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## Refugee Children in Malaysia: Perceptions of Family and Coping Mechanisms

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## Refugee Children in Malaysia: Perceptions of Family and Coping Mechanisms

### Abstract

The percentage of refugee children in Malaysia has been growing in recent years with a rise of more than 9000 in less than 3 years. More than 51,000 of the 164,620 documented refugees in 2019 are below the age of 18 years. Refugee children are often marginalized in society making them vulnerable and requiring special assistance in meeting their educational needs, mental health care and socio-emotional wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of refugee children regarding family life and their emotional and coping mechanisms. Employing the Collage Life-Story Elicitation Technique (CLET) and a discovery-oriented narrative approach, 25 refugee children at a non-governmental educational center in Kuala Lumpur were interviewed. The findings from an in-depth thematic analysis revealed that these refugee children perceived their families as having gone through separation and disruption resulting in isolation, loneliness and being powerless in the host country. Their coping mechanisms included help offered by enabling adults, teachers seen as angels and other wise people from the community who were their sources of strength. They strived for a better future through being brave and independent. We also discuss the need for more humanitarian programs and support for this group of vulnerable children in Malaysia.

### Keywords

refugee children, collage life-story elicitation technique (CLET), narrative approach, self-striving

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## **Refugee Children in Malaysia: Perceptions of Family and Coping Mechanisms**

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The percentage of refugee children in Malaysia has been growing in recent years with a rise of more than 9000 in less than 3 years. More than 51,000 of the 164,620 documented refugees in 2019 are below the age of 18 years. Refugee children are often marginalized in society making them vulnerable and requiring special assistance in meeting their educational needs, mental health care and socio-emotional wellbeing. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of refugee children regarding family life and their emotional and coping mechanisms. Employing the Collage Life-Story Elicitation Technique (CLET) and a discovery-oriented narrative approach, 25 refugee children at a non-governmental educational center in Kuala Lumpur were interviewed. The findings from an in-depth thematic analysis revealed that these refugee children perceived their families as having gone through separation and disruption resulting in isolation, loneliness and being powerless in the host country. Their coping mechanisms included help offered by enabling adults, teachers seen as angels and other wise people from the community who were their sources of strength. They strived for a better future through being brave and independent. We also discuss the need for more humanitarian programs and support for this group of vulnerable children in Malaysia.

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Refugee children in Malaysia have minimal rights to physical protection, education, health care and other resources. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in January 2019 there were about 164,620 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the organization in Malaysia. The single largest proportion were refugees from Myanmar, accounting for about 86.52%, comprising of Rohingya, Chinese, Myanmar Muslims, Rakhine, Arakanese and various other ethnic groups. Other refugees numbering about 22,250 come from countries that include Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. The number of children below the age of 18 as reported by UNHCR was 42,750, an increase of more than 9000 in less than 3 years (33,640 in 2016). Refugee children in Malaysia are, however, deprived of their basic rights (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019) because the local government in Malaysia consider them a transient community with limited rights for long-term stay (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, 2019).

As Malaysia had not agreed to the 1951 Refugee Convention, there are no refugee camps in Malaysia to accommodate them. Furthermore, Malaysian laws such as the Federal Constitution of 1957 and the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63 do not provide refugees with legal rights to remain in the country. Thus, these refugees are a marginalized group scattered around the Klang Valley in and around Kuala Lumpur. They live in overcrowded shared spaces in groups of up to 20 people per unit in low-cost housing, urban villages and housing estates and some even in huts built near construction sites or in temporary camps in the fringes of the jungle (Shelter Home for Children, 2019). They do not have access to fundamental human rights and no legal status or recourse against exploitation by local employers. The Malaysian government has adopted an apathetic attitude, making no policies to ameliorate the precarious situation of these refugees (Letchamanan, 2013). The struggles of the refugees in Malaysia persist including being employed on lower wages, being forced to work long hours and do dangerous work that most Malaysians do not wish to do (Wake & Cheung, 2016). As with most refugees elsewhere (Doocy et al., 2016), refugees in Malaysia continue as stateless migrants (The Malaysian Bar, 2005), striving to survive while many also experience constant fear of being rounded up and repatriated to their war-torn countries of origin or imprisoned and undergoing harsh punishment (Wake & Cheung, 2016). These uncertain, precarious situations and struggles have significant impacts on the Malaysian refugee children's perceptions towards their family life and their psychological well-being.

Given that they are denied access to the free government education system and attending public examinations that would grant them access to higher education and a better future, these refugee children experience the harsh realities of life in Malaysia (Article 28(1)(a) of Malaysia's reservation; Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, 2017). In 2018, the UNHCR reported that only 30% of the school-aged refugee children in Malaysia are enrolled in the 133 community learning centers operated by non-government organizations (NGO), religious and humanitarian groups (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee, 2018). These learning centers, however, face numerous issues such as lack of financial resources and qualified teachers, security and safety, overcrowded classes, and unhygienic conditions (United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017; Teng, 2011). Furthermore, refugee children attending the refugee-run community-based educational centers are unable to attain any educational qualifications recognized in Malaysia (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, 2017).

Other hardships experienced by refugee children in Malaysia relate to teenage daughters forced to stay at home without any form of education, and teenage boys (below 18 years of age) having to work in malls, construction sites and restaurants to contribute to the maintenance and needs of the family. In general, most of these refugee children in Malaysia become exposed and vulnerable to increased risks to a wide range of adverse outcomes that span mental health problems, suicidal behaviors, substance abuse, criminality and educational underachievement (Fergusson & Horwood, 2008; Vaghri et al., 2019). They also suffer low psychological well-being due to traumatic experiences, both before and while escaping from their homeland and when seeking settlement in the host country (Hunt, 2002; Low et al., 2014; Shaw et al., 2018). Those who had witnessed, or experienced traumatic events, such as witnessing the death of loved ones, are at higher risk of developing mental disorders or other stress-related conditions (Alemi et al., 2015). Displacement-related stressors, for instance, discrimination at the hands of the local host community, lack of social support and employment also contribute to the poor mental health of these refugee children (Kim, 2016; Vaghri et al., 2019). On the other hand, Daud et al. (2008) contend that adequate emotional expression, supportive family relations, good peer relations and pro-sociality within the refugee community are key contributors to the resilience of refugee children.

Given the precarious situation of these refugee youths, we can conclude that the lives of refugees and their children in Malaysia are not easy. It is assumed that refugee children had no choice but to follow their parents or adult caregivers and to adapt to the new host country. They had been exposed to stressful environments and thus tend to encounter mental health problems such as anxiety, high levels of stress and depression (Gosnell, 2017; Low et al., 2018). However, to date scholarly research related to investigations into the experiences and perceptions as well as the coping mechanisms of refugee children in Malaysia is still very limited. The present study was therefore initiated to explore the perceptions of refugee children on their family lives, and how they coped with living in Malaysia. The research questions were: (i) How do refugee children perceive family life living as refugees in Malaysia? and (ii) How do refugee children cope with the uncertainties and difficulties they experience living in Malaysia?

The present study has obtained ethical approval from the University Scientific and Ethical Review Committee at a local private higher education institution in Malaysia after successfully obtaining a private grant specifically allocated for refugee studies. In accordance with requirements for psychological research, the researchers complied with all ethical matters. Since the participants were under the age of 18 years (see Methods section below), parental consent was required. Following the agreement with the administrators at the educational center that the children attended, the teachers explained the project to parents in an information leaflet and verbally, acquiring parental consent. The information leaflet explained that all data collected during the focus group session with the children will be handled confidentially, the children and family's privacy protected, and the data archived in password-protected folders on the head researcher's computer. The children also consented to participate without any coercion.

At the time of conducting the study, three authors were from the same research center at a private university in Malaysia. This university was responsible for the ethical approval and managing the research grant for this project. The research grant was specifically aimed at encouraging research with refugees to raise public awareness and advocate for the needs of these vulnerable communities in Malaysia. The fourth author, while from a different higher education institution in Asia, was the developer of the Collage Life-story Elicitation Technique (CLET) that was used as the method to solicit narratives from the refugee children. At the time, she was also indirectly involved with a Malaysian university as external reviewer and collaborator. The first author was the lead researcher of this project who has done several refugee studies prior to this project (Kok et al., 2017; Low et al., 2014, 2018). She involved in the initial contact and training of CLET workshop for the refugee teachers in Kuala Lumpur with the arrangement assistance of UNHCR, followed by the training for fieldworkers (interviewers). Data has been collected from the refugee children at the end of 2018, followed by analysis and report writing.

## **Method**

According to Sharan (2009), qualitative methods focus on the perceptions, experience and feelings of the participants. Employing these methods give us rich understanding of the lived experiences of participants without the interference of researcher preconceived categories. In the same vein, the Collage Life Eliciting Technique (CLET) evolved as a method to give voice to young people and those who are not yet able to verbalize their feelings as eloquently as native speakers (Van Schalkwyk, 2010; Van Schalkwyk & Lijadi, 2019). Whereas drawing out stories from young children could be difficult because of their inability to articulate the CLET utilizes both non-verbal and verbal narrative making (storytelling) to gain an understanding of that which cannot yet be voiced out. The CLET also allows for

culturally appropriate narratives, for the scaffolding autobiographical memories of hard-to-remember traumas, and for self-disclosure and meaning-making to explore deeply embedded processes (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014; Van Schalkwyk & Lijadi, 2019). Therefore, the researchers decided to use CLET to explore the refugee children's perceptions of family life and to discover more about their coping mechanisms as refugees in Malaysia.

## **Participants**

Letters were sent out to several refugee centers in Kuala Lumpur but only one center gave permission to conduct the CLET and to collect the children's stories. After obtaining consent from the parents 25 students (19 boys and 6 girls, aged 10 – 12 years) assented and were present on the day of our visit to participate in our study—the teacher at the learning center helped the researchers obtain parental consent. All of the children had been living in Malaysia for 3-5 years before participating in this project. The children were randomly assigned to small groups of five students as focus groups (i.e., 5 groups), each with a research assistant conducting the session following the CLET procedures. Coming mainly from Myanmar and Sri Lanka, most of them had arrived in Malaysia when they were 6-9 years of age, while a few of them were born in Malaysia. Their parents held jobs as helpers or waiters in restaurants, construction workers and domestic maids, and their monthly earnings were less than RM1,000 (about USD250).

## **Procedures**

The CLET was used in a focus group format because of time constraints that did not allow for individual face-to-face interviews. The refugee children were also of Asian heritage cultures that is more collectivistic, and a group session was considered more appropriate to help them better elaborate/articulate the topic under investigation. Each focus group was conducted with the help of four trained research assistants, while the first author conducted the fifth focus group. These four research assistants were students of a Malaysian university, fluent in English as well as several Asian languages, and were trained to use the CLET in accordance with the procedures set out by Van Schalkwyk (2010, personal communication). The children were familiar with the English, which was the language of education at the center and all the focus groups were conducted in English.

In the beginning in order to establish some rapport, the refugee children played a few games as a group and were then organized into focus groups based on a color strip (i.e., green, blue, red, orange, and yellow) that they randomly selected at the start of the session. The children's teacher was also present to help with the games and familiarizing the children with the researcher and research assistants. Once organized into focus groups, the research assistants followed the five steps of the CLET in succession starting with collage making (CLET Step 1). The children had been instructed beforehand to bring some photos or magazines for selecting pictures and the researchers also provided magazines, A3 paper for collage making, scissors and glue. For Step 1 of the CLET, the children in each focus group were instructed to make a group collage in which everyone in the group could select 4-5 images to paste on a large piece of paper depicting a picture story about "family." They could freely choose which images or pictures they wanted to use, cut these and paste them in random fashion on the A3 page provided. The collage-making lasted about 20 minutes and the research assistants provided guidance and encouragement but did not advise the children what and how to paste the images.

Following the collage making, the research assistants facilitated the focus-group interviews encouraging the children to tell a story about an experience/event represented in the picture they or someone else pasted or an image that they had drawn on the collage. Two initial

prompts were used to help the children tell their stories: (i) “Tell a story about this image,” and (ii) “What does this image mean to you.” These two questions were followed up with more prompts to elicit storytelling and draw out meaningful stories from the children. The research assistants also alternated the children telling their stories making sure that everyone in the group had an opportunity to tell two or more stories about the images on the collage. Using the collage as stimulus avoided one of the pitfalls in focus group discussion as the children selected different images to talk about and did not merely respond by saying the same as the one before (Franz, 2011).

We followed the guidance of CLET developed by Van Schalkwyk (Van Schalkwyk & Lijadi, 2019) to ask some Self positioning questions such as, “Where would you position yourself in the collage,” and “Was there any picture you tried to find but could not get to paste it on the collage.” Students were encouraged to draw pictures on the collage in case there was an image they could not find but would like to add. The self-positioning provided some insight into the child’s perceptions of self-in-the world, while the missing image portrayal was intended to elicit memories that might be repressed for fear of exposing family secrets. Besides we also used prompts where the children were then asked to reflect on two pictures whose meanings were related either in terms of similarities or differences. The above prompts were intended to give voice to probable conflicts not yet verbalized. The answers to the two prompts were presented in Table 3

## **Data Analysis**

During the data analysis phase, the focus was on gaining insights regarding the refugee children’s perceptions of family and how they coped with living in the host country Malaysia. The focus group interviews were transcribed, and each child’s utterances labelled with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. This provided five protocols each comprising of a group collage (Figure 1) and a transcript of the group’s storytelling. On the collages, each image was assigned a number reflecting the order in which the children talked about the picture during the storytelling phase.

Following through with the procedures proposed by Van Schalkwyk (personal communication and co-author), each researcher conducted an in-depth thematic analysis first of the collage alone and then of the narratives alone before combining both collage and narrative to test assumptions (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014, 2017). We adopted an inductive open coding approach, we read through the protocols several times independently to familiarize ourselves with the data, both non-verbal and verbal data separately. For example, children in Group 1 pasted many pictures and used many emotional descriptions (i.e., sad, lonely, angry, fierce, and scary). Table 1 is an example of how the researchers have developed the categories and themes from meaning units (verbatim) and images in the collage for Group 1 (see Figure 1). First, the images (or pictures) posted on the collage have been interpreted without reference to the storytelling transcripts and writing down denotations (column 1) and possible connotations (column 2) for each picture pasted on the collages. The descriptive labels were separated into negative and positive emotions. The researchers then met online to discuss the denotations and symbolic meanings for the images and explored alternatives until we could all agree on the possible non-verbal story intended by the images.

Second, the focus group transcripts were interpreted again independently and without reference to the collages searching for deeper meanings and potential categories emerging from the verbal data set. This provided the researchers with direct quotes from the participant’s storytelling (column 3). The researchers met again to discuss the themes and categorize these for further exploration when reading the collage and stories together (third phase) and doing a within-case analysis adding codes (column 4) and organizing the codes into categories (column

5). During the within-case analysis, the researchers connected the reasons for the negative emotions that dominated their life experiences as these experiences indicated instances of (1) Separation (either personally missed their family members from their home country) or (2) their projection of losing life, missing family members due to wars. Thus emerged a theme of “Separation and Disruption” with sub-themes related negative feelings due to separation caused by wars and the subsequent disruption of family lives. Instances of being left behind after school hours due to parents being at work became apparent in the across case analysis and was linked with their experiences of loneliness and struggling to cope with sibling quarrels and bullies.

**Table 1.***The Development of Categories and Themes for Collage 1: Emotions and Hope*

Picture (exact)	Connotation	Quotation	Code	Categories
Pic 1 A man holding a frightened little girl in arms and a little boy standing	Lost, Confused	“I feel sad because I could relate to this picture”	Feeling sad (Separation)	Negative Emotions
Pic 2 Picture of a baby (giving away baby)	Sad, confused	“This baby is alone, she will be given away”	Feeling confused (Separation)	
Pic 3 A lonely girl	Anger, playing cool	“I am always angry because of my family”	Feeling angry (in need of company)	
Pic 8 Sibling fight	Fierce, Anger	“I feel angry towards my sisters because they are always argue”	Feeling angry	
Pic 7 Cousin fight	Dark, Cold, Fierce	“Cousin looks very fierce and scary and always scold me”	Feeling scared (in need of guidance when faced with bully)	
Pic 4 Pic of reunion	Joy, Cheerfulness	“Happy to reunite with mother”	Reunion	Positive Emotions
Pic 6 Past excursion photo	Once being together	“Happy thinking about the past vacations with family members”	Memory of togetherness	
Pic 9 Travelled with mum	Joy, Sadness	“Thinking of the time travelling with my mum...” “Sad because no longer can travel	Happy Memory	
Pic 12 Playing dress-up	Happiness	“Playing dress-up make me happy”	Family bond (Togetherness)	
Pic 17 Teachers bring hope	Guidance, joy Hope	“Teacher as hope and leader in bring my hopes and dream to reality” “I am grateful to my teacher”	Teacher are angel	Hope

Numerous online meetings were held where all the researchers were present and because one of the researchers was transferred to another university and another was in a different country. Note that only the first author was part of the research team who conducted the focus group sessions. The other authors, although part of the bigger research team, were not involved in conducting the CLET and were thus independent readers during the analytic process. Dissent views were resolved during our online audio and video conferences to achieve consensus of possible meanings and metaphors that could give a deeper understanding of the refugee children's lived experiences in Malaysia (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014, 2017). For the most part, consensus was easily achieved as we kept the focus on the repeated occurrence of meanings emerging from the five collages and that answered our research questions. Apart from the in-depth thematic analysis, we also adopted an interpretive stance (Smith & Osborn, 2008) that helped the researchers not only to connect codes—that is, the visuals (pictures) and verbal (interview) storytelling of the children—but also to interpret the contextual structure that gave rise to possible meanings.

The themes were formulated based on discussions, cross-case analysis, and further reviews of CLET protocols. To achieve the objective of this research, we focused on analyzing only the collages (CLET Step 1) and the storytelling (CLET Step 2), while other students' answers to our other probes and prompts of which illuminate our understanding of our research questions will also be presented. Figure 1 presents the five group collages, numbered for easy reference. In further presentation of the findings below, the collages are referred to as "Figure 1, Column 1:3" for collage 1, picture 3 or "Figure 1, Columns 3:8 & 9" for collage 3, pictures 8 and 9. For each theme, we also present some direct quotes from the focus group discussions and storytelling to support our analysis and interpretation, followed by a discussion of our claims. We also need to emphasize here that the findings and discussion is based on our collaborative efforts as authors and that we acknowledge the possibility of alternative interpretations should these become apparent.

## **Findings**

In this section, we present our findings pertaining to the two central research questions, namely refugee children's (i) perceptions of their family life, and (ii) their coping strategies in the host country. In the presentation of the findings, we first present an overview of the children's participation in the first two steps of the CLET (i.e., collage making and storytelling) and then follow this with a discussion on the four themes which emerged from our cross-case analysis and interpretation of the five CLET protocols: (i) Separation and Disruption, (ii) Vulnerabilities, (iii) Family as Source of Strength, and (iv) Enabling Adults. As expected, each of these four themes included some sub-themes such as feelings of being losing or gaining life, powerless, poverty, elements of a happy family, self-empowerment, striving and dreaming. Table 2 summarizes the identified themes and sub-themes based on the cross-case analysis. Although the focus of each collage was different, similar expressions and descriptions have been integrated with the overall theme and sub-themes.

**Table 2.**  
*The Identification of Themes from the 5 Collages*

	Codes	Categories	Sub-themes	Themes
Collage 1	Feeling sad Feeling scared confused Feeling loss	Negative Emotions due to separation	Consequence of war	Separation & Disruption
	Feeling lonely	Negative Emotions of current family lives	Disrupted family	
	Memory of togetherness Guidance	Positive Emotions about family Hope	Family bond	Source of Strength
	Teachers are angels	Hope	Community Resources	Enabling adults
Collage 2	Losing live Gaining live	Consequence of war	Unity and separation	Separation & Disruption
	Struggles with routine of life Desire to have a toy Desire to have fun	Being left behind	Disrupted family	Separation & Disruption
	Religious leader	Religion guidance	Community resources	Enabling Adults
	Doctor	Caring people Medical help		
	Family bond Family together	Family love	Family as source of strength	
Collage 3	Powerful footballer Fierce authority figure Older siblings	Showing off and bully Threatening Aggression	powerlessness	Vulnerability
	Anger Strive for power Competition Recognition	Own striving	Aspired to have power	
	Sibling bullying Basic need unmet	Resentment Poverty	Lack of guidance	
	Cruise Voyage Basic needs	Leisure time Family togetherness Basic needs to be met	Elements of an ideal Family	Family as a source of strength

	Missing grandparents	Yearning for an united family		
	Dream	Yearning for a happy future	Dream of future family life	Own striving
Collage 5	Sweet memory Family Bond	The Past Self	Memory and self-striving	Own striving (Self-Empowerment)
	Future dream	The Future Self		
	Empty plate need of company The unimportant self Self- encouragement	The Present Self		

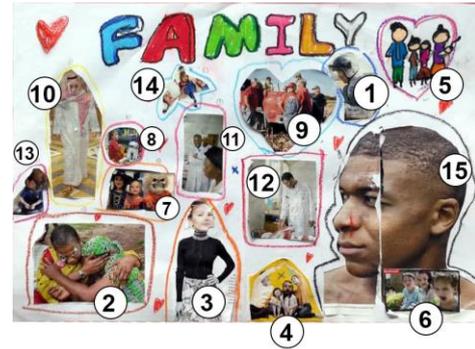
Furthermore, we discuss each of the four themes and sub-themes by providing evidence from both the visual stories—referencing the images on the collages embedded in Figure 1—and the verbal story telling with direct quotes in the children’s own voices and presented in italics below to support the researchers’ interpretations of the qualitative data collected with the CLET. Themes 1 and 2 are further elaborated to address the questions pertaining to the children’s perceptions on their families and how they feel to live as a refugee family in Malaysia. Themes 3 and 4 are formulated upon the findings in response to how the children we interviewed in focus groups coped and where they found their resources to overcome the adversities they faced as refugee children in Malaysia.

### Overview of CLET Participation

Aiming to explore the refugee children’s perceptions of family and their coping strategies, the children were asked to make a group collage telling a picture story about their family. We gave a title for collage making about “My Family” anticipating that the children would paste many images of people representing their perspectives of the family and their family life as refugees in Malaysia. We anticipated that the children would use the images pasted on the collages to stimulate autobiographical memories and storytelling in response to our research questions (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). However, the pictures pasted on the collages were seemingly unrelated to the family (Figure 1), and their storytelling were more reflective of their own emotions living in the host country than of specific perceptions of family life or coping. There also seemed to be a distinctive focus in each group collage that did link closely to the children’s experiences as refugees living in Malaysia rather than of their family life. This reluctance could possibly be explained by a culture of holding back and not talking about any form of disharmony that might exist within the family and to rather present only what is viable for public knowledge (Kok et al., in press).



Collage 1: Completed by Group 1



Collage 2: Completed by Group 2



Collage 3: Completed by Group 3



Collage 4: Completed by Group 4



Collage 5: Completed by Group 5

**Figure 1**  
*Five Collages made by Refugee Children*

Although human-related images dominated the five group collages (64% of all images), only a few images directly portrayed family life as such (see Figure 1). Rather, the human-related images were of individual persons (i.e., 23 of 48) or persons who stimulated memories of the past (e.g., lost parent, parent-child reunion) or wishes for the future (e.g., being powerful, successful businessperson).

Overall, the children could however identify potential symbolic meanings of the pictures and link them to their experiences. For example, Group 2 (ref to Figure 1, Column 2) referred to the human-related images as stimuli to narrate stories about “going to war means loss of lives” and “two people hugging means gaining lives.” In another example of how human-related images stimulated their memories, a boy in Group 1, Koko pasted two pictures, one of a mother and daughter together and one of a man sitting alone to the side. He narrated a

story about the mother and daughter being reunited after an initial separation (Figure 1, Column 1:4), and the father as still alone and separated from his loved ones (Figure 1, Column 1:5). While Koko was apparently happy when talking about the reunion between mother and child, his tone changed, and he became visibly sad when talking about the lonely father. Another boy in the group said: “The father is feeling sad for being faraway.” Maung, a boy from Group 5 referred to one of the single female images saying that it reminded him of his mother (Figure 1, Column 5:4). He did not know the whereabouts of his father and seemingly did not care much about this absence in his family life.

Apart from human-related images, the children pasted 36% images of objects and nature. These images also stimulated memories of family life (e.g., vacations together, leisure time) as well as projections of their unfulfilled wishes and dreams of a possible (better) future (e.g., Figure 1 Column 4). For example, Maung, the boy from Group 5 pointed to an empty plate on the collage (Figure 1, Column 5:6) saying, “I wish I could have meals with my family” and expressing a longing to spend time with his mother. His mother worked as a domestic worker, was always busy and did not have much time to spend with him, although he described her as always smiling and never sad. Maung also commented on missing his extended family, his “uncle and aunty” with whom he went swimming and kayaking during the summer (Figure 1, Column 5:5 as well as images 10 and 14) before they came to Malaysia.

### **Theme 1: Separation and Disruption**

The theme regarding separation and disruption of family life had been repeatedly narrated by many of the refugee children in all the groups. We assumed that separation would relate, for example, to a parent leaving the family to go ahead to a prospective host country in search of a better life, or that a parent was killed during a war in the home country. Disruption in our assumptions referred to a family, also the extended family, being pulled apart, parents working long hours with little time for family togetherness, and sibling squabbles. All the groups expressed this theme in their collage making and storytelling. For example, a girl named Cynthia, in Group 4, when talking about a picture of a snow-capped mountain (Figure 1, Column 4:12) said, “I miss my grandma and I also miss the snow at grandma’s house.” Her grandmother lives in the northern parts of Pakistan and Cynthia had not seen her since they came to Malaysia four years ago. Another girl in Group 4 also narrated about missing family when pointing to picture 3 on the group collage (Figure 1, Column 4:3), “I miss my grandparents.”

Emotions of separation, loss and disruption that related to wars were also expressed by several other children. For example, the children used phrases such as “giving away the child,” “leaving behind,” and “losing life.” A few more excerpts from the story telling suffice to support how their current lives were affected by the separation of family members and being left alone. “This child is sad because she is alone” said Nang, a girl in Group 1 pointing to Figure 1, Column 1:3. She also told a story about being bullied by her cousins and that her mother was too busy to mediate in the dispute with her cousins. She expressed sadness, having no choice but to live with her cousin’s family while her mother was occupied elsewhere, probably working long hours away from their home.

Although we assumed that the children would talk freely about their present life situations living as a refugee family in Malaysia, we noticed that few did so in their storytelling. The children did not directly relate their current living conditions to the consequences of war or vulnerabilities in their home country. Rather, they projected symbolic meanings into the pictures that related to wars and separation that have caused so much disruption to their lives. They referred to losing life (when men were sent to war) and gaining life (when there was reunion) to interpret the consequences of war. The consequences of separation with family

members, both nuclear family members and extended family, was also expressed. Many refugee families were forced to leave behind family members, or a parent left the family in search of a haven or a better future. Even when arriving in Malaysia, a seemingly safer country, the lives of refugee children have been disrupted. The children in Group 1 implied many negative emotions of feeling sad, lost and confused (due to separations), and many other negative emotions due to being left behind with the images they pasted on the collage (Figure 1, Column 1). The concepts of loneliness and of missing family members or a parent were evident in the refugee children's verbalizations (storytelling). Disruption of family life was evident in describing their feelings of being left behind unattended after school hours, feeling sad and craving adult (a parent's) company (Figure 1, Column 1:3; Column 2:13), or just feeling angry and scared or in need of guidance to cope with sibling's bullying (Figure 1, Column 1:7 & 8). Many parents of refugee children in Malaysia worked as construction workers or as helpers in restaurants, where they worked long hours and seldom had time to spend with their children, specifically not when the children were awake (i.e., during the day). The children were therefore left behind to take care of themselves and of younger siblings (Wake & Cheung, 2016).

## **Theme 2: Vulnerabilities**

The theme of vulnerability refers to powerlessness and experiences of being bullied. We assumed that the children would be able to express specific challenges they faced as refugee children in Malaysia and providing insights into broader issues of having had to leave their country of origin. While some children would narrate stories more expressly related to the consequence of war (the example of losing lives and separation), others talked about being bullied by older siblings or other family members, or about feeling powerless in the face of their own difficulties. Perhaps the age at which they left the home country contributed to their inability to narrate specific stories about being refugees. Most of the participants were quite young when their parents brought them to Malaysia, and they have little or no knowledge of the situations that demanded the family to leave.

Nevertheless, the children used authority figures and pictures of powerful animals to express, on one hand, their own experiences of powerlessness, and on the other hand to elaborate on their own yearnings of being powerful. This theme was particularly evident in Group 3 and throughout their interaction of collage making and storytelling in the focus group. Other group collages also presented with images of authority figures that support the theme of vulnerability. For example, Thakin, a boy in Group 3, initiated his storytelling by choosing two images of seemingly powerful people, a politician and two football players on the group collage (Figure 1, Column 3:7, 8 & 9). He continued to describe the football player as "a show-off" and the politician as "a bully" expressing his dislike for the supposedly powerful politician and aggressive football player. On the other hand, Thakin aspired to be powerful talking about the picture of a lion cub as being "cute and happy" (Figure 1, Column 3:1). Although cute, the cub could also be seen as powerless and the child facing many adversities and vulnerabilities in his young life. An alternative interpretation of the lion cub is certainly possible. Another boy in Group 3, Ken talked about a footballer (Figure 1, Column 3:9) and a trophy (Figure 1, Column 3:10) all of which represented his wish or desire to be powerful and strong—the footballer had power and authority and would enable Ken to tell others what to do: "If I am like him, I can tell everybody what to do, and they have to obey me." He also liked to win and thus the trophy signified for him the desire to win at everything. We interpreted the choice of powerful people (businessmen) and successful sportspeople as evidence of how children learned behavior through modelling and how they are motivated to strive to be powerful (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 2010) in a probable attempt to deal with the adversities faced thus far in their lives.

Besides Group 3, the children from other groups also used authority figures such as politicians (Figure 1, Column 3:7), the military or police (Figure 1, Column 1:1, Column 2:1), businesspersons (Figure 1, Column 5:9; Column 3:5; Column 5:4), or sportspersons (Figure 1, Column 2:14; Column 3: 8 & 9) who represented their un-verbalized stories of power, harassment, or abuse (i.e., non-verbal storytelling). There were also images of fierce, powerful, and threatening animals (e.g., tiger, lion) and an image of a faceless person holding up a sign of hope (Figure 1, Column 5:11). We interpreted the inclusion of the images of authority figures as well as threatening animals as non-verbal stories of bullying, that the children, and perhaps their parents as well as other family members had experienced, but that they were unable to verbalize in their storytelling (Van Schalkwyk & Lijadi, 2019). Living in poverty as many refugee families in Malaysia had to do also caused the refugee children feeling vulnerable. A picture of food (Figure 1, Column 3:12) and an empty plate (Figure 1 Column 5: 6) were non-verbal expressions of their need for unmet basic needs (“I am hungry when I see the picture of food” (Figure 1. Column 3:12) said a girl in Group 3) and wanting to have company at mealtimes said another.

The faceless person (Figure 1, Column 5:11), however, was puzzling. Apart from possibly referring to missing family members who were left in their home countries and their projection of emotions related to separation onto the pictures of wars, the children we interviewed described their present lives as having mundane experiences of being bullied and of sibling quarrelling due to being left behind when parents are busy working. They also expressed vulnerability about having to hide their stateless identity in a host country that was not particularly welcoming of refugees and their children (Wake & Cheung, 2016). The latter seemed to be a likely interpretation of the faceless person, but other interpretations are also possible with further exploration and a point that could be followed up should we have an opportunity to revisit the children who participated in this project.

### **Theme 3: Family as a Source of Strength**

Apart from perceiving the family as being disrupted or experiencing vulnerability, the refugee children in this study also perceived the family as a source of strength in the face of adversity. Our assumption at the start of analysis was that the children would elaborate freely upon how specific family members enabled them to adapt in the host country. Could the children, for example, rely on the family to help them cope with the necessary adaptations? In our cross-case analysis it became clear that the family did serve as a source of strength but not necessarily in the manner we anticipated. For the children who participated in the five groups, their strength came from having good memories of past experiences and being together with both parents and the extended family members (Figure 1, Column 4:3), being united (Figure 1, Column 1:4; Column 2:2), and having good bonding doing things collectively (Figure 1, Column 2:9 & 14). They treasure these memories and imagine a future of again visiting with family in their country of origin, going on a holiday or supporting one another through difficulties, and by describing elements of the ideal family or at least how they perceived the ideal family. Storytelling in Group 4 also focused on the importance of family togetherness. “Without a family you are nothing” said Amid who came from Pakistan via Sri Lanka. Pointing to a huge mosque (Figure 1, Column 4:1) and a giant cruise liner (Figure 1, Column 4:2) he continued to narrate: “Family needs to have love, leisure time and playing time and going for holidays” and explaining that being together as a family will be a great strength when faced with adversity. Another child in Group 4 also narrated about the family saying: “Besides food, shelter, going for a vacation or having some leisure time...or not having to work all day are important.”

The refugee children interviewed for this study, perceived the family as having experienced disruption and separation, and as a result being vulnerable to daily hardships of living in Malaysia. On one hand, vulnerable refugee children are living under harsh conditions being excluded from the public health care and education systems and their parents being exploited by local employers as discussed above in the introduction. On the other hand, they treasure the memories of family that provided them with a source of strength to face the adversities of everyday life. Being dependent as children on their parents and the extended family is typical in Asian cultures (Kitano & Chinn, 1986), and despite having suffered hardships in their young lives they are already quite familiar with the importance of the collective being stronger than the individual (Kok et al., in press). Therefore, psychologically being part of and attached to a family are for them a source of strength and coping with challenges (Van Schalkwyk, 2020).

#### **Theme 4: Enabling Adults and Aspiring**

A coping strategy identified in the collages and the narratives of the refugee children who participated in the five focus groups involved the support from compassionate teachers and other community leaders such as religious leaders and medical officer. “Teachers are angels” said Betsy, a girl in Group 1 who expressed positive emotions of home and happiness with colorful drawings on the group collage and stating that she had a teacher who was very supportive and helpful. She continued to say that “Teachers give us hope and lead us. They help bringing my hopes and dreams to reality. I am very grateful to my teachers.” Other group members agreed that their teachers were “like angels” that would guide them to help them to fulfil their dreams “of becoming a successful person in the future.” Rico, a boy and Ruth, a girl in Group 2, respectively pasted images of a man in white clothes and turban (Figure 1, Column 2:10) and of religious people wearing robes and a doctor attending to a woman on a bed (Figure 1, Column 2:11 & 12). In their storytelling, Rico and Ruth elaborated that these community leaders as representative of persons with influence and power who could resolve certain issues in their country (of origin) as well as in the host country. The children could identify these community leaders as important people who could affect change. Knowing such community leaders, either in their country of origin or in the host country, seemingly gave the children a sense of wellbeing for coping with the adversities they were facing as refugees.

On the other hand, there were also the children’s own strivings and aspirations of a better future for themselves and their families. Strivings was particularly evident among the participants in Group 5. Many children in this group aspired to be successful and powerful such as Frans who wanted to be a chef or a businessman (Figure 1, Column 5:9) so that he could earn a lot of money and buy a Mitsubishi car (Figure 1, Column 5:10) and to support his family. Other children aspired to be musicians/singers (Figure 1, Column 5:8), sportsmen or businessmen/women (Figure 1, Column 3: 8 & 5; Column 5: 9). Their aspirations included some values such as wanting to be kind, sharing, and contributing to their own community. Thakin from Group 3 hoped to have power so that he could help people who were oppressed and in need, like the kind-hearted successful sportsman on the collage (Figure 1, Column 3:8). A few students from Group 3 have identified being powerful and kind as admired traits for their respective future selves. Bravery was a specific trait that for many of the children were depicted in the symbolic meanings of images of fierce animals, successful people, or community leaders. These images represented power and influence, something the children wished for in the future. Rufus, a boy in Group 5, also said that he was content being alone wanting to be independent in future. He commented that he was used to being alone and thought about the word “Step up” (Figure 1, Column 5:2) that being independent could help him learn

many new things and empower him for a better future, possibly to make changes in his community when he is in a position of power.

Besides their own strivings, the children also presented with some daydreaming and used dreams about objects they desired to project to the near future as a way of coping. For example, mobile phones (Figure 1, Column 3:13 & 14; Column 5:12) and high-tech digital devices (Figure 1, Column 4:9 & 10) were presented as desirable at a time when things get better, and when they will overcome the present hardships of their refugee lives. Others expressed their wish of a future self that could go for a journey to a big mosque (Figure 1, Column 4:2), a voyage on a cruise liner (Figure 1, Column 4:1), and into nature (Figure 1 Column 5:7). These images could have been representations of escaping their current situation as refugees and dreaming of a different life when all (family members) would be happy living and doing things together. We concluded that the image with the words: "You give me hope and a future" (Figure 1, Column 5:11) summarized this theme of striving and dreaming for a better future, something the family was seeking when leaving their country of origin for the host country, Malaysia. Overall, the refugee children aspired to be successful and powerful. They used aspiration and dreams about the future as a way of coping with adversity focusing on things they wished for rather than talking about their current circumstances.

### Analysis of Responses to Two Additional Prompts:

The self-positioning question provided insight into the child's perceptions of self-in-the world, while the missing image portrayal was intended to elicit more stories as there was an image they could not find, but the students would like to add. Most students wrote their names besides the figure they liked, or they wrote "This is Me" on the collage. They were able to find a representation according to the symbolic meaning they identified. Table 3 below shows some examples:

**Table 3.**

*Data Analysis of Two Additional Prompts*

Two additional prompts	This is Me	
Self-positioning and Missing Figure	Identify Self with pictures	Projection Meanings
	Nang, a girl in Group 1 pointing to a lonely child (Figure 1, Column 1:3), "this is Me"	A boy wrote his name besides the figure of a man holding a child (Figure 1, Column 1:1), and he wrote "Life is challenging." When asked what he meant, he answered "Challenging means full of troubles."
	A girl wrote her name besides the picture of "Teachers are angels" (Figure 1, Column 1:17) and she identified herself with the girl in the picture whose hand being held by the angel.	Jia, a girl from Group 2 drew many heart shapes referring to these as "happy family."
	John pointed to a boy in the picture (Figure 1, Column 1:17) and said, "I was going for an excursion with my family"	Anjana, a girl in Group 4 happily showed a red heart shape she drew (Figure 1, Column 4:12) and positioned herself between the

		heart shape and the picture of grandma
Reflection of two Conflicting/Similar pictures	<b>This is My Thinking and Emotions</b>	
	Identify Conflicting Meanings	Reveal Emotions & Aspiration
	<p>Gain vs Loss</p> <p>Minh, a boy in Group 2 pointed to (Figure 1, Column 2: 1 &amp; 2) said that picture 1 represented “war” and the loss of life, while picture 2 showed “gaining of lives” where “two individuals hugged each other.”</p>	<p>A boy in Group 3, after listening to Ken’s (who wanted to be a powerful person like a footballer) sharing, he used two pictures to make a contrast between a “showing-off” footballer (Figure 1, Column 3:9), and a kind-hearted footballer (Figure1, Column 3: 8).</p>
	<p>Happy vs Sad</p> <p>Another child in group 2 echoed Minh’s narrative pointing to picture 2 and claiming: “<i>This one is happy</i>” while pointing to another pic (Figure 1, Column 2: 2) “<i>That one sad.</i>”</p>	<p>Yin Yin in Group 3, were keen to be seen next to the picture of a tiger (Figure 1, Column 3:2), stating that she wanted to be “<i>bold and fierce</i>” just like the tiger. She continued to draw on the similarities between the tiger and a businesswoman stating that she wanted “<i>to be able to bravely speak out for what she wanted and to be confident.</i>”</p>

While using the techniques of “Compare and Contrast” students were able to verbalize some conflicts or emotions that they would otherwise be difficult to express. The ways they positioned themselves were in concordance to the identified four themes presented. Conflicting concepts and emotions revealed also relevant and their aspiration of wanting to be powerful but kind also being expressed.

### Discussion

The emerging themes that answered our research questions gave us greater understanding of the refugee children’s perceptions of their families and on their coping mechanisms. Their perception of family was a mixture of vulnerability and source of strength. As children from refugee families are affected by their parents and the respective environments around them, the eco-systemic theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1997), appears to be the most appropriate theory to interpret the findings and propose changes for these refugee children.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) developmental framework holds that the development of children is affected by their ecological environment. In this framework, the family exists as the microsystem, and is regarded as the main and immediate ecological environment of a child. Besides the family, teachers and peers from the school system and extended family members in the immediate neighborhood serve as a wider influencing environment. The interactions between two settings (meso-systems) such as family and school setting or societal systems (exo-systems) such as the educational and community systems will also affect the children’s

development, while the wider culture such as the country's policies and the cultural values in which the child is embedded, serves as the macro-system.

The family setting in which children experience their day-to-day life is located in a wider community and therefore unavoidably influenced by the policies of a particular country, which in this case is the host country of Malaysia. The family, as an immediate environment for refugee children is vulnerable, especially so when this family setting itself is not conducive. Refugee parents in Malaysia are engaged in long and arduous working hours, and under displacement-related stressors such as discrimination and lack of social support, will directly present risks such as mental health issues for their children. The children's perceptions of their families emerged from their past experiences and current situations can be a source of strength, or vice versa, in the face of adversity.

In this study, one of the coping strategies employed by the refugee children was self-empowerment. This coping they demonstrated thus far has been encouraging and could be a collective strength of the refugee community in order to survive. However, research showed that young children tend to attribute success to self-effort instead of external factors because of their stage of cognitive development (Steinbeis, 2016). As the children grow older, there could be a realization of the uncontrollability of these environmental factors. Nonetheless, the inherent qualities of children who always want to strive for the best would help them survive, particularly with strong family ties and relationships—that is, if their primary ecological environment support their initiations. Note that the family was seen as a source of strength and one can only dream about the future if there is a stable and supportive ecological environment. At present, however, children's development relies to a great extent on the enabling adults, preferably those who could advocate for them and in their best interests. Many problems are actually created and sustained by the system, such as discrimination, unemployment and deprivation that occur in the society and which result in the hardships faced by refugee families. These problems are detrimental to the development of refugee children if changes to the system is not forthcoming.

To mobilize resources from different levels, it is proposed that there be more collaborations between personnel from different settings such as school (community teachers, volunteer teachers) and family. The educational stake holders tend to have a better understanding of the parents' work schedule to avoid refugee children being left unattended when they are out at work. The dialog sessions for instance, the parent-teacher association between school/family and community systems (religious leaders, community leaders, NGOs) and even with the higher authorities (UNHCR and local NGOs) will need to work together for the wellbeing of refugee children. NGOs who were involved in providing assistance to refugee children could have more collaborations from a multilevel approach to help refugee children adjust to global educational standards for future adjustments in their respective countries of settlement. These multilevel perspectives and the collaborations among various systems have been supported by many scholars (Paat, 2013; Peiloch et al., 2016). Research has also shown that the different social support from the relevant surroundings of the refugee children help build resilience in them as they tend to experience multiple contextual changes throughout their migration. Multilevel support following an ecosystemic approach will be most beneficial for the refugee children who participated in this study and probably for other refugee children as well.

## **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the present study is the small sample of refugee children. We could only gain access to 25 children from an educational center in a community and there are many more children who are not in any educational centers and who live in even poorer

conditions. Therefore, generalizability is not an option and was not our intent. The findings of this study may not be generalized to other settings. Sufficient details about the research procedure and context have been provided and it is hoped that CLET could be utilized to draw out narratives of refugee children in other contexts. Another limitation could be that the children's responses in a focus group session could have been influenced by their group members. Focus group sessions with Asian peoples are far more challenging than in Western societies where it originated. In Asian societies, participants in a focus group tend to subject their viewpoints on a topic to that of a perceived leader and another's opinion (or narrative) is rarely challenged for fear of creating disharmony. The participant presenting a strong opinion or speaking in a domineering manner could easily lead to others drawing into themselves and not fully participating. This was, for example, especially true with most of the children in group 3 echoing the theme of powerlessness once it was introduced by a domineering first speaker. On the other hand, however, the CLET, with the collage making and using the images as stimulus for storytelling, did assist somewhat with encouraging all the children in each group to speak more freely. We acknowledge the constraints posed on this study choosing to do focus groups instead of individual face-to-face interviews. We also must acknowledge that having different researchers conduct the five focus groups could have been a limitation. Although the researchers were well-trained in conducting the CLET, their own individual demeanors and styles could influence the ways in which they encouraged the children in the groups to participate. Because of time constraints on this project, we were bound to use different researchers who could do the focus groups all at the same time. However, we recommend that with future projects that although the focus group approach could work to obtain a larger data set in minimum time, the groups should all be conducted by the same person to avoid confounding the outcome of the study. Of course, and if possible, individual interviews using the CLET as method would be a better option.

Our findings affirm that refugee children in Malaysia were able to express themselves verbally and non-verbally using the CLET. Although the CLET is not a diagnostic tool and not intended as such, it is certainly a useful tool to elicit narratives from participants who need some kind of stimulus to get them talking about the topic of interest. Embedded in a tradition of symbolic interactionism and post-structuralism, the CLET also provides some insights into the un verbalized meanings for which particularly children have not yet developed the vocabulary. Furthermore, the findings of this study using the CLET can help the public gain a better understanding of the refugee children's narratives. Mental health professionals and social workers can draw insights from this study to develop psychological interventions from this eco-systemic approach.

As refugee families and their children are not protected under the Malaysian current legal framework, they are subjected to the Immigration Act and treated as illegal immigrants while their children are denied access to public education and vital health services. With the insights we gained through this study in mind, we advocate for humanistic assistance from NGOs to be rendered to refugee families and their children. For instance, refugees are being charged substantially higher for medical treatment. Even with a subsidy of 50% of costs many refugees still avoid getting access to public medical provisions for fear of being rounded up and arrested by the legal authorities for being illegal undocumented immigrants (Paulsen, 2019). This is the macro-environment faced by refugees in Malaysia.

In conclusion we want to put forward a call for more humanitarian assistance from local NGOs, faith-based communities, and local charity organizations, and for working closely with the UNHCR to provide affordable medical assistance, quality education training for volunteer teachers to sustain their education needs, and for various other social support systems for refugee families and their children. There are some creative social support opportunities such as E-Illuminate (n.d.), a social enterprise assistance aiming to provide vocational skills training

for refugee children. The Picha Project (Low, 2017) is a social enterprise that also aims to create a sustainable source of income for refugees through food catering and delivery services. A friendly living environment will assist refugee families to be able to access their inherent strengths and lead sustainable lives.

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