

Serving the Refugees at Kedah Public Library, Malaysia

“Libraries: Create Spaces – Inspired Dialogue – Empower Community”

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Abstract:

Arriving in a new country with a different culture and language confronts all refugees with a challenge. To make their arrival easier, Kedah Public Library Corporation, Malaysia offer many services and by doing so contribute to a culture of welcoming. More libraries in many federal states want to ease the settling in of refugees by offering special services. For such activities, libraries usually cooperate with civic initiatives. Libraries primarily provide their media expertise; but beyond that, encounters between people and contact with locals facilitate getting to know the new surroundings.

Kedah Public Library decided to serve the refugees as a social community. It is centre which the refugees can access all the information and services in Kedah Public Library Corporation. It is especially a meeting point for the great variety of local welcome initiatives. In cooperation with NTA School for Refugee Children and Baitul Rahmah Rohingya Learning Centre, aim at providing a diverse programme such as Group Membership, Library Visit, Children’s Club (Kelab Sinar Pintar Bayan Budiman), school holidays Fun Activities and monthly activities, a variety of consultation services, homework support, and multilingual reading for refugees children. It is a place of impressive community, social work and space of culture. Now, libraries play an important role in the acceptance and the resolution of conflict. Kedah Public Library is a place of culture where opportunities can arise. An open space on the world to improve its future. It makes us stronger.

For this time, it give opportunities for libraries to serve refugees as well bring a better world for them. In view of the living conditions of refugees in temporary shelters without technical equipment and WLAN, the concept of the library as a place takes on special meaning: public libraries are low-threshold services, and they have sought to lower the bureaucratic hurdles even further. Library cards are issued free of charge, the otherwise required presentation of official papers is waived and premises, Internet access and media service are made available. The contribution of libraries to a welcoming culture consists in facilitating access to information, knowledge and encounters. Only once interest is awakened can libraries target the specific needs of the individual.

Keywords: Refugees; Education; Activities; Collaboration; Engagement; Services; Special needs

1.0 Introduction

The services to refugees children at the Kedah Public Library is to create equitable opportunities for learning, discovery and connection. At all stages of the refugee experience, there is a need to make social connections, for both practical and emotional support. Our library focus on doing program and activities targeting the refugee children in informal schools or learning centres through understanding of supporting their needs. Public library potentially have a very important role for people in this position but consultation showed that many refugees do not have any idea of what a public library is. They did not know about the range of services already on offer, or believed it was not for them. A lack of language skills can result in a lack of confidence to approach library services as well.

Kedah Public Library is serving as a social and educational space for the refugees and become places for engagement. We are honored to share experiences and best practices for serving refugee children communities in Kedah with the NTA Children School for Refugees and Baitul Rahmah Rohingya Learning Centre by offering the school with library program activities and resources for education purpose. The library had discussion about a few matters that worried the administrator of the school which is the safety of the children, community perception, languages barrier and illiteracy. However the library had a good responses from the childrens for the first program arranged for them , they were very excited and patinated with the activities and the staff that welcome them well. They are looking forward for the next visit to the library which is by monthly and periodically.

In Malaysia, refugees do not have legal status but a numbers of them registered with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). For Rohingya children in Malaysia, as of December 2016, just over a third - 39 per cent – of school age children have access to any education, while the remainder are classed as being out of school, according to UNHCR's education unit in Malaysia. What education they receive is in 120 informal learning centres throughout Malaysia, run by the refugee community or faith-based organizations, with support from UNHCR. Many struggle with limited funding, overcrowded classrooms and few resources. Other challenges include a high turnover of teachers, students who drop out for financial or cultural reasons, and limited opportunities for higher education. Access to education is seen as key for the more than 21 million refugees worldwide, more than half of whom are children.

While appreciative of support from informal schools, UNHCR supports access to state education for refugees in Malaysia. "Any support towards education access to refugee children will enable UNHCR to gradually phase out the informal parallel education system that it currently supports, and channel the resources towards programmes that mutually

benefit the refugee children as well as those from the host community” said Mimi Zarina Amin, head of education at UNHCR Malaysia.

Who is the refugees in our community
 - mostly of Rohingya ethnicity from Myanmar.

No.	Name of School	Total of Students	Age of Students	Funded/Run by
1	NTA Children School For Refugeee	60	6-14	New Thessalonian Apostolate (NTA) is a Catholic Missionary Organisation
2	Baitul Rahmah Rohingya Learning Centre, Alor Setar	32	7-12	Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organization (MAPIM)
3	Maahad Ar Rahmah Li Tahfiz AlQuran.	21	7 -12	Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organization (MAPIM)
4	Baitul Rahmah Rohingya Learning Centre, Sungai Petani	83	7 - 15	Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organization (MAPIM)
5	Baitul Rahmah Rohingya Learning Centre, Kulim	30	6 - 13	Malaysian Consultative Council of Islamic Organization (MAPIM)

Due to their illegal status, refugee children have no access to formal public schools in Malaysia and UNHCR supports some 126 learning centres run by NGOs. The everages of the refugee children will have education until their age is 12 years old and after that the boys are getting to start working and the girls is getting married in young age, others have to take care of their siblings.

2.0 Definition

Malaysia possesses a great reputation for allowing refugees to live in the country until they repatriate or resettle in a third country. People seeking refuge in Malaysia need to approach the UNHCR for the formal recognition as refugees. They can be recognized as refugees by the UNHCR after undergoing through a lengthy interview process to determine whether they are genuine refugees. However, they are not legally recognized in Malaysia due to the fact that Malaysia is not a party to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol.

2.1 Under International Law, the word ‘refugee’ has a very precise meaning, as set out in the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to Refugees. In the Convention, a refugee is defined as someone who:

- has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion;
- is outside the country they belong to or normally reside in, and
- is unable or unwilling to return home for fear of persecution

2.2 Refugees are the people outside their country of origin because of the fear of persecution, armed conflicts or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order leaving them with no choice but to seek 'surrogate protection' from other members of the international community.

2.3 Definition of Refugees under International Law – Under Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention, as amended by its 1967 Protocol, the words “refugees” refer to any individual who : “Owing to be a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country : or, who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” According to the United Nations, Myanmar’s Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. For generations, this group has suffered routine discrimination, violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion and other abuses.

3.0 Interview Techniques

Research methodology used by Kedah Public Library to collect data and information is through interview and observation approach because from this techniques the information received is highly valueable. By doing interview , we personally satisfied with face -to-face interactions and reactions from the respondents through their fruitful information and feedback. Our respondents for this paper are school administrators/management, school teachers, school students, volunteery teachers, parents, library staff.

There are two forms of interview which are structured or unstructured. Unstructuredinterviews allow respondent to give their views, experiences or opinion freely. The schedule of questions are provided to control the session between interviewer and respondents and it will guarantee all questions answerable by respondents. In addition, this interview method allows the interviewer to gathered in depth information related to the experiences, opinion and reactions as well as the perception of respondents compared to questionnaire. Within this interview session, the interviewer will get some of experience highlighted through bad or good of facial and eye movement also by respondents.

4.0 Purpose – Education for All

Refugees children in Malaysia are denied access to the formal education system. Like all children, refugee children have the fundamental right to life, survival and development to the maximum extend. However, living in exile, refugee children are often denied normal childhoods. Public libraries need to be clear about their role and able to promote this succinctly externally. Public libraries have a key role within the overall context of government agendas related to citizenship, community cohesion and social inclusion and they need to perform and communicate this much more effectively locally, regionally and nationally.

As a result of violence and oppression around the world, many families are forced to flee their countries as refugees. Refugee children often have significant adjustments to have life in their new communities including language differences. The principles of the United Nations Convention the Rights of the Child which states that “ all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their life, maximizes their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages.” The report, entitled Migration, Displacement and Education : Building Bridges Not Walls, highlights countries achievements and shortcomings in ensuring the right of migrant and refugee children to benefit from quality education, a right that serves the interests of both learners and the communities they live in.

Lack of specific funding for refugee education, meaning there is often a shortage of resources for students support needs, support from central or local government can reduce gaps to meeting refugee children’s education needs. Public Library have a key role to play in the lives of refugees, which fit closely with the current policy priorities defined by government and strategic bodies. Priorities for library, which are relevant in context of libraries learning and information resources are:

- promotion of reading and informal learning
- access to digital skills and services including e-resources
- measures to tackle social exclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship

Refugees are amongst the most excluded from society. Despite having gone through extraordinary and often very traumatic experiences, many are extremely keen to access opportunities for reading, learning and information that are relevant and important to them to improve their position. Often their circumstances mean that options such as studying or using computers at home or buying books are not available to them, library ensure opportunities for education are live long and available according needs. Public libraries provide more essential services in relation to this audience. With the right approaches in place, public libraries working with refugees will be able to help them meet their needs, and in so doing, meet the need of many other current non-users of their services as well. As a result public libraries will also increase their overall usage, visitor numbers, membership, lending and enquiry rates, and enhance their role as focal point for local communities as a whole.

Malaysia’s progresss in making education more inclusive for children of migrants and refugees is too slow, according to the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM) by the UNESCO. Figures at a Glance in Malaysia, As end of April 2019, there are some 170,460 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia.

- Some 147,590 are from Myanmar, comprising some 90,200 Rohingyas, 24,720 Chins, 9,750 Myanmar Muslims, 4,000 Rakhines & Arakanese, and other ethnicities from Myanmar.
- There are some 22,870 refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries, including some 6,150 Pakistanis, 3,350 Yemenis, 3,065 Syrians, 3,090 Somalis, 1,720 Sri Lankans, 1,970 Afghans, 1,450 Iraqis, 780 Palestinians, and others from other country.
- Some 68% of refugees and asylum-seekers are men, while 32% are women.
- There are some 43,710 children below the age of 18.

Though the needs of refugee populations are unique in many ways, it is also important not to exoticize them. When you come to a new place, what the first thing you want? For most people in the developed world right now, that answer is “the wifi password”. It’s the same for refugees, free access to an internet connection is important to refugees, and is often what gets them in the door of a library (Lison 2016)

5.0 Program and Activities

Kedah Public Library program for childrens are free and open to public including the refugees. Public libraries are now seeking to implement better strategies to engage with special needs group. We learned to drop the assumption that everybody has the same skill set. Depending where these students are coming from, they might not have experience with public libraries. Librarian should also be careful with voice levels, physical contact, or behavior that could potentially trigger students who have lived through disturbing events. Libraries have a role in offering a welcome that is respectful and responsive to their needs. They are some 33,000 refugee children in Malaysia who have no legal status in the country. Refugees especially childrens deserve love, protection, stability and an education. Library is trying to shape the programs that meet their needs as a civic and humanity engagement for program sustainability. Public Libraries can be the gathering place for different communities to meet and mix, where it can be a safe learning environment place that they can spend time after school or during holidays instead of wasting their time in wrong places that can divert them to social problems

Public libraries have often been leaders in these activities providing book loans; offers internet resources which helping children getting familiar with computers; free wifi; movies; technologies; languages classes; electronic resources; thematic activities and outreach program. Library serve refugee children by organized some activities targeting their program toward parents or entire family supportive such as reading and talent competition, reading session-reading without border and many activities that can build up their communication, skills, confidents and cultural.

Library is ideally situated and equipped to make difference in the lives of refugee children, Kedah Public Library serving refugee childrens by offered the school some programs and activities that can support their lack of materials, manpower and technologies.

i. Library Visit/Library Tour

Introduce the library, helps them become familiar with the Library’s space, services and resources. This is a great introduction to the library as the orientation tours provide opportunities for children and their teachers or group leaders to become familiar with the materials and staff in the library.

ii. Group Membership

Enable book borrowing for school in bulk loan by supporting reading material for usage of the students in their school. The selection for the book are made by the teachers depending on their needs in maximum of 100 books each time. Intended to encourage and develop a love of reading.

- iii. **Childrens Club (Kelab Bayan Budiman)**
Space for the refugee children to mix with local children that encourage them to communicate and have social interact. The club is based on the following tenets: to have fun as they read, write, learn, and imagine in order to succeed through participating in intellectually stimulating, challenging, and exciting activities that stretch the imagination to succeed.
- iv. **School Holiday Fun Activities**
Having bonding time with parents and family in the library for activities and making more friends. We have a great range of fun activities to keep the kids occupied these school holidays that refugee children can join for free.
- v. **Monthly Thematic Activities**
Colourful activities for arts and crafts, reading session, technologies, internet access, movie screening, storytelling and maker space are made available. They can experiment with new technologies including 3D printers, robotics, 3D pen, makey makey and Augmented Reality materials.
- vi. **Library Events**
Schools and students are also invited to join library events such as English Camp and Beyond the Moon: Apollo 50th Anniversary 2019. Event can be used as a mean of celebrating different communities and bringing people together.
- vii. **English Classes**
Public library has already partnered with the Fulbright English Teaching Assistants, Kedah and YES Student from USA as a volunteer by providing ESL (English as a Second Language). Library offers groups session such as English Conversation Hours and Tell a Story, for them to learn multiple languages such as English and Bahasa Malaysia to overcome the languages barrier.
- viii. **Reading Without Border**
The reading session targets refugee children and encourages them to learn English, Bahasa Malaysia and understand the importance of reading from our library childrens book collection. Every activities will start with children doing free reading materials chosen by them self and the librarian provide a form to list down the title of book that has been used.

Another major defining aspect of refugee life is the complete severing from former information landscapes, which consists of social and informational ties that help people make sense of the world. After settling in a new community, refugees need to rebuild these connections. When someone loses their connection to cultural, social, and institutional systems, they have to reorient themselves and reframe their understanding of their knowledge environment. Building social connections is a major part of this process, and social inclusion is of paramount importance. Major barriers to this effort are “language, racism, discrimination and labelling”. Public libraries have been recognized as a good place to help with the rebuilding process, being “safe and non-judgemental place(s) where assistance is offered to enable the developing information literacy practices” (Llyod 2015)

6.0 Engage and Empower Education

Kedah Public library as a place for refugee self-education and enlightenment, equip staff to provide sensitive responses and support in building trusting relationships among the parents and childrens, helping them develop the ability to self-regulate behavior, emotion and attention. Providing resources and education to refugees from library collections to serve students with low literacy levels can attract them to enhance their reading skills. By coming to the library, it can help to prevent social problem among refugees in future, let us welcome and instruct these refugees who with our support will change their awareness of education since young age.

People are basically good, and when treated with respect and care, most people most of the time will respond in kind. Compassion and empathy are the most powerful tools for creating a more just world. Refugee children feel more welcome and dignified and at the same time it will fulfilling the library's mission of serving the whole community by support for learning needs. In fact, it is through love and affection that one can establish trust and confidence between the refugees and the citizens of the host country so that they would be able to live in an environment where peace, security and freedom from persecution prevail and that the human rights of the citizens and the refugees are protected equally. Human being is worthy of basic human dignity.

Balancing the importance of developing the skills and knowledge for them to be succeed. The needs of refugees can be challenging and required commitment, collaboration and creative thinking. To create equitable opportunities for learning, discovery and connection, libraries can offers sufficient resources to build a strong relationship. Parents inability to help with homework and their lack of knowledge and therefore ability to guide their children through the schooling process become the problems to the refugee childrens. Understanding these barriers is an essential first step to ensuring and engaging students and their families and ultimately building the trust necessary to provide effective services and supports.

Empowering education strives to foster a sense of empowerment that drives them to seek healthy, positive relationships with their friends, family, and community. Most importantly, students engagement are improving education daily from not knowing english to reading stories and having conversations. Through collaborating and partnerships library as a learning center can develop skills of children refugees in condusive environment and safe place. Research and practice identified specific support needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children, which have been addressed by various educational initiatives, such as the Additional Support for Learning Act (Scotland,2004), and important partnership work between schools and other agencies.

In order to maintain good social and mental health, refugees need to feel comfortable and accepted in new communities. This anxiety is well expressed in a quote from an interview with an asylum-seeker in Norway. “ we fear being rejected, because coming from countries with less education we feel embarrassed, (we) do not know how to communicate, why should they be interested in you? (Varheim 2014)”. “Libraries are essential, if you are going to cut libraries you must be prepared to build more prison, to build more homeless hostels” said John Bird from BBC.

7.0 Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Public libraries as a place for immigrant self education, enlightenment, and the study of democracy and languages so that the program continues to be sustainable. By working directly with refugees, public libraries are uniquely well-placed to contribute to better cultural understanding between different communities as well as meeting reading, learning and information needs. It also demonstrates that understanding this role is just the beginning and will be continuously for long term planning with more various program and activity. There has to be strategic commitment to improve access to and quality of public libraries services for refugees as part of a wider policy to improve and develop services. This need to be backed up by local action plans with staff time, skills and relevant support in place to deliver result.

Children learn negative lessons about their future opportunities when they experience poverty, severe and sustained physical and mental distress, and limited school access. Public libraries have great potential to promote integration of emerging communities and enhance community cohesion. Use the opportunity to build up working relationship with relevant partners and take part as a role in demonstrating the importance of choosing, sharing and enjoying books and having access to imaginative reading experiences. Libraries should be seen as a key community centres, open to all where alongside books, people can rely on other essential life services.

Many refugees have had very traumatic experiences. They often lack the information required to make informed decisions regarding activities such as getting their children into school or finding safe place to enhance education. A few areas can be consider to provide services to refugees : what is known about refugees as users libraries are targeting, what types of partnerships libraries should be considering, what the role of different types of libraries should be in providing services to refugees, what professional knowledged and skills are needed to administer services and how to make libraries more welcoming.

Its explored how refugee children experience education, what effective and supportive provision look like, how best to support the integration of refugee children in schools, and finally what the key barriers and facilitators associated with meeting the educational needs of refugee children are. When appropriate support is not in place, refugee children are likely to feel disengaged from learning. It is vital to draw on best practice, and identify and address areas where provision could be strengthened. By creating a supportive environment through these social innovative collaborations, the teachers from refugee school and learning centres was feel enthusiasm about the attractiveness of the program that provides an excellent opportunity and also enhances the program's sustainability.

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APPENDIX :

A Gallery of Programs and Activities for Refugee Children at Kedah Public Library.



To improve computer literacy Refugee children learned and used computer and online apps in Multimedia Room. The librarian gave Information about using computers and basic training on searching.



Refugee children are given opportunity to experiment with library material for skills and creativity. The creations of your imagination come to life with art! Experiment with creative making and crafting. We provide the Legos! Legos are not just toys, they are STEM tools, and allow children to invent, collaborate, engineer, and build.



The childrens feeling awesome for robotic, technologies and coding. Discover new ways to be creative with STEM. If you encounter refugee children in your library, take a little bit of extra time to get to know them. Who knows, you just might change their world!



Explore more robotic and technologies is the important role that public libraries play in engaging young minds by providing access to technology and learning opportunities to enhance individual creativity and innovation. Library is now strategically using its spaces to incorporate technology to inspire creativity in kids.



Screening and gaming, make them to come back to the library. It's time to move! Let's jump and groove while we share stories, songs, play games and get active.



Literate the children with reading session with library book from childrens collection. Learn through activities that foster children's expression and readiness to learn and promotes a strong foundation for lifelong learning



Storytelling session brings a library's collection alive, a great tool for communication and also teaches good listening skills. Library tour for first timer in library to promote services and safe space for everyone. Do not expect them, but always work



Parents and family having good and informative session at the library. Helping improving their literacy skills. Serving refugee patrons can be some of the most gratifying work you do as a librarian.



The students join the yearly English Camp, it's the space for them to mix and improve their communication and language skills. The children are genuinely happy.



USA YES Exchange Student and English Teaching Assistants is doing volunteering by giving english classes. Most Refugees speak differently from you and have a smaller vocabulary than you.



Reach out and visit to refugees schools for interview, information and discussion to help shape the program for better services to special need community. By having education it can minimise the level of violence and exclusion suffered by refugees

