Kyi's NLD wins landslide victory, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34805806>

⁸ Nilsen, Marte, and Stein Tønnesen. "Political parties and peacebuilding in Myanmar." *Peace Research Institute Oslo Policy Brief 5* (2013): 2013.

⁹ BBC (3 July 2014) Why is there communal violence in Myanmar, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>

Research Question

1. What are the key expectations of parents, NGOs of education projects, teachers and refugee children of the educational space for urban refugee children in Malaysia?
2. What are the educational experiences of urban refugee children in their country of asylum, Malaysia in relation to their interaction with their fellow students?
3. Does education for urban refugee children in Malaysia contribute to reduction of intergroup tension?

Prejudice & Intergroup Contact Theory

As the research question examines if the education for urban refugee children in Malaysia contribute to reduction of ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension, it is important to first define prejudice and intergroup contact theory. The definition of prejudice is a negative attitude towards a social group.¹⁰ According Samson, 'prejudice involves an unjustified, usually negative attitude towards others because of their social category or group membership'¹¹ In discussing theories of prejudice and its application to the case study of refugee school in Malaysia, two particular theories namely, the social identity theory and integrated threat theory appear relevant to the discussion as it is applicable to multiethnic schools especially in the case of the existence of a predominantly minority group student bodies.¹² Social identity theory is based on the aspect of self-identity that is based on group membership¹³, whereby the stronger the members of a group identify with the group the more the perception that the outgroup is homogenous and an increased in group favoritism.¹⁴ This process allows for the group to view the in group as distinctively positive.¹⁵ The second theory, integrated threat theory highlights an important cause of prejudice, which is feeling of threat and fear and there are 4 basic types of threat which could lead to prejudice, namely, realistic threat, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotype.¹⁶ There are also 7 factors which identified which could increase these threats namely, level of prior intergroup conflict, contact, status and lastly the knowledge of the outgroup¹⁷.

In discussing whether the contact that the refugee children of different ethnic group would reduce intergroup conflict, we will look into the intergroup contact theory. In relation to intergroup contact, Allport¹⁸ proposed that contact between members of different group leads to more positive intergroup attitudes. This is supported by

¹⁰ Newcomb, T., Turner, R., & Converse E(1965) *Social Psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

¹¹ Sampson, E. E. (1999). *Dealing with differences: An introduction to the social psychology of prejudice*. Harcourt College Pub as cited in Brown, R. (2011). *Prejudice: Its social psychology*. John Wiley & Sons pg.4

¹² Stephan, W. (1999). *Reducing prejudice and stereotyping in schools*. Teachers College Press.pg 39

¹³ Turner, John C., Hogg, Michael A., Oakes, Penelope J., Reicher, Stephen D., & Wetherell, Margaret S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

¹⁴ Stephan, W. (1999). *Reducing prejudice and stereotyping in schools*. Teachers College Press pg 29

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Stephan, Op cit, pg 30

¹⁷ Stephan, Op cit, pg 32

¹⁸ Allport, G. W. (1958). *The nature of prejudice: Abridged*. Doubleday.

Pettigrew and Troops¹⁹ comprehensive meta-analysis supports the verification of Allport's proposed theory. It is noted that Allport's intergroup contact hypothesis is a key development in the field of social psychological research on intergroup relations as he specified, among other things, the critical situational conditions for intergroup contact to reduce prejudice²⁰. Allport held that in order for positive effects of intergroup contact to occur, the four key condition are ; equal status; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law or custom. On the other hand Amir²¹ provided that some of the conditions which could strengthen prejudice would involve a) when contact situation produce competition between groups b) when the contact is unpleasant, involuntary, tension laden c) when the prestige or status of one group is lowered as a result of the contact situation d) when members of a group or the groups as a whole are in a state of frustration e) when the groups in contact have moral or ethnic standards which are objectionable to the other f) in the case of contact between a majority and minority group, when the members of the minority group are of lower status or are lower in any relevant characteristics than the members of the majority group.

Preliminary Findings

Key expectations on educational space for urban refugee children in Malaysia Interviews with the teachers

It is seen from the interviews with the teachers and principal that their perceptions of the key expectations of educational space for urban refugee children in Malaysia can be divided in 4 main expectations:

- a) Ensuring that the students have a safe place to go spend time whilst in Malaysia
- b) Providing the students with the basic knowledge necessary for resettlement
- c) Providing a place for spiritual, emotional and moral support.
- d) Preservation of the Burmese language

a) Safe place

The teachers indicates that from the teacher's perception that the learning center provides a space to keep the refugee children off the streets and provide a safe space for them to go to while they are in Malaysia. This is contrary to reports²²²³ which indicate that parental concern that their children would harassed, arrested and arrested by authorities due to their lack of identification had contributed to low participation of refugee children in receiving education, causing the refugee children to spend their

¹⁹ Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.

²⁰ Allport, G. (1962). W. 1954. The nature of prejudice. *Reading: Addison-Wesley.*

²¹ Amir, Y. (1969). Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. *Psychological bulletin*, 71(5), 339

²² UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *But when will our turn come? A review of the implementation of UNHCR's urban refugee policy in Malaysia*, May 2012, PDES/2012/02, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5142ed802.html>

²³ Aljazeera (20 June 2016) Rohingya children in Malaysia, an undocumented life, Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/06/rohingya-children-malaysia-undocumented-life-160620042659161.html>

childhood in their neighborhood not leaving their community. This might be explained by the fact that most of the students live in the nearby vicinity to the school and during an undocumented conversation with the principal, the researcher was informed that there is fear that the older children could be stopped by authorities but the younger children does not face any issue. Apart from that, during the researcher's period of research at the learning centre, a new development had taken place whereby there are opportunities for the students to further their education to university level which previously was not available. As such, the learning centre provides a space where they can strive for a further education instead of venturing into the work place where they are forced to take up low paying work and would vulnerable to exploitation from the employers.

b) Basic knowledge necessary for resettlement

In all the interviews with the teachers, reference were made to resettlement of the students to a third country. The teachers viewed their role as teachers to prepare the students for their further education and integration when they are resettled to a third country. As such subjects such as English and other basic academic subjects are deemed with utmost importance. This is consistent with reports indicating that the education provided through the education projects are mainly English, Math, Science and Malay language which is consistent with the aim of the community based schools to equip the refugee children with basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills²⁴.

c) Spiritual, emotional and moral support

Considering the traumatic experiences of refugee children having to leave their homeland and their tumultuous journey of escape to their country of asylum where they have to adapt to a new environment, this can contribute to complex psychological, emotional, resettlement process.²⁵ Having to adapt to their new environment in Malaysia can result in development of learning difficulties, behavioral problems and psychological distress.²⁶ Therefore, it would appear that the provision of spiritual, emotional and moral support that the students are able to depend on is a key expectation that the teachers have on the educational space for urban refugee children in Malaysia.

e) Preservation of the Burmese language

It is observed during the research that not all the students from Myanmar are fluent in Burmese and most of the students speak in their own dialect. In fact some of the students are more fluent in English than Burmese. The introduction of Burmese is seen as a valuable asset for the refugee children if they return to Myanmar or for their assimilation with the refugee community in their country of resettlement but it is also a common language which can be a unifying factors for the refugee children studying in the school.

²⁴, New Straits Times, 24 May 2012, Spotlight: Refugees' struggle for education available at <http://www2.nst.com.my/nation/general/spotlight-refugees-struggle-for-education-1.87056>

²⁵ Hamilton, R. J., & Moore, D. (2004). *Educational interventions for refugee children: Theoretical perspectives and implementing best practice*. Psychology Press.

²⁶ Ibid.

Interviews with parents

There is a common thread of expectation of the teachers which are shared with the parents who were interviewed. Firstly two of the parents expects that their children will learn English well and that they will be able to communicate with others and help their family in assimilate in the country of resettlement in the event that they are resettled. Whereas a parent mentioned that he is glad that his child is learning Burmese in the school. Two parents who were interviewed were not educated themselves, their wish that their children will be educated and gain knowledge in the school and a parent hope that after his child complete his education in the school he would join another school or degree or diploma.

Interview with students

The main expectation of the students who were interviewed on why they go to school was to learn English. It can be seen that 13 out of 17 students had mentioned that they wanted to learn English. The students believe that learning English would be essential for their future in getting a job and when they get resettled to a third country. Besides that the school also gives them hope to aspire for a better future and it is a place where they can find positive role models.

Education experiences of the refugee children in relation to their interaction with their fellow student

Interviews with the students

The researcher found that the results from the interviews with the student can be divided into 3 broad categories namely a) positive interaction, b) positive interaction with occasional fights and quarrels and c) less than positive interaction due to religious and language difference. The results will be discussed in more detail below:-

a) Positive interaction

It is noted that majority of the students interviewed had positive interaction with their classmates. Most of them revealed that they were happy in school because they have friends who they can study and play with. The school provide them with a space where the children can learn to socialize with the other children. This is true even for children who had expressed that they face difficulties in learning in school, they had stated that they enjoy going to school because it is a place where they can meet and spend time with their friends.

b) Positive interaction with occasional fights and quarrels

In the interviews, 4 of the 17 students interviewed had revealed that although they had good interaction with their friends in school, they would sometimes fight and quarrel with their friends. Some of the students stated that they will quarrel with their friends and that their friends would use bad language. When asked about the content the students were not able to specify any particular reasons that they will fight with their friends.

c) Less than positive interaction due to religious and language difference

Out of all the students interviewed only 3 students had specifically stated that they had less than positive interactions with their classmates due to the difference in religion and language. 2 of the students had indicated that they did not have good interactions with their friends as they were from different religion. Although both the students had stated that they had good friends in the class, they were not happy that their religion was insulted by their classmates. One of the student had expressed difficulties in interacting with her classmate due to the different dialects however, it is noted that the student has a good friend in class and was able to converse with her classmate in English.

Interviews with the teachers

When asked about the teacher's observation of the education experiences of refugee children in relation to their interaction with their classmates from different religious and ethnic background, some teachers had expressed their opinions of what they perceived to be the hindrance to the interaction between the children whilst some teachers think that there is no difference in the way they interact with one another despite the difference in religion and ethnicity.

a) Linguistics hindrance to interaction

From the interviews with the teacher with regards to the interaction between the children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, two of the teachers noted that the difference in the dialects spoken by different ethnic groups is a hindrance to the interaction between the students. However, the teachers added that once the children are able to language barrier and are able to communicate with one another they are able to be friends with one another.

b) Difference in religion

Only 3 teachers had expressed that they had observe the presence of tension in the interaction between the children from different religious background in the class. The teachers were also quick to point out that they have consciously attempted to correct the behavior of the children whenever such tension arises.

c) Difference in Culture and Ethnicity

It is interesting to note that one teacher believe misunderstanding between the student from different religion could also be caused by a difference in culture between different ethnic group.

d) Positive interaction

The remaining 3 teachers interviewed had stated that there is good interaction between the children. Two of the teachers simply stated that there is good interaction and one of the teacher who stated that she did not notice much difference in the interaction between children from different religious or ethnic background.

Interviews with parents

All 3 parents who were interviewed does not know much about the interaction between their child and their classmates. However, they had stated that the friends of their children are of Christian religion.

Reduction of intergroup tension

Taking into consideration firstly, the religious conflict in Myanmar between the Muslim and Buddhist community which led to communal violence in the Rakhine state²⁷ and secondly, the sectarian violence against the Myanmar Muslim and Rohingya community in Myanmar, the educational space provided by the education projects in Malaysia maybe the rare opportunity for children from different religious groups from Myanmar to assemble in the same space. As such, the research would examine if the intergroup contact can promote reduction of ethnic prejudice and intergroup tension that is prevalent in their country of origin.

Interview with Students

During the interviews, the students were asked who their best friends are and why these friends were chosen as their best friends, in order to determine if religion or ethnicity are factors taken into account when deciding who they are friends with. The result shows that none of the students expressed that religion or ethnicity as a determining factor. Instead, the determining factors includes the characteristics of their friends, the way the students were treated by their best friends, the fact that they spend time with each other, the proximity of the students and their friends in class and place of residence.

With regards to the interviews with Buddhist and Muslim students who are the minority in the class, it is interesting to note that when both the Buddhist student and Rohingya Muslim student from Rakhine state were interviewed, both of them does not appear to know much about the other's religion despite the communal violence which were reported between the Buddhist and Muslim in Rakhine state.

When the Rakhine student was asked about her experience with people from different religion from herself she stated that she was initially afraid but indicated that when she got to know her classmates they are fine. The following is the excerpt from her interview:-

“The first time I came here I was afraid because I have never friends with chin people and non Buddhist I was afraid now I am happy...we become friendly and we know more so I am happy now. I know about Muslim religion before coming to school..I don't know very much about them what I know that they don't eat pork that is what I know. After we know them we are fine. We discuss and we talk but we don't discuss other than learning and subjects when we study and play.”

When the Rohingya Muslim student from Rakhine state was asked about his experiences with his classmates who are from a different religious background from

²⁷ BBC (3 July 2014) Why is there communal violence in Myanmar, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>

himself at class he stated that his friends who call him by a derogatory term which he did not like. Despite the fact that he appear to be close friends with two other boys in class, he identified more with his friends whom he made in his former school which is a Muslim school. The following is the excerpt from his interview:-

“ I don't have good friends in the class. They are very naughty they play around. They call me kala. Kala because we are Muslim I don't like it. I am not their friends, we don't meet them every day but my friends outside we meet up every day..Here we don't meet during the holidays. I haven't heard anything about Buddhist or Christian before I came here... but I think we are all the same”

Meanwhile the interaction in class seems to have create a positive effect on the Buddhist Shan student who had expressly stated that his best friend from class was from Muslim background. Although he was initially afraid of the Muslim due to hearsay information from his friends he said that he is not afraid anymore after he knew his friend who is Muslim from school. However, he did mention that being in Malaysia which is a country with Muslim majority has also helped him get over his fear. The following is the excerpt from his interview:-

“Before I came to this class I know about Muslim.. Before that my friend in Myanmar told me that Muslim will chop off people's head...because I didn't know and we were young. I am afraid of them but now I am ok now I am in their world I am used to it..now I am with Muslim daily in Malaysia is also Muslim but that time I didn't know. The first time I quarreled with him I was afraid that he will tell his parent.. but I don't think they will chop of my head. I am afraid when I thought about what my friend said in Myanmar. But I know how he is now I am not scared.”

Finally, it is noted that the Myanmar Muslim student from Yangon was able to communicate better with his friend who is Buddhist as he is from a bigger city and has had contact with friends who are Buddhist in Myanmar. When asked about his interaction with his friends in class he mentioned that he has a Buddhist friend in class and although he stated that his mother had asked him not to be friends with some boys who were Buddhist he clarified that it is more due to their character and not based on their religion. The following is the excerpt from his interview:-

“I have Buddhist friend in the class and other class. I am good friend with him... he is he is a good monitor he is our monitor. He is not like other students.

“In Myanmar the Buddhist every morning at 5am they pray and I heard their prayers and I know a bit about their prayers...after I know them I think they are aggressive. Every time I saw them I see they are fighting with each other that is why I think they are aggressive and they don't listen to their parents. My mother asked me not to be friends with them. My mother and their mothers are friends so my mother know about them and my mother asked not to be friends with them”

Interviews with teachers

“They are starting to integrate there is more conversation and more acceptance. Sometimes it is due to personality and not necessary related to different ethnic background and religions. Some of them can be more defensive and is aware of the

challenges due to his religion. To a large extent it stops him from being accepted in the class than his friend who is from the same religion as him but is far more accepted. He feels more targeted, my heart goes out to him. With time he certainly improved and not as abrasive as he was initially and he is more accepting and it is because the rest of the children become more accepting.

When the teacher were asked if they had notice any changes in the way the children from different ethnic and religious background interact with one another in school, most teachers noticed that there is a higher degree of integration and acceptance between the students. It is interesting to note that when this question was asked the teachers who noticed any changes had made reference the Muslim students in the class despite there being students who are from minority Buddhist background in the learning centre. A few teachers noticed that over time the Muslim student had become more talkative and communicate more with the other students. Whereas the head teacher of the school mentioned that although one Muslim student and one Buddhist student had quarrel on one occasion they have been counselled by the head teacher and are now friends with one another.

Interview with Parents

When asked if their child has any friends from other religion, all the parents had stated that their child do not have any friends who were non-Christian. However, when asked about their feeling about their children have friends from a different religion, two parent explicitly stated that he doesn't want his child to befriend non Christian while the other parent stated that it doesn't matter to her if her child befriends a non-Christian.

Class Observation

It is noted that there are some activities carried out in the class where the students are encouraged to have common goals and intergroup cooperation whereby they have a group activities in class where the group who are able to cooperate well will gain points in class. Apart from that, it is also noted that the teachers would correct the students and discipline them when they tease their friends who are Muslim. For one instance in a social studies class when a child made mention about Muslim and ISIS the teacher said had asked the students to get into religion. It is also noted from class observation that the students would sometimes make derogatory remarks to their Muslim friends calling them Kala to which the teachers were quick to respond and asked them not to repeat it. However, from the class observation it is also apparent that despite efforts from the teachers, the status between the students are not equal which could affect the interaction between the students.

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