

Sustainable Education for Refugees Children: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This literature review describes the educational needs, challenges, and potential solutions for refugee children, aiming to provide insights into how to improve their access to quality education. Applying the PRISMA flow, a comprehensive search yielded 10 articles published between 2013 and 2023, which were analyzed to identify recurring themes. Three prominent themes emerged from the literature: challenges faced by refugee children and their teachers, access to quality education, and sustainable education initiatives for refugee children. The literature highlights the multifaceted obstacles encountered by refugee children, including displacement, trauma, language barriers, and limited access to educational resources. Moreover, teachers working with refugee children face unique challenges related to accommodating diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, addressing trauma and mental health needs, and navigating complex administrative and policy frameworks. Additionally, access to quality education remains a significant concern, with disparities persisting due to socioeconomic status, geographic location, and systemic inequalities. Sustainable education initiatives play a crucial role in addressing these challenges, emphasizing inclusivity, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement. Key components of sustainable education for refugee children include access to quality schooling, teacher training, psychosocial support, language acquisition, and pathways to higher education or vocational training. Therefore, this literature review underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted interventions to address the educational needs of refugee children. Recommendations include investing in teacher training, fostering partnerships with local communities and organizations, advocating for policy reforms to promote inclusive education, and providing ongoing support for sustainable education initiatives. By addressing these challenges and implementing evidence-based strategies, stakeholders can work towards ensuring that refugee children receive the education they deserve, enabling them to build better futures for themselves and their communities.

Keywords: Refugee children; Education; Sustainable.

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INTRODUCTION

Refugees are a group of people who are forced to leave their country and seek refuge in another country, which is primarily because of persecution, war, or violence based on the 1951 Convention (1). Some of the refugees may have been forced to leave for a short period of time, while others may have been forced to leave their country permanently. According to *The Global Cost of Inclusive Refugee Education* published in 2021, the number of individuals displaced as a result of conflict, violence, persecution, or human rights violations increased from 41.1 million to 79.5 million by 2010 till the end of 2019 and 26 million of these are refugees where half of them are under the age of 18 (2). Young men and women refugees are the hope for their future in the most perilous of circumstances. They hold the promise of more sustainable economic livelihoods for their families, as well as more solid political and social leadership in their native countries. However, most are denied opportunities to pursue the types of education that would enable them to develop the skills, knowledge, and critical thinking abilities needed to meet these demands (3). Education has recently been identified as an important factor in the struggle for refugee rights. Access to education for refugee children is significantly lower than for non-displaced children. It is projected that 77% of refugee children attend primary school, 31% attend secondary school, and barely 3% pursue post-secondary education (2).

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 emphasises the significance of assisting the education system in becoming "inclusive, responsive, and resilient" (4). This implies that education should continue to serve all individuals in need, regardless of nationality, social, economic, legal, or political background. Upholding such rights implies that, despite the dynamic struggle, children and young people will continue to have access to education. After years of displacement, the state of refugees is not transitional but protracted and requires strategic long-term planning that integrates interdependence, coexistence, and growth of the whole country including its refugee population (5). The declaration also draws attention to refugee children's need for safety in the learning environment and the importance of supportive mental health programs. It is evident and agreed upon that without adequate education, refugees and displaced people will not have the tools, sufficient transferable knowledge, or skills to rebuild their lives and futures.

Thus, to work towards achieving SDG 4 by 2030 and specifically the targets relevant to displaced communities, it is critical that governments, NGOs, foundations, donors, and corporations concentrate on programs that protect education, learning facilities, and those who fall through the cracks in conflict zones. While education for all children is a right, it is also a right with multiple and complex challenges (5). Therefore, this literature review aimed to look for the available literature related to refugee children in order to gain an understanding of their needs in education, the obstacles the children need to face and how to overcome all of these challenges in order for them to get a better education in their life.

METHOD

This study employed a literature review adapted from a previous study's method (6). The online databases Science Direct, ProQuest Health, and PubMed were used to search for articles. The articles search strategy uses the search mode 'find all my search terms' within the full text of articles, including patents, while limiting the results to full text and peer-reviewed without specifying a publication. Due to limited studies and a focus on the English language, this review included published data from 2013 to 2023. The journal subset is set for all and accepts studies on refugee children's education. The search terms are refugee children, education, and sustainable. Additionally, Boolean logic (AND) is used to combine the search terms.

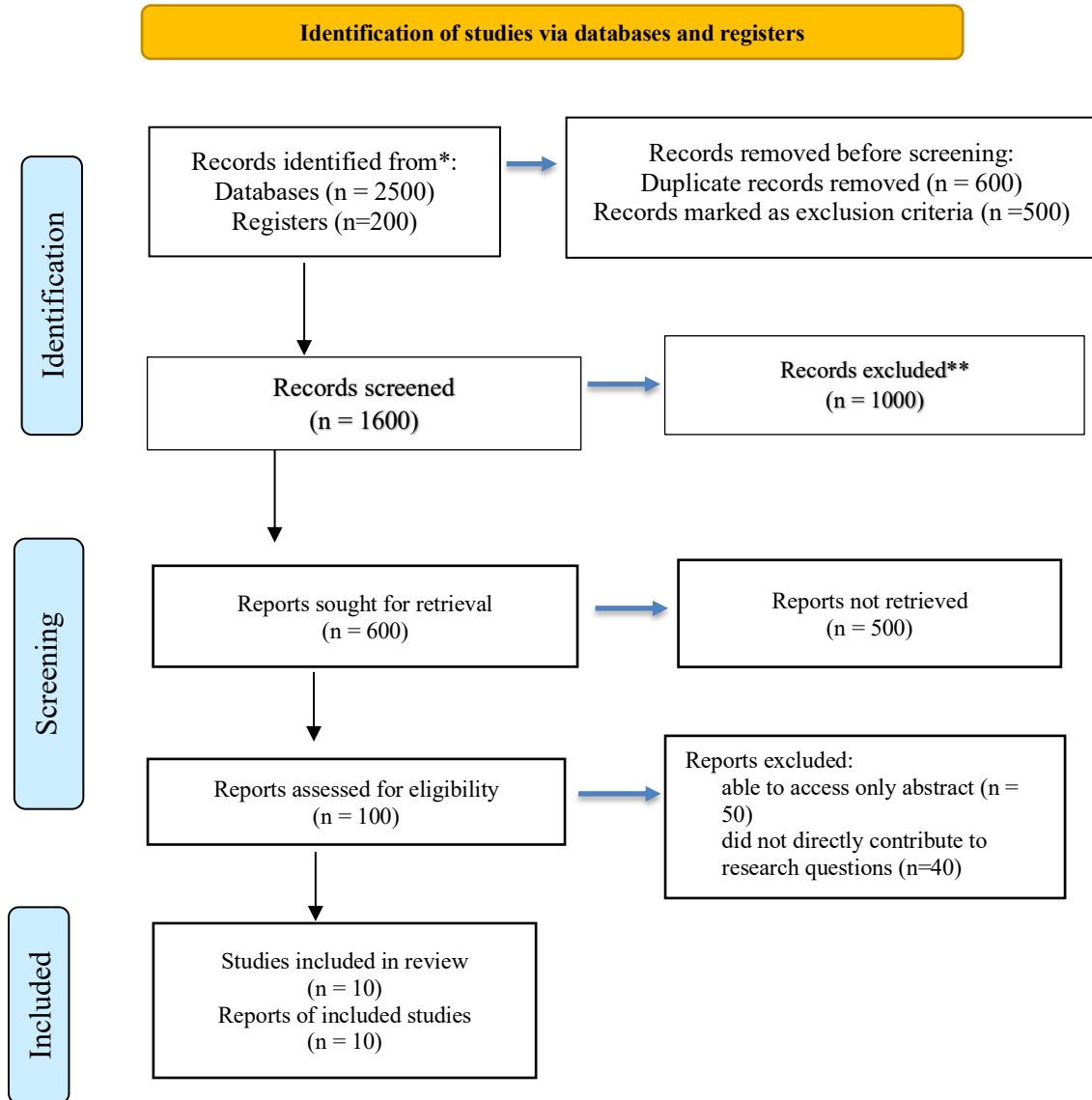
A total of ten academic articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic of refugee children's education and their focus on challenges, opportunities, and potential solutions. The articles included were originated from diverse geographical contexts. The inclusion criteria for this review were the studies done on the key challenges faced by refugee children, their impact on educational attainment, and potential strategies for improvement. Whereas, the exclusion criteria for the article finding are unpublished articles, secondary sources, newspapers, and studies published in other languages apart from English.

The literature search was carried out by using PRISMA flow search 2020 and the keywords stated above. Initially, there were a total of 2700 articles were found. Then, the process of searching of the selected articles, a total of 2100 articles were excluded due to the articles were

not in line with this study objective. Finally, only 10 articles were chosen for this literature review as they suited the inclusion criteria stated above.

Figure 1 presents the article search flow for this study.

Figure 1: The review process using PRISMA 2020



FINDINGS

Education means studying the subjects for deeper knowledge and to understand the various subjects which are going to be used in our daily lives. The term education is not limited to our bookish knowledge but it stands for knowledge that is obtained and experienced by us outside the books or classrooms. In this review, there are a total of three themes emerged from the included 10 articles. Those are challenges faced by refugee children and their teachers, access to quality education, and

sustainable education for refugee children. The following sessions describe details about the findings.

Challenges Faced by Refugee Children and Their Teachers

Refugee children and their teachers face a myriad of challenges that significantly impact their educational experiences and outcomes. For refugee children, these challenges often stem from forced displacement, trauma, language

barriers, and limited access to educational resources and support services. Many refugee children have experienced disrupted schooling, which can lead to gaps in their learning and difficulties in adjusting to new educational systems (7). Additionally, they may grapple with cultural adjustment, discrimination, and social isolation, further exacerbating their educational challenges. A previous study described students' barriers in schooling with regard to psychosocial factors, cultural adaptation, language learning, systemic barriers, and family relations (8).

On the other hand, teachers working with refugee children face unique challenges related to accommodating diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, addressing trauma and mental health needs, and navigating complex administrative and policy frameworks (9). They may also lack training and resources to effectively support refugee students, leading to feelings of frustration and inadequacy. Besides, at the individual level, post-traumatic stress disorder is associated with differences in educational achievement among refugee students. (10). A study also highlighted that Syria and Afghanistan contribute to over half of the world's child refugees and the study covers the major difficulties that refugee children confront and one of them is neurological challenges because of poor access to education (11).

Since about August 2019, nearly 2 million children which is actually 1/3 of Syria's children population were out of school, with another 1.3 million at risk of dropping out and over 800,000 children in refugee host nations not attending school. One of the factors contributing to low enrolment and the likelihood of more student dropouts is that refugees living in rural regions outside of refugee camps may have trouble accessing schools without proper transportation. Furthermore, when refugee children migrate to neighbouring countries, they are required to study a new curriculum and it is often in a foreign language, which the migrants must master before continuing their education (11). Furthermore, the emotional trauma caused by their relocation and earlier violence impacts many children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, increasing their academic hurdles. The children also face stress which will disrupt their brain and can impair their learning, memory, and stress response control (11). Despite these challenges, both refugee children and their teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in overcoming barriers to education, highlighting the importance of targeted interventions and support systems to promote their

academic success and well-being.

Access To Quality Education

Education changes our perspectives to see life more deeply. Most of the refugees, regardless of the old and young people, parents and children always hope for a better future education for themselves in the most uncertain and dire of situations. They believe that when they have the chance to have a good education, they can improve their economy and have a stable financial situation for their families.

However, studies show that there are frequently insufficient resources in host-country metropolitan areas because some host nations already have capacity concerns when it comes to enrolling their local students and enrolling refugee children would push those schools over capacity (11-12). Many schools in host countries have laws that require refugees to get government-issued documents or legal status before enrolling (8,9,11). In Turkey, Turkish authorities introduced a new "pre-registration and screening" step in order to obtain government-issued documentation and this created a delay with waiting times up to six months. In certain regions, Turkish public schools refused to allow Syrian children to enrol even if they had these identification cards, or the school officials demanded other documents and because of those requirements, their access to education became restricted (11).

Looking into Malaysia's setting, Malaysia has been a host country for Rohingya refugees for around 30 years, ever since the 80s. In an article by Hema Letchamanan, he wrote that Malaysia does not have any refugee camps, instead they live among citizens in cheap, low-maintenance flats (13). Since these refugee children are not allowed to learn in Malaysian public schools, there have been a few alternatives to building learning centres for them to learn. Though there may not be many, there are a few educational centres for these refugee children in this country including the Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-Chi Foundation School in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur and the Rohingya Community School in Puchong, Selangor. These two learning centres are assisted by UNHCR in terms of providing textbooks and training along with compensation for the teachers (13). The refugee children are taught the Malaysian syllabus using the workbooks given by UNHCR but since the syllabus has been changed to be taught completely in Malay, the book supplies to

UNHCR by the publishers have stopped. Thus, these learning centres switched to teaching syllabi that are not exactly the Malaysian curriculum, but the syllabus that aligned with the ones taught in public schools around the country (13). The whole purpose of teaching this syllabus is questioned as these children are not even allowed to sit for exams like Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or O-levels. Instead, the author suggested that the teaching should be universal which may include teaching these children vocational and technical skills, enhancing their technological knowledge, and most importantly, highlighting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD) prevention (13). Thus, access to quality education is a critical determinant of social mobility, economic development, and overall well-being, yet disparities persist in the availability and delivery of educational opportunities worldwide.

Sustainable Education for Refugee Children

A study highlighted that despite global commitments, the realisation of lifelong learning for refugee youth and adults is likely to remain frustrated for some time by normative assumptions firmly embedded in the conceptualisation of lifelong learning and the education frameworks of nation-states. (7,14). In another literature piece by Claudia Koehler and Joel Schneider, they wrote that education for migrants or refugees in most countries tends to cost more compared to the local citizens (12). When it comes to providing education for refugees, it should be taken into consideration the long-term investment required to make it possible for every single one of them to get quality education.

Studies also described that vocational education and teaching (VET) can be an effective tool to facilitate low-threshold and effective access to stable and reasonably well-paid jobs in the first labour market (7 & 12). They also mentioned the problem of providing education to these refugee children. One of the problems happened to be the missed years of early education due to war or political complications in the country of origin. The lack of primary education could affect these children later in higher education as latecomers are often “streamed into lower or lowest qualifying tracks in secondary education” regardless of their true capacities (12). Another challenge mentioned by the author is the age limit or restrictions in education levels where the children have to complete the level during a certain age range only, that if they happened to miss the primary level, there would be no going back (15).

A study done in Lebanon described that they built a Ghata which is functioning as a school that has a classroom that can accommodate an average of 40 students for the Syrian refugees (16). Ghata schools overcome barriers refugee children face in accessing formal education. This school operates within a holistic restorative built environment that makes the quality of education more accessible to the refugees, increases the attainment of knowledge and also nurtures hope among displaced and refugee communities. However, there are some challenges that Syrian refugee face in their ways of getting formal education. The cost of students’ transportation to and from schools. At ROTA schools children are openly recruited on a first-come-first-serve basis. The students did not have to pay for their tuition fees but the fees did not include the transportation costs. This could be a major problem for Syrian students to enter the local schools. The reason why most of them cannot afford the transportation costs is mostly because the refugees are not allowed to work legally in the country, so it's hard for them to access any local job market to support their finances. Getting work permits is found to be difficult for Syrian refugees as they are not welcomed into the country. That's why most of the refugee households live below the poverty line. Even though all the accommodations are well prepared for the refugee children, their parents are most likely to deprioritize the education of the children if it costs them high fees (16).

Therefore, sustainable education for refugee children is a crucial aspect of addressing the educational needs of one of the world's most vulnerable populations. The literature highlights the unique challenges faced by refugee children, including displacement, trauma, language barriers, and limited access to formal schooling. By investing in sustainable education for refugee children, stakeholders can help break the cycle of poverty and displacement, promote social cohesion, and contribute to the overall well-being and resilience of refugee communities.

DISCUSSION

The emergence of three distinct themes in this review underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges and opportunities associated with refugee education. Firstly, the challenges faced by both refugee children and their teachers highlight the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that impact their educational experiences. Secondly,

the theme of access to quality education sheds light on the persistent disparities in educational opportunities faced by marginalized populations, including refugees, and underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access for all. Lastly, the focus on sustainable education for refugee children reflects a growing recognition of the importance of holistic, community-driven approaches that address not only immediate educational needs but also long-term integration, resilience, and empowerment. By examining these themes, this review provides valuable insights into the complexities of refugee education and highlights opportunities for policy, practice, and research to support the educational rights and well-being of refugee children and their families.

As a result of the wars, many refugees are forced to leave their homes and country. This causes many challenges for the refugees and one of the greatest challenges for refugee students is being able to access the education they desire. Many states have provisions for providing educational services to refugees, but these programs are often overburdened and underfunded. This leaves most refugees with few options for accessing education, especially in areas where there are few educational services or resources for refugees. A few challenges and problems faced by refugee children are discussed in this section.

In any community, the selection of language is related to educational considerations. Language is also one of the important things that provides an opportunity for the refugees to exert control over their own education system. However, the problem is unfamiliar language becomes one of the challenges for the refugees to access education. The majority of language acquisition literature did not target refugees directly; rather, most language studies applied to all students arriving from places where the host country's language was not the student's first language (17). Familiarity with the language of the host country, and the language of their home country, can play a significant role in a student's educational success. According to a previous study, immigrant and refugee pupils do poorly in school when they do not speak the language of their host nation (14). Familiarising with the host nation's language is important for education and it is supported by a study where they discovered that refugees in the United States who spoke English well are adapted better to their educational surroundings (17). Despite being able to speak well in English, the process of learning the language can be challenging as children with thick accents or who struggled with English were

mocked, and some students who spoke their original languages were punished. Most of the children claimed it was difficult for them to learn English, and some said they assisted their parents with their English abilities (17).

Since language is a barrier to education for refugee youth, it is important that schools focus on teaching a second language throughout the school day and year. As study also mentioned that a challenge for refugee children is that despite the refugees' shared ethnic identity, they speak different languages (18). Because of this different language, most of the children have difficulty succeeding in the higher grades because the other language is not sufficient for them to study. In Mae La and Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camps, teachers explained that students who are not used to using Skaw Karen in schools faced difficulties in their schools (18). This group took about 6 months for them to become accustomed to reading and writing in Skaw Karen but some of them cannot even adapt to this language. A teacher in the Ban Don Yan refugee camp also mentioned that some students who cannot adapt to this kind of situation return to their own countries because of language difficulties (18).

Access to quality education is a challenge for refugees. The challenges that refugees face when it comes to education are not just limited to the acquisition of education but also the access to it. For example, the most basic education is the most important for all children including the refugee children. The most basic education includes literacy which is the ability of reading and writing. Literacy is the most important building block for all other forms of education. Many refugees in rural areas do not have a school nearby, thus their children are unable to make the journey due to a lack of access to transport (11). According to Letchamanan, the majority of these learning centres in Malaysia are in areas with a significant concentration of Rohingya refugees (13). Parents usually send their kids to these facilities. Some centres provide transportation to and from the children's homes. The author also discovered that some older children walk to the centres, despite the fact that this is not recommended because they may be detained by police on their route. In Malaysia, refugee children's learning centres are typically flats and houses that have been transformed into a few classrooms. These centres' learning environments are not favourable to learning and the teachers stated that the classrooms were overcrowded with no

properly separated classrooms and it is hard for both teachers and students to focus in that environment. In contrast, a study mentioned that refugees from Burma in Thailand do not have access to services provided outside the camp, nor are they permitted to leave the camps to earn their own income (18). So International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide them with the most basic and capacity-building services in the areas of food, shelter, health, education and community services. Barriers to accessing all the facilities from the wider socioeconomic environment include conflict, poverty, discrimination and stigmatization due to HIV/AIDS, gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, the perceived practical value of education and inadequate care (18).

Besides, young refugees frequently share their experiences with conflict, war, persecution, and violence, as well as displacement from their homes. These experiences put their psychological and social well-being at risk (14). Many adolescents have missed years of school, interfering with normal growth and jeopardizing their futures. Those who do not receive an education are more likely to feel excluded and powerless, which enhances their vulnerability and raises their risks of radicalization. Children were separated from their guardians during migration and they are especially vulnerable to PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other emotional and behavioural difficulties that can result in poor sleep, inattention, and social disengagement (11). Trauma is a common experience for refugee students but if the children are traumatized for a long time and no psychosocial treatment is given, they may feel stress, anger and grief. Research conducted shows various experiences of trauma and loss that the refugee children go through that impact how the refugee students learn, behave and interact with others (14). The statement is supported by a previous study where stress can have a big impact on children's brains (11). This is because the brain releases cortisol when we are stressed and helps us deal with stress but cortisol is supposed to be released in a short time. So, suppressed stress will cause cortisol to be released continuously and will damage the hippocampus of the brain. As a result, chronic activation of the stress response system can impair learning, memory, and stress response control.

The synthesis of literature across the ten articles underscores the multifaceted challenges encountered by refugee children and their teachers in accessing and providing quality education. The identified themes of challenges faced by refugee

children and their teachers, barriers to accessing quality education, and the importance of sustainable education initiatives collectively highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and targeted interventions to address the educational needs of refugee populations. By recognizing and addressing the unique socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that impact refugee education, policymakers, educators, and humanitarian organizations can work towards fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments that promote the well-being and future prospects of refugee children. Through sustained efforts to overcome these challenges and implement sustainable education practices, stakeholders can contribute to the empowerment and integration of refugee communities, ultimately advancing the principles of social justice and human rights for all.

RECOMMENDATION

Language barriers can make refugees feel isolated, hopeless, and anti-social, which often leads to depression. Struggling with speaking and comprehension makes it difficult for refugees to make friends with peers and can unfortunately make them a target for bullying. It also leads to a lack of confidence, inhibiting many from speaking up and participating in class, and ultimately missed job and educational opportunities. Language barriers for refugees can be overcome by offering free language classes, with the aim of supporting refugees' integration and improving their chances of accessing training and employment opportunities.

Moreover, adequately funds schools and universities. Host countries' national education systems need more funding to provide the schools and teachers necessary for all refugee children to have a quality education. Local universities need more support to offer displaced tertiary students the opportunity to complete their studies. Also, universities can provide scholarships for refugees. Scholarships can help refugees to continue their education somewhere safe, learn a new language, and prepare for one day rebuilding their home country. Scholarships often cover course and maintenance fees, accommodation, travel and visa costs.

CONCLUSION

At its heart, sustainable education is about creating environments in which all learners can grow and learn by being open to a wide range of perspectives and promoting critical thinking and personal accountability. However, in many places today, this is simply not possible because all the students are of a particular background and language or cultural group. Though English is the universal language in communication, some people like the refugees lack the ability to learn the language. Even if English is not the host country's first language, the language might still be foreign to the refugees. For instance, most of them still cannot read and write Bahasa Melayu despite being in Malaysia for many years. Many programmes can be conducted to help refugee children gain knowledge. Firstly, community welfare can conduct an awareness campaign to tell how important education is in our lives. The speaker can mention that by having a good education, people can get better-paid jobs in their life. Refugee children can grow and help to shape a better society of refugees who know about their rights. On the other hand, the government can provide education programs that teach kids languages which are Bahasa Melayu and English. Bahasa Melayu is a national language in Malaysia and people mostly communicate by using this language. Providing a basic knowledge of Bahasa Melayu to refugee children can help them to communicate with society. Having a basic knowledge of language can help the refugee children to interact with society in order to exchange ideas, make new friends and share experiences. Last but not least, university students can conduct day-to-day life skills programs for refugee children for instance, communication and interpersonal skills, decision-making and problem-solving, time management, money management, their responsibilities as children to parents and how to do house chores including laundry and cleaning the house. All of these programs not only help the refugee children to expand their knowledge but also practice new skills that help them in their daily activities.

The limitations of this review include its reliance on existing literature and the exclusion of primary data collection methods like interviews or surveys. Future research could build upon this review by employing mixed-method approaches that combine literature reviews with field-based studies to gain deeper insights into the specific experiences and needs of refugee children in their local contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare there is no conflict of interest present.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

TS@SJ: drafted the manuscript and contributed to the concept development and design of the article through literature collection, analysis and data interpretation for the article.

MSN: contributed to the concept development and analysis and data interpretation for the article.

KKW: check the manuscript content, support with literature and finalised the draft.

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