The role of schooling and education in promoting mental health and wellbeing amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds : Evidence from Malaysia

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The Role of Schooling and Education in Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing Amongst Children from Refugee and Asylum Seeking Backgrounds: Evidence from Malaysia

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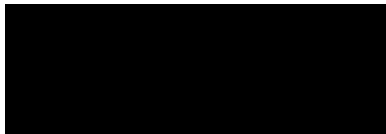
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Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of this thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (2018-250H; 2021-124H).

Signed:

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Abstract

Rates of global forced displacement are at an all-time high. Every year, millions of individuals are forced to flee from their homes in an attempt to secure international safety and security from instances of war, persecution, conflict, or violence. Amongst these individuals, thousands of vulnerable children endure stressful and often traumatic experiences of resettlement, which occur during crucial periods of development. A large body of research has identified high prevalence rates of psychopathology amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, prompting an urgent call for research into the factors that may provide protection against the development of adverse mental health and wellbeing.

Education and schooling for example, has been posited as a potential predictor, with studies beginning to identify schooling and education as important in mental health promotion amongst refugee and asylum seeking students. Research conducted primarily with children resettled across high-income countries suggests that there are several educational and school-based factors that support the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. While this research is valuable, a large proportion of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds reside in low-middle income countries of first or temporary asylum, where they may spend years in exile awaiting permanent resettlement.

Research into the experiences of children within countries of first and temporary asylum has been neglected. As such, the overarching aim of this dissertation is to shed light on the schooling experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds residing in Malaysia (a country of temporary and first asylum), with a focus on exploring the role of participation in schooling and education in mental health promotion. Through a series of studies utilising both quantitative and qualitative designs, and through evidence triangulation that draws

on multiple data sources including teachers, students, and members of the refugee community, the findings of this study allowed for a greater understanding of the perceived barriers and facilitators of education, as well as the school and education relevant factors that contribute to the development of growth, as well as positive mental health and wellbeing.

Schools across the globe will continue to experience a significant influx of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds over the coming years. Given that children spend the majority of their childhoods within schooling environments, they are ideal locations in which optimal wellbeing and mental health can be fostered. Therefore, it is hoped that this dissertation will provide educators and clinicians with a better insight into the experiences faced by their students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. With this knowledge, it is hoped that the findings not only support the development of confidence, empathy and understanding when working with these students, but also the development of tailored strategies that will ultimately see these students' flourish.

Chapter 1 – Introduction and Overview

1.1 Global Forced Displacement

The UN Refugee Agency (previously referred to as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]) was officially established on December 14th, 1950 in an attempt to manage the aftermath of the Second World War (United Nations General Assembly, 1950). At the time, the UN Refugee Agency was tasked with assisting millions of Europeans who had been forcibly displaced, with the expectation that they were to finish and disband within three years (The UN Refugee Agency, 2002). Evidently, the work of the UN Refugee Agency did not end there - the UNHCR mandate extended on a temporary basis until 2003 followed by an eventual decision to indefinitely extend its work. This decision was a result of continuous and significant levels of forced global displacement. Over 70 years later, the UN Refugee Agency still exists as a global organisation that is dedicated towards providing life-saving humanitarian assistance to individuals from forcibly displaced communities across the globe.

While years have passed since the creation of The UN Refugee Agency, forced displacement remains a worldwide phenomenon, with record-high figures being recorded annually. In addition, this record breaking is likely to continue, with the population of forcibly displaced persons predicted to grow over coming years (Ostrand, 2015). By the end of 2021 alone, the UN Refugee Agency (2022a) recorded 89.3 million forcibly displaced individuals. Of these, 53 million consisted of individuals that had been displaced within their home countries. A smaller proportion were refugees (21 million) and asylum seekers (4.6 million) – who are the focus of this dissertation. This represents the highest number of forcibly displaced individuals on record, being more than double the number recorded in 2010 (~41 million). To put these figures into perspective, it is now estimated that over one percent of the world's entire population has

been forcibly displaced (specifically, 1 in 95 people). That is, 20 people around the world are forcibly displaced every minute (The UN Refugee Agency, 2020).

Under the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its 1967 protocol (The UN General Assembly, 1951, p.3), refugees are defined as individuals who "*owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country*". Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are individuals who have lodged claims for asylum, but whose claims have yet to be verified. When an individual lodges a claim for asylum under the *1951 Refugee Convention*, they are automatically described as an asylum seeker, with a proportion of these individuals subsequently going on to receive international protection as refugees once their claims have been verified. It must be noted however, that as not all countries have signed the 1951 convention, these categories are often not clear-cut, with some countries having their own social or legal definitions of what constitutes a refugee or asylum seeker.

1.2 Refugee Children and Youth

Amongst this global population of forcibly displaced persons, approximately half consist of children and youth under the age of 18 years (The UN Refugee Agency, 2012). Annually, hundreds of thousands of children are forced to flee from their home countries in order to secure international refuge or asylum abroad. Often, they are unaccompanied or have been separated from their families. The latest figures released by the UN Refugee Agency (2021) indicate that while children account for approximately 30% of the world's entire population, they currently constitute 42% of all forcibly displaced people. Furthermore, it is estimated that between the

years of 2018-2020 alone, one million children were born as refugees (The UN Refugee Agency, 2021a).

It is important to recognise that refugee and asylum seeking children are a particularly vulnerable group, as they experience the upheavals associated with resettlement during crucial periods of development (International Organization for Migration, 2019; The UN Refugee Agency, 1994; Vaghri et al., 2019). Furthermore, while the experiences of each refugee or asylum seeking child is different, it is important to acknowledge that many refugee and asylum seeking children (by definition) are exposed to traumatic challenges and stressors that most non-refugee children are unlikely to experience (Davis et al., 2021; Nickerson et al., 2021). Of note, these challenges have been found to subject refugee and asylum seeking children to numerous adverse developmental outcomes (Vaghri et al., 2019), which are reviewed below.

1.3 The Impact of Resettlement on Child Development

Within the population of forcibly displaced individuals, children and youth are particularly vulnerable, largely because they are still developing – physically, mentally, and emotionally (Mace et al., 2014). As such, children have specific and unique psychological characteristics that warrant special attention. Children's bio-psychosocial development remains incomplete, with childhood being a time of significant physical, emotional, social, moral, and cognitive change due to the rapid brain growth that occurs during these crucial formative years (Hanewald et al., 2020; Park & Katsiaficas, 2019). Consequently, disruptions and insecurity (as typically caused by the resettlement process) can have a detrimental impact on children's physical, cognitive, as well as psychological development.

Within the literature, the stressful and often traumatic experiences faced by refugee and asylum seeking children are referred to as *adverse childhood experiences* (Hilado et al., 2021;

Vaghri et al., 2019). Research findings typically indicate that exposure to, and the accumulation of adverse childhood events can have long-lasting and significant impact on a child's ability to flourish and thrive (Anda et al., 2006; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Javanbakht et al., 2021; Park & Katsiaficas, 2019). These early and extreme life stressors can interfere with the development of crucial brain circuits, organisations, and systems which can have subsequent effects on health, quality of life, and cognition, as well as on emotional well-being throughout the lifespan (Anda et al., 2006; Bremne & Vermetten, 2001; De Bellis, 2001; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2017).

Previous studies have found an association between exposure to adverse childhood experiences and a range of long-term adverse outcomes, such as increased risk of chronic physical health conditions, higher risk-taking behaviour (e.g., substance use), lower academic achievement, and economic poverty (Enoch, 2011; Herzog & Schmahl, 2018; Hughes et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2020). Furthermore, and of importance to this thesis, traumatic experiences that are chronic, complex, intentional, and interpersonal (such as those encountered during the journey from displacement to resettlement) are associated with higher levels of psychopathology, leaving children vulnerable to the development of compromised mental health and wellbeing throughout the lifespan (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Henley & Robinson, 2011; Kroenig et al., 2019).

1.4 The Mental Health of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children

Experiences encountered during the journey to resettlement pose great risks to the emotional wellbeing and psychological development of refugee and asylum seeking children, however it is important to recognise that not all refugee or asylum seeking children who have been exposed to trauma experience negative psychological outcomes (Speidel et al., 2021). As

Rutter (2003) notes, while some children remain psychologically vulnerable, most cope with the multiple stressors of being a refugee. Many refugee children possess protective factors that assist in mitigating the negative side effects of trauma. For instance, factors such as cognitive abilities, secure family attachments, educational attainment, as well as self-esteem have been found to contribute towards increased resilience in the face of trauma and adversity amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Fazel et al., 2011; Montgomery, 2010).

Although some refugee children develop resilience skills and coping mechanisms, the experience of resettlement partnered with a range of additional risk factors leave many vulnerable to the development of psychological distress (Michelson & Sclare, 2009; Vostanis et al., 2016). These risk factors include various individual (e.g., number of events; severity of trauma experienced, resilience, temperament, motivation, physical health, language fluency, cognitive ability, biological predisposition; Fazel & Betancourt, 2018; Fazel & Stein, 2002), family (e.g., parental mental health difficulties, unemployment, parental attachment/support; Eruyar et al., 2018; Rizkalla et al., 2020) and environmental factors (e.g., poverty; discrimination; presence of supportive peer relationships; school environment; length of time awaiting permanent resettlement; Frounfelker et al., 2020; Höhne et al., 2020).

Numerous reviews reveal high prevalence rates of mental health difficulties in samples of refugee and asylum seeking children. Most commonly, children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds present with high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety compared to non-refugee populations (Betancourt et al., 2017; Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Fazel et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2012). For instance, in the case of PTSD, prevalence estimates range between 50% and 90% (Lustig et al., 2004; Salari et al., 2017;

Vervliet et al., 2014). Attachment difficulties, traumatic grief, academic and learning difficulties, sleeping disorders, somatic complaints, and a number of emotional and behavioural concerns are also often reported (Betancourt et al., 2012; Cartwright et al., 2015; Fazel et al., 2014; Hodes, 2000; Loughry & Flouri, 2001; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2001; Richter et al., 2020; van Ee et al., 2016; Weise & Burhorst, 2007). Particular groups of refugee children are understood to possess higher vulnerability to the development of mental health difficulties, such as those who are unaccompanied (e.g., or have been separated from their families), have experienced a significant number of adverse childhood events, or have spent prolonged periods in detention (Hanewald et al., 2020; Hodes et al., 2008; Hodges et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2014).

Given these findings, it becomes evident that a proportion of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds require additional support and intervention in order to foster the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, there is a need for research to improve knowledge and awareness surrounding how to best support the mental health needs of these children. While mental health difficulties in childhood present unique and significant challenges, it is important to acknowledge that childhood also brings about an opportunity for early intervention and prevention (Hettich et al., 2020; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). The ability to intervene during childhood provides children with an opportunity to develop more positive coping strategies, therefore reducing disparities between these children and those from non-refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds. Based on this understanding, one of the driving forces behind this thesis is an acknowledgement of the need for a better understanding of the ways in which positive mental health and wellbeing can be promoted in children of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

1.5 The Role of Education and Schooling in Mental Health Promotion

The role of schooling and education in fostering the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds is a major aim of this thesis. An extensive body of research has documented a number of significant and long-lasting benefits associated with engagement in schooling and education in the general population. For example, the ability to participate in education has been linked to the development of literacy, academic achievement, language acquisition, cognitive development, and future socioe-conomic success and stability (Block et al., 2014; Fazel et al., 2012; Koehler & Scheider, 2019; The UN Refugee Agency, 2019a; UNICEF, 2017). In addition, schooling and education is known to provide multiple opportunities for the promotion of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing amongst students, including those with refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Thomas, 2016; Vaghri et al., 2019). Once resettled, school attendance (particularly across countries of high-income) typically becomes mandatory for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. As such, schools are ideally placed to have significant influence on the lives of many children, with the potential to support the overall resettlement and development of these children.

An emerging body of research has explored the educational experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, with a proportion of these studies having explored the role that schooling and education can have in mental health promotion. Existing research suggests that stable education and schooling has the potential to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment, therefore fostering the development of a sense of hope, stability, normalcy, and routine (Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005; UNICEF, 2017). This is particularly important for children who have already experienced considerable periods of

instability and insecurity (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). The ability to re-engage with routine education and schooling following prolonged conflict allows children to begin the trauma healing process (The UN Refugee Agency, 2001). Furthermore, nurturing and inclusive environments can have significant influence on the mental health and wellbeing of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds through fostering a sense of belonging, stable social relationships, resilience, and self-confidence (Block et al., 2014; Downey, 2007; Rutter, 2006). Finally, schooling and education are known to play a pivotal role in the overall resettlement process, through assisting children with socialisation and acculturation to the host country (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Taken together, it becomes apparent that participation in schooling and education brings about myriad opportunities to support overall development, including the promotion of mental health for students who are vulnerable to compromised wellbeing.

1.6 Education and Schooling in Countries of Temporary Resettlement

Research into the experiences of individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can be grouped according to the three phases of the resettlement journey (i.e., pre-flight [within the country of origin], flight [during the journey to resettlement], and post-flight [following resettlement in a third country]; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Hodes, 2000). While emerging research has explored the general experiences of individuals with refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds - including experiences of schooling, education, and mental health - a majority of the research in this field centres on the experiences of individuals who have already been permanently resettled across high-income countries (i.e., most commonly in the United States, Canada, and Australia; Dryden-Peterson, 2015, 2016; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). In contrast, research exploring the experiences of children within countries of first and temporary asylum

(i.e., the country in which a child lives after fleeing from their home country but before being resettled in a host country) is sparse, and the associated evidence is less comprehensive (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

There is a call for research into the schooling and educational experiences of children within their countries of first asylum for several reasons. For example, children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are likely to spend a majority of their childhoods in exile (The UN Refugee Agency, 2021a). While there are intentions for refugees to be either resettled or returned safely to their home country within a reasonable period of time, this is highly unlikely due to the sheer number of individuals requiring resettlement partnered with limited durable solutions (e.g., limited humanitarian visas available each year; The UN Refugee Agency, 2006; Vaghri et al., 2019). As a consequence, it is important that the experiences of these children be understood to identify challenges, barriers, as well as facilitators of engagement in schooling and education. This is of particular importance given that the provision of education to refugee and asylum seeking children (particularly in countries of temporary and first asylum) comes with several challenges (UN Refugee Agency, 2011b; for a more detailed discussion, see Chapter 3.5, p.92). An increased awareness of these challenges will allow for advocacy as well as the creation of tailored strategies and recommendations to better support the needs of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

It is also important to recognise that pre-resettlement educational experiences can also significantly impact and inform the educational experiences of children post-resettlement. Past experiences can influence the ways in which children encounter and perceive school, which may then have flow-on effects for the subsequent development of social relationships, academic achievement, as well as a sense of belonging (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Furthermore, an

awareness of past educational experiences will enable future educators and clinicians to be more sensitive to and understanding of their students' backgrounds. This understanding allows for the tailoring of suitable academic and psychological services to best support the needs of these students within the school environment. It is important that more research be done into pre-resettlement educational experiences as this will allow educators in countries of permanent resettlement to better support students during an already vulnerable time that is typically characterised by change and uncertainty.

1.7 The Current Research Project: General Aims and Research Questions

The ability for children and adolescents to engage with school and education plays a vital role in their development of positive mental health and wellbeing (Lee & Yoo, 2015; Lombardi et al., 2019; Marquez & Main, 2020). However, less is known about how these findings apply to specific groups of students, such as those of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (particularly within countries of first and temporary asylum). Therefore, this thesis explores the role of education and schooling in promoting mental health and wellbeing amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds by aiming to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. *What is the relationship between participation in school and education, and the health and wellbeing of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds?*

Examination of RQ1 will help to establish which school and education relevant factors are related to the development of either positive or negative mental health and wellbeing amongst refugee and asylum seeker children.

- RQ2. *What are the educational and school experiences of children within countries of first and temporary resettlement?*

Examination of RQ2 will help to uncover what the schooling and educational experiences of children within a country of first/temporary asylum looks like, including the perceived barriers and facilitators of schooling within these countries. Furthermore, this question will establish the extent to which participation in schooling within these countries can aid in the development of growth, positive mental health, and wellbeing.

1.8 Structure of Thesis

This thesis contains several chapters that fall into two distinct phases. Phase 1 explores the role of education and schooling in promoting mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (thus addressing RQ1). This will be achieved through conducting a mixed-method systematic synthesis of globally available data exploring the particular school and education relevant factors that are associated with the promotion or reduction of mental health and wellbeing amongst these students. Phase 2 then explores the role of education and schooling within countries of first and temporary resettlement. This will be achieved through the analysis of data collected for this thesis from refugee students and their teachers in Malaysia (thus addressing RQ2).

Based on findings obtained through the studies conducted across Phases 1 and 2, this thesis will also then provide a number of strategies and recommendations to assist clinicians and educators with creating school environments that support the mental health and wellbeing of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. This thesis will take the format of a *Thesis with Publication*. As such, the empirical chapters presented in this thesis are presented as articles that are designed to be read independently (and as a result, may contain overlap in content).

1.8.1 Phase One – Global Overview of Refugee Education

Following the introduction and overview, Chapter 2 - *Factors Relating to Schooling and Education That are Associated with Psychosocial Wellbeing in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Students* - presents a synthesis of the available evidence into the schooling and education relevant factors that influence the mental health and wellbeing of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. A mixed-methods systematic literature review was conducted which pooled globally available qualitative ($k = 27$), quantitative ($k = 12$), and mixed-method ($k = 7$) data from over 7000 participants. The analysis that synthesised these data highlighted several schooling and educational relevant factors that had the ability to either promote or inhibit the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst students. Several of these factors were unique to the social and emotional needs of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. The review was dominated by studies conducted with students who had already been resettled, particularly across high-income countries. Only a small number of studies explored pre-resettlement educational experiences (e.g., within refugee camps). This gap was addressed in Phase 2 of the dissertation.

1.8.2 Phase Two – Malaysian Case Study

Chapter 3 - *The Malaysian Context* - provides an overview of Malaysia's role in the refugee crisis as a country of temporary and first asylum. This chapter provides a brief historical overview of the history of migration for refugees into Malaysia before exploring the contemporary situation for refugees and asylum seekers in the country. This chapter delves into the challenges currently faced by refugees and asylum seekers who are in Malaysia, including an examination of the difficulties that children face accessing and participating in education.

Most of the remainder of this dissertation (Chapters 5 through to 8) contains data that were collected from refugee students and their teachers in Malaysia. Given the complex nature of conducting research with children, particularly those from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, extensive care was taken to ensure ethical research methods were being used across the empirical studies. Chapter 4 - *Conducting Ethical Research with Children from Refugee and Asylum Seeking Backgrounds* - provides an extensive overview of the methodology and ethical considerations used across the studies detailed in the subsequent four chapters.

Chapter 5 - *Teacher Perceptions of the Barriers and Facilitators of Education Amongst Chin Refugees in Malaysia* - presents the first in a series of studies that explored the schooling and educational experiences of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia (Cowling & Anderson, 2021). Qualitative interviews with teachers of refugee and asylum seeking students allowed for an exploration of their experiences as teachers of this specific group of students, and provided insight into what they perceived to be the barriers and facilitators of refugee education. The findings indicated that teachers and students within Malaysia encounter several challenges and barriers when attempting to engage with long-term formal education and schooling. However, the passion and sheer dedication of these teachers was strongly reflected in the interviews, and it was evident that these teachers used creativity and commitment to overcome these challenges in order to best support their students.

Chapter 6 - *"Our School is Small, but it has a lot of Memories": A Qualitative Analysis of the Educational and Schooling Experiences of Chin refugees in Malaysia* - expands on the study conducted in Chapter 5 by again using qualitative techniques to explore schooling and educational experiences, but this time from the perspectives of the refugee students themselves. While teacher perspectives are valuable, research identifies a lack of attention regarding the

educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students from their own perspectives (Prior & Niesz, 2013). This study gave voice to the students, in order to enable a better understanding of their lived experiences of engaging in school and education within a country of temporary and first asylum. The analysis of these interviews identified strong levels of student resilience, despite the presence of hardship and disadvantageous life circumstances. While the students faced several barriers that hindered their engagement in education, it became apparent that the ability to participate in schooling had profound and positive influences on their lives.

Chapter 7 - *The School-Based Predictors of Mental Health and Wellbeing For Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children: Evidence from Malaysia* - presents a quantitative exploration of the educational and schooling experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. As identified through the systematic literature review presented in Chapter 2, there is a clear link between schooling and education and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. However, existing research has almost exclusively focused on the experiences of children within high-income countries of permanent resettlement, therefore neglecting the experiences of students within countries of first and temporary asylum. To contribute to this body of research, this study uses cross-sectional survey data to explore the relationships between several school relevant factors and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. A series of questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 173 students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia. These questionnaires contained scales that assessed several school-based factors, as well as outcomes relating to mental health and wellbeing. The findings obtained through a series of multiple regression analyses found a number of school relevant factors were associated with the development of wellbeing, satisfaction with life, as well as reduced emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Chapter 8 - *An Exploration of the School-Based Factors Associated with Positive Wellbeing: The Mediating Role of Post-Traumatic Growth* - presents the final empirical chapter in this dissertation. This study builds on the studies in Chapters 6 and 7. In the previous two studies, observable (albeit unexpected) levels of resilience and growth were found amongst the children, prompting a secondary analysis of the data set collected for Chapter 7. This analysis explored the role of schooling and education in fostering post-traumatic growth for refugee students. To further extend this study, an analysis was conducted to explore if the development of this growth could also serve as a buffer against the development of adverse wellbeing. A series of mediation analyses were conducted, with the findings confirming the possibility that school environments both promote post-traumatic growth and buffer against the development of adverse wellbeing.

To conclude, Chapter 9 presents a general discussion of the thesis, including a summary of the evidence and findings obtained throughout this dissertation (literature review and empirical studies). Following this summary, a socio-ecological framework for mental health promotion, particularly for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds is presented. This provides educators and clinicians with a reference point when creating mentally healthy school environments. Furthermore, based on the evidence obtained, practical recommendations to support the mental health and wellbeing of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds within educational environments are presented.

Chapter 2 – Factors Relating to Schooling and Education that are associated with Psychosocial Wellbeing in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Students: A Systematic Literature Review

This chapter contains a mixed-methods systematic literature review that synthesises the literature into the school and education relevant factors that are associated with the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Dissemination strategy: This literature review is currently being reviewed for publication in the *Review of Educational Research*

Statement of contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** Study conception and design, database search, data extraction, quality assessment, interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

- **Joel Anderson:** Study conception and design, supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

- **Tom Whelan:** Study conception and design, supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

All authors were involved in the reviewing and approval of the final manuscript for this literature review.

2.1 Abstract

Past research indicates that individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are at risk for poor mental health and wellbeing driven by exposure to prolonged periods of stress and trauma. Importantly, research findings consistently report a link between engagement in formal education and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. In this paper, we explore this link in the specific case of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds by conducting a mixed-method systematic literature review. We identified 46 articles ($n = $ ~7,000) presenting evidence of school and educational factors that impact the mental health and wellbeing of these students. Synthesis of the qualitative evidence led to the identification of six major themes: *Language Barriers*, *Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination, Social Relationships, School Staff Support, The School Environment*, and *School-based Initiatives.* Synthesis of the quantitative evidence revealed links between student mental health and wellbeing and a series of school-based factors, specifically *School Connectedness, Peer Relationships, Teacher Support, Positive Feelings and Perceptions,* and *Academic Achievement.* Taken together, the results of this review provide compelling evidence that schools are a protective factor against the development of adverse mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. It is hoped that the findings from this study aid in the creation of school environments and initiatives that enable these students to thrive, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

Keywords: children, asylum seeker, refugee, education, mental health, well-being.

2.2 Introduction

The United Nations Refugee Agency (2020a) estimated that approximately 100 million individuals had been forced to flee from their homes in order to find safety in the last decade, due to global increases in persecution, political violence, conflict, and human rights violations. At present, it is estimated that one in every 97 people has been forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2020a). In 2019 alone, 79.5 million individuals (the highest number on record) were displaced from their homes, including 26 million individuals who's application for refugee status had been approved, and an additional 4.2 million awaiting their applications to be processed (i.e., asylum seekers; UNHCR, 2020b). This on-going increase in the population of forcibly displaced individuals has resulted in one of the largest humanitarian crises of our time, with the trajectory of these figures demonstrating that this is a long-term phenomenon that shows no signs of subsiding in the near future.

2.2.1 Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children

Amongst the total population of forcibly displaced persons in 2019, 40% (approximately 32 million) were children and youth under the age of 18 years old (UNHCR, 2020a). A large proportion of these children were refugees or asylum seekers (i.e., those who have been externally displaced, or who have fled their home country, while the remainder were internally displaced). Many of these children have spent significant periods of time away from their homes and are often separated from their families. These children are vulnerable, often having been exposed to various traumas and extended periods of stress during critical periods of child development (Turrini et al., 2017). For example, prior to successful resettlement, these children typically have already encountered myriad traumatic pre-migratory and migratory experiences. Within their home countries, they may have been exposed to war, torture, and violence, as well

as persecution or death of family members (Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Murray et al., 2010). Furthermore, while seeking refuge, children may encounter prolonged periods of stress due to uncertainty about the future, dangerous travels, and difficulties with accessing basic needs (e.g., shelter, health care, food, etc., see Lustig et al., 2004; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). During resettlement, these children may also experience lengthy stays in under-resourced refugee camps or detention centres. Importantly, past reviews of the literature indicate that detention can have devastating impacts on mental health and is a risk factor for the subsequent development of severe psychopathology (Werthern et al., 2018). Despite the large number of individuals seeking refuge and asylum, it is estimated that less than one percent are successfully resettled every year (UNHCR 2020c). Taken together, the process of obtaining refugee status (if successful) can take many years, leaving displaced children and their families in a state of limbo for an indefinite period of time.

Importantly, these difficulties and challenges do not cease once a displaced child has been resettled in a third country. Upon resettlement in a new country, these children will continue to experience significant challenges while still processing and managing the typically negative effects of trauma and separation. For example, many will have to adjust to new cultural norms and beliefs, navigate language barriers, endure high levels of stress and loneliness, and often become victims of prejudice and discrimination (Hart, 2009; Jensen et al., 2019). A large body of research demonstrates that the cumulative nature of traumas faced by children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can predispose these individuals to poor mental health and wellbeing (Cowling & Anderson, 2023; Opaas et al., 2015). For example, findings from various studies have documented high prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleeping difficulties, somatisation, grief, depression, attachment problems, and anxiety in

samples of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Betancourt et al., 2012; Buchmüller et al., 2018; Fazel, 2002; Lies et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Educational Experiences of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children

In addition to the difficulties detailed above, many children from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds may not have accessed formal education or may have encountered prolonged disruptions to their schooling and education. These difficulties have the ability to further impact the overall mental health and wellbeing of this already vulnerable population (Ziaian et al., 2017). Importantly, leading government institutions have identified access to quality education as being a fundamental human right, with inclusive and quality education being enshrined in various human right laws and conventions, including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Education also has the ability to bring about significant benefits such as promoting intellectual, social, and cognitive development, as well as facilitating the development of positive mental health and social and emotional wellbeing (Fazel et al., 2014; O'Reilly et al., 2018; Ziaian et al., 2017). As such, there has been extensive advocacy for the provision of quality education to all children, including those holding refugee and asylum seeking status.

Although the value of education for children is well understood, there is only a small (albeit growing) body of research that is dedicated towards understanding the specific benefits that education and access to schooling has for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Of particular importance, existing research has begun to suggest that schooling possess rehabilitative and healing properties that may mitigate the negative psychosocial impacts often experienced by these children (Thomas, 2016). For example, schools have been identified as safe havens for these children as they are able to foster a sense of safety, normalcy, and

security through the provision of daily structured routines, which is vital for children who have experienced significant periods of instability and uncertainty (Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005). Engagement in education and schooling is also an important facilitator of successful resettlement, providing refugee children with the opportunity to integrate into their new home countries and cultures (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2015). Moreover, shared spaces such as schools are often the first service and point of contact that newly arrived refugee students will encounter following resettlement (particularly within higher-income countries).

Participation in education and schooling can also foster a sense of social inclusion and establish a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2016). While in schools, these students are afforded the opportunity to meet and develop new friendships, learn new language skills, and encounter various new experiences (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Importantly, past research has identified that possessing a sense of belonging and connectedness to one's school is associated with a range of positive behavioural, psychological, and academic outcomes such as improved self-concept, self-esteem, optimism, motivation, academic achievement, social skills, and overall health and wellbeing (Betancourt et al., 2012; Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Korpershoek et al., 2019; McBrien, 2005).

Despite a substantial amount of evidence supporting these significant benefits associated with schooling and education, it must be noted that students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds typically encounter significant challenges within the school environment that inevitably impact their overall sense of wellbeing. Of course, all children experience a variety of challenges during their educational experience, however, children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are likely to experience additional stressors that other children do not (in line with the tenets of *minority stress theory*; Meyer, 1995; 2003). For example, it has been

suggested that previous experiences of disrupted education may place these students at a relative disadvantage when compared to the general school population, due to the presence of significant gaps in their educational knowledge and development, and their understanding of school practices, routines, and structures (Hammond & Miller, 2015). Furthermore, most refugees are ultimately resettled in countries that have vastly different cultures when compared to their home countries (Haque & Malebranche, 2020). Past research suggests that individuals who are resettled in host cultures that significantly differ from their home cultures are likely to experience a more challenging resettlement and transition (i.e., cultural fit theory; Ward & Chang, 1997). These challenges may include the need to overcome language barriers that can lead to difficulties with learning, socialisation and developing close peer relationships (Gömleksiz & Aslan, 2018). Such challenges can predispose youth with refugee backgrounds to significant acculturative stress (i.e., stress associated with resettlement to a new host culture, such as the need to adjust to new cultural norms), which previous research has linked to difficulties with properly engaging in formal education (Shiekh et al., 2019; for a review see Shiekh & Anderson, 2018).

Past findings also suggest that students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds may be subjected to experiences of victimisation, racism, and discrimination within the school environment (Mansouri et al., 2009; Uptin et al., 2013). These students can also harbour a sense of 'failure', due to the stress and pressures of needing to catch up and close the significant gaps in educational knowledge between them and their classmates (Cassity, 2012). Put together, these experiences have the ability to negatively impact on successful settlement, adjustment and wellbeing with past research highlighting a range of concerns including decreases in self-esteem, increases in anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems as well as lack of motivation and underachievement at school (Juvonenet al., 2003).

2.2.3 The Current Study

Students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds may encounter challenges with transitioning to new school environments. However, research also suggests that engagement in schooling and education may provide these children with a range of significant benefits. The benefits of education are long lasting, are associated with positive developmental outcomes, and can influence future social-economic status and employment opportunities (UNHCR, 2001). For refugee and asylum seeking children and youth, access to education can provide a pathway to securing a better future, through increased opportunities, independence, and freedom (Matthews, 2008). Given these findings, it is important to be aware of the specific school-based factors associated with improved mental health and wellbeing, in order to maximise the benefits obtained through schooling and education for this population. As such, in this paper we present the findings of a systematic review of the qualitative and quantitative evidence available in the literature in order to answer the following research question: "Which school-based factors are associated with either the enhancement or deterioration of mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds?"

2.3 Method

2.3.1 Search Strategy

The search strategy employed for this systematic review was informed by Cochrane methodology (Higgins & Green, 2011) and all relevant information has been presented in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis guidelines (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). An extensive search of the literature was conducted in April 2020, across the following seven databases: PsychInfo, Medline, Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, Proquest Psychology Collection, and EBSCO Psychology and Behavioural Sciences

Collection. In order to detect articles reporting evidence that addresses our research questions, search terms were selected to identify the concepts of *refugees*, *education*, and *mental health and wellbeing* (search terms presented in Table 2.1). During the initial database search, terms were combined using the Boolean search operator OR to form each of three target concepts (i.e., refugees, education, mental health)*.* Next, the concepts were combined using the Boolean search operator AND. No date restrictions were placed nor were there requirements pertaining to the research design of the papers in order to give this review a mixed-methods approach.

A mixed-methods approach was employed for a number of reasons. For example, the incorporation and comparison of both qualitative and quantitative data has been argued to provide greater understanding of the research questions being investigated (Regnault et al., 2018). The use of a mixed-method approach allows for the comparison and combination of data from different perspectives, such as more subjective insight or lived experiences gathered through qualitative data as well as more standardised and generalisable data typically obtained through quantitative research methods. The incorporation of both forms of data allows for the yielding of more complete evidence when compared to studies that rely solely on either quantitative or qualitative data. Searches were limited to only studies published in English. Finally, the reference lists of included studies were scanned in order to locate other potentially relevant articles that were not identified by the search strategy.

Table 2.1

Search terms employed for each concept.

Refugees/ Asylum Seekers	Education	Mental Health/ Wellbeing
Refugee* OR	Education* OR	"Wellbeing" OR
"Asylum seeker*" OR	School* OR	"Well-Being" OR
"Political asylum" OR	Academi* OR	Health* OR
"Forced migration" OR	Teach* OR	"Mental health" OR
"Internally displaced" OR	Learn * OR	"Mental illness*" OR
"Displaced person*"	Student*	Psychopatholog* OR
		"Quality of life" OR
		"Mental disorder*"

2.3.2 Screening and Inclusion Criteria

Once database searches were complete, all records that were identified underwent a multi-step screening process to determine their eligibility. In the first phase, the titles and abstracts of all identified records were read and screened by the first author to determine if the paper appeared relevant to the research aims (i.e., if the paper explored how aspects of education and schooling are related to the mental health and wellbeing of students from refugee, and/or asylum seeking backgrounds). Once these papers were located, the papers underwent full text screening, whereby papers meeting the following eligibility criteria were retained: (a) presentation of original qualitative or quantitative empirical data, or a combination of both, (b) contain data from a sample that included students holding refugee or asylum seeking status, (c) exploration of at least one element or factor relating to engagement in education or schooling (e.g., school belonging), and (d) reporting of how these factors relate to students' mental health and/or wellbeing.

2.3.3 Data Extraction

Following the data screening process, data were extracted from all eligible articles into a bespoke spreadsheet. The following information across all studies was extracted: Study design (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), demographic information (i.e., age range, host/home country), sample size, setting (e.g., primary school), variables being investigated (e.g., PTSD symptomology), measures that were employed (e.g., Hopkins Symptom Checklist; Derogatis et al., 1974), and relevant findings.

2.3.4 Quality Assessment

Two researchers assessed the quality of studies included in the review through the *Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool* (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT is a tool that has been specifically designed to assist in the appraisal of studies utilising either qualitative or quantitative methods, or those utilising a mixed-methods approach. The tool allows researchers to appraise five categories of studies (i.e., qualitative research, randomised controlled trials, non-randomised studies, quantitative descriptive studies, and mixed method studies). Depending on study design, studies are assessed against a set of five unique criteria (e.g., *Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question*? [for qualitative studies]; *Are the measurements appropriate*? [for quantitative designs]). Mixed-method designs are assessed against 15 criteria (i.e., five for the qualitative component, five for the quantitative component, and five unique to mixed-method designs [e.g., *Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed-methods design to address the research question*?]). Each study is subsequently assigned a score ranging from 0 – 100% (i.e., 100% assigned if all five criteria are met; 80% if four criteria are met). For mixed-method studies in particular, an overall quality score is assigned based on the lowest score achieved from each of its study components.

2.3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative source data were synthesised thematically to facilitate the identification of similar and recurrent themes across all the studies that included a qualitative component. Each individual study was first read in order to extract data, and any findings relating to the school-based factors that influenced student mental health and wellbeing were coded. Next, codes across all studies were compared and subsequently grouped together in order to form major themes. This method of analysis enables the identification of prominent themes across this area of research, providing the opportunity to summarise and interpret key findings.

Quantitative source data (i.e., effect sizes and inferential statistics) were first extracted with the intention of conducting meta-analyses. This was not possible due to various data limitations (e.g., heterogeneous measurement scales across studies; not enough data for each outcome), and instead extracted data were clustered based on similarity of outcome measures (i.e., identification of studies exploring the same outcome variable; school belonging etc.). Themes were subsequently created through the clustering of these similar outcomes, therefore allowing for a narrative synthesis of the findings.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Study Selection and Sample Characteristics

The database searches returned 6,313 records (after the deduplication process). The screening process resulted in the identification of 46 eligible studies (this selection process is illustrated in Figure 2.1). These eligible studies were published between 1988-2020. Around half ($n = 27$; 58.70%) employed qualitative methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews; focus groups) to obtain data, while a smaller proportion ($n = 12$; 26.09%) employed quantitative designs, including the use of various self, parent, and teacher report measurement scales (e.g.,

Psychological Sense of School Membership scale; Goodenow, 1993) in order to explore the relationship between certain school factors and aspects of mental health and/or wellbeing. Lastly, a smaller proportion employed mixed-method designs ($n = 7$; 15.22%).

Together, this review includes data from approximately 7,268 participants[1]. All or a majority of participants across studies were students from refugee and/ or asylum seeking backgrounds who had been born across various countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Sudan most commonly). Other countries of origin included countries across Asia (e.g., Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos), South America (e.g., Colombia), Africa (e.g., Congo, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia), and Europe (e.g., Bosnia, Serbia). These students were either awaiting refugee status or resettlement to a third country or had already been resettled in a new host country. These countries included Australia (12 studies), United States of America (11 studies), United Kingdom (four studies), Jordan (four studies), Canada (three studies), Lebanon (three studies), Gaza (two studies), Sweden (one study), Netherlands (one study), Turkey (one study), Norway (one study), South Korea (one study), Germany (one study), Uganda (one study), Ethiopia (one study), Afghanistan (one study), and Sierra Leone (one study). The student participants were aged between 5 and 30 years of age.

A majority of the participants were still engaging in formal education (i.e., primary and secondary school), however some data were from participants that had already graduated from school. Since these participants were engaged in interviews that required them to reflect on their experiences while at school, data from these participants were included. Furthermore, some

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[1] An exact number could not be obtained as it was not always clear how many participants were involved in a study. For example, in a study by Winthrop and Kirk (2008), the exact number of participants involved across focus groups was not provided (i.e., only an average provided). Similarly, in a study by Stark and colleagues (2015), it was unclear as to how many participants were involved in both the focus group and individual interview.

studies conducted interviews and collected data from relevant individuals such as parents, teachers, and school support staff (e.g., psychologists).

Figure 2.1

Systematic Database Search and Screening Process

Identification of studies via databases and registers	
Identification	Records identified from*: Databases (n = 7) Registers (n = 0)	Records removed *before screening*: Duplicate records removed (n = 1192) Records marked as ineligible by automation tools (n = 0) Records removed for other reasons (n = 0)
Screening	Records screened (n = 16,023)	Records excluded** (n = 15,883)
	Reports sought for retrieval (n = 140)	Reports not retrieved (n = 0)
	Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 140)	Reports excluded: • Sample not refugee or asylum seekers (*n* = 28) • Conference proceedings or reports (*n* = 13) • Theoretical articles (*n* = 15) • Not English (*n* =6) • Not related to mental health or wellbeing (*n* = 32)
Included	Studies included in review (n = 46) Reports of included studies (n = 0)	

2.4.2 Quality Assessment

The quality assessment process revealed that studies included in this review were of relatively high quality, with studies fulfilling a majority of the criteria. For example, all studies presented clear research questions, used suitable measurement and data collection methods, and interpreted data appropriately. No significant concerns with regards to study quality were noted, and as such all identified studies were included in the data analysis process.

2.4.3 Qualitative Findings

Details of the qualitative studies included in this review are presented in Table 2.2, and relevant quotes highlighting the identified themes are presented in Table 2.3. Overall, analysis of this data revealed a series of school-based factors that contributed towards the development of positive or negative mental health and wellbeing. Findings across the studies were relatively consistent and led to the identification of six major themes: *School Staff Support, Peer Relationships, Language Barriers, Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination, The School Environment,* and *School-based Initiatives.* These will be discussed in further detail below.

Theme One: The Impact of School Staff Support in Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. The most common theme identified in the data (k = 29 studies) pertained to the presence (or the absence) of support from various members of the school staff, and the subsequent impact that this had on student mental health and wellbeing. Overall, student participants valued the presence of positive relationships with teachers, who supported them academically, emotionally, and socially (Bartlett et al., 2017; Crawford 2017; Fazel, 2015; McMullen et al., 2020; Salem, 2019; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Sleijpen et al., 2017; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Participants reported wanting their teachers to demonstrate awareness, caring, and sensitivity with regards to their social-emotional needs, given that many of the

participants had limited exposure to formal education and multiple experiences of past trauma (Benounna et al., 2019; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Pryor, 2001; Weine et al., 2014). These positive and caring relationships with teachers were associated with increased motivation to perform at school, as well as with increased levels of confidence, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing (Oliver, 2012; Pucino, 2014; Veronese et al., 2017).

However, these positive relationships were not always easy to foster. Many participants voiced experiences with teachers who lacked awareness or who were not sensitive to the needs of their students (Hyman et al., 2000; McMullen et al., 2020; Mosselson, 2007; Posselt et al., 2014; Stark et al., 2015). Teachers themselves expressed that they often lacked the resources, or the knowledge and skills needed to appropriately support and teach their students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, who often present with complex mental health needs (Al-Rhousan et al., 2018; Pastoor, 2015; Rousseau et al., 1996; Weine et al., 2014). Some participants felt that teachers were negative with condescending attitudes and tended to have low expectations regarding their abilities (Dejong et al., 2017; Fazel, 2015; Posselt et al., 2014; Stark et al., 2015; Uptin et al., 2012; Ziaian et al., 2018). These attitudes contributed to withdrawal, and poor mental health and wellbeing (e.g., increased feelings of isolation/unworthiness; Demir & Ozgul, 2019). Furthermore, ineffective and abusive practices such as corporal punishment and exploitation were described as being particularly distressful and damaging to student mental health and wellbeing (Salem, 2019; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008)

Participants also described difficulties with accessing appropriate school-based supports beyond the classroom environment. Some participants shared that they had the ability to access various support services (e.g., school psychologists, counsellors, social workers) and described these services as being necessary in order to help address their needs and help them heal from

their past trauma and grief (Baker et al., 2019; Fazel, 2015; Oliver, 2012; Olivia, 2015; Weine et al., 2014). However, access to these supports was not always available - most schools were unable to provide their students with specialised support services, and when they were available, participants reported them as lacking in the appropriate knowledge, skills, and training in how to appropriately intervene and support complex mental health needs (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017; Posselt et al., 2014). In these circumstances, limited access to specialised support services could lead to students experiencing a sense of failure and rejection, as well as a deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing.

Theme Two: The Importance of Peer Relationships in Fostering Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Another common theme identified in the data ($k = 28$ studies) was the ability (or inability) to develop meaningful friendships and the direct impacts that this had on student mental health and wellbeing. The participants reported that being able to attend school facilitated the development of friendships, which was important as it provided students with social and emotional support during difficult processes such as resettlement and integration into a new country (Close et al., 2001; Dejong et al., 2017; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Weine et al., 2014; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Furthermore, the development of friendships provided the students with a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school community, which contributed towards higher levels of happiness and overall wellbeing (Crawford, 2017; Pastoor et al., 2015; Sleijpen et al., 2017; Veronese et al., 2017).

Students described finding enjoyment in playing with other children, expressing that this fun provided a distraction from their previous traumas and experiences (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2017). The participants valued other students who welcomed them to their school community and took time to help orient them to their new school environments, as many found the initial

transition challenging (especially in cases where students had significant disruptions to their schooling experiences; Bartlett et al., 2017). The participants also valued the opportunity to develop friendships with other children who shared similar cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds, as this fostered a sense of safety and security (Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Hyman et al., 2000; McMullen et al., 2020; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Oliver, 2012; Pucino, 2014). Overall, the ability to develop friendships made attending school a more positive experience for the students.

While participants described wanting to develop friendships, sometimes this was difficult to achieve due to cultural and language barriers or due to being the targets of prejudice and discrimination (e.g., because of their refugee status). Experiences of negative peer interactions, including teasing, fighting, and bullying were commonly reported as contributing to a negative sense of self and reduced wellbeing (Closs et al., 2001; Fazel, 2015; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Mosselson, 2007; Salem, 2019; Stark et al., 2015; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). The participants described particular difficulties with making friends when they were in schools where there were limited opportunities to meet other children of refugee or asylum seeking background, or where there were limited opportunities to meet children who shared similar cultural backgrounds (Benounna et al., 2019; Crawford, 2017; McMullen et al., 2020; Mosselson, 2007; Uptin et al., 2012). Some participants described a need to adopt various behaviours in line with the culture of their host country (e.g., one participant described needing to act more 'Western' in an attempt to develop friendships; Copolov & Knowles, 2020). In the circumstances whereby participants experienced difficulties with developing friendships, they expressed feelings of isolation, rejection, and loneliness (Olivia, 2015; Schapiro, 1998; Svensson & Eastmond 2013; Uptin et al., 2012). Importantly, many described feelings of distress as they often felt they had no support

during the challenging experience of transitioning and integrating into a new country and school environment (Uptin et al., 2012). Overall, the inability to develop friendships with other peers led to a decrease in wellbeing, with participants describing higher levels of worry, sadness, anxiety, and school refusal.

Theme Three: Consequences of Language Barriers on Overall Mental Health and Wellbeing. The next major theme to be identified in the data ($k = 25$ studies) related to the impacts of language barriers on student mental health and wellbeing. More specifically, there was plenty of evidence in the data that identified numerous barriers to successful communication, with most participants describing difficulties with progressing academically and socially due to an inability to fluently speak the host country's language. Within the school environment, language barriers were commonly cited to contribute to increased feelings of frustration and humiliation (Bartlett et al., 2017; Benounna et al., 2019; Crawford, 2017). For example, within classrooms, students found it hard to engage with the content being taught, with many students unable to verbalise their confusion and difficulties to their teachers. This was particularly true in cases where students had been allocated to classrooms based purely on age, rather than on ability level (e.g., language proficiency; Posselt et al., 2014; Ziaian et al., 2017). Language difficulties coupled with limited or no prior engagement in education (as is common in students from refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds) resulted in students finding it hard to progress academically (Rousseau et al., 1996). Furthermore, student responses suggested that these difficulties often led to high levels of stress and self-consciousness, which could sometimes lead to mental health difficulties (e.g., anxiety, somatisation; Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Fazel, 2015; Posselt et al., 2014; Pryor, 2001; Schapiro, 1988).

Students reported that they appreciated and valued the ability to engage in school-based programs that were specifically designed to cater for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, in order to target any language difficulties (e.g., English immersion courses; English as a Second Language classes). These courses contributed to language development, aided in overall school adjustment and academic progress, and facilitated supportive relationships with both teachers and peers (Fazel, 2015; Olivia, 2015; Pucino, 2014; Shallow & Whitington, 2014).

The findings suggested that language barriers not only hindered academic progress, but also interfered with the students' ability to foster and develop meaningful friendships while at school (Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; McMullen et al., 2020; Uptin et al., 2012). Students found it difficult to both express their own thoughts and feelings, and to comprehend their peers (Benounna et al., 2019; Olivia, 2015). These difficulties with developing friendships led to increased feelings of isolation and insecurity, with many participants expressing difficulties with creating a sense of belonging within the school environment (Hyman et al., 2000; Oliver, 2012; Shapiro, 1988; Uptin et al., 2012). Furthermore, participants described often becoming victims of bullying purely due to their accent or because of their inability to speak the host country's language (Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Mosselson, 2007; Salem, 2019; Stark et al., 2015). Participants noted that they were more likely to be marginalised in schools where they were the only refugee or asylum seeking student, or when there were not many other students of similar cultural backgrounds (Bartlett et al., 2017).

Many participants described that they valued being in a school where they were able to make friends with other children who spoke the same language (Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Hyman et al., 2000). The ability to develop friendships with peers of similar cultural or language

backgrounds was associated with higher levels of self-esteem and confidence. Furthermore, participants noted that being able to learn and become fluent in the hosts country's language not only facilitated the development of confidence, but also allowed for the development of more friendships and a sense of belonging to the school community (Svensson & Eastmond, 2013; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008).

Theme Four: Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination and its Impact on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Another major theme identified in the qualitative data (k = 24 studies) related to student experiences of prejudicial treatment, with participants describing incidences of prejudice, discrimination, and racism within the school environment. The students expressed that they were often victims of prejudice and discrimination due to their skin colour, religion, or because of their refugee or asylum seeking status (Bartlett et al., 2017; Benounna et al., 2019; Blanchet-Closs et al., 2001; Cohen et al., 2017; Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Mosselson, 2007; Olivia, 2015; Svensson & Eastmond, 2013). The participants shared experiences of being laughed at, ignored, mocked, harassed, and stereotyped. Students were often socially excluded, with some participants describing experiences of both verbal (e.g., teasing) and physical bullying (e.g., fighting; Closs et al., 2001; Dejong et al., 2017; Oliver, 2012; McMullen et al., 2020; Posselt et al., 2014; Pucino, 2012; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Stark et al., 2015; Uptin et al., 2012). As a result of these experiences, students were often emotionally distressed, with many describing high levels of anger, sadness, and frustration (Dejong et al., 2017; Hyman et al., 2000; Oliver, 2012). Furthermore, student descriptions suggest that these experiences led to the development of poor self-esteem, with many students feeling 'different', unwanted, and unliked (Demir & Ozgul, 2019; Uptin et al., 2012; Ziaian et al., 2017).

It is important to note that the experiences of prejudice and discrimination were not only inflicted by students, but by teachers as well (Fazel 2015; Salem, 2019). The students articulated that while some teachers did not intend to engage in stereotyping or discrimination, their lack of awareness surrounding the experiences of their students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds led them to engage in various micro-aggressions (Benounna et al., 2019; Hyman et al., 2000;). Without support from both peers and teachers, the students described feelings of isolation, poor self-worth, and feelings of being unworthy and unaccepted (Posselt et al., 2014; Schapiro, 1988; Ziaian et al., 2018;). Students expressed that these experiences led to them feeling as if school was unsafe, with many developing school refusal and truancy, with one report of a child developing a phobia with regards to going to school (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017).

Theme Five: The School Environment Impacts on Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. The fifth theme to be identified ($k = 18$ studies) pertains to different aspects of the schooling environment that have the ability to subsequently impact mental health and wellbeing. For the most part, participants described feeling safe while at school (Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Dejong et al., 2017; Veronese et al., 2017). School was described as being able to provide the students with physical protection, and also with distraction from negative thoughts driven by past traumas (Bartlett et al., 2017; Sleijpen et al., 2017; Veronese et al., 2017). Furthermore, many participants valued the structure and routine offered by schools, as this tended to counteract the prolonged instability and uncertainty often faced by refugees and asylum seekers (Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Pastoor, 2015; Salem, 2019). Being at school also provided children with a sense of normalcy and control, and was generally associated with positive feelings, such as happiness and gratitude (Pastoor, 2015). Many participants also described feeling more hopeful and

optimistic, explaining that the ability to attend school provided them with better opportunities for the future (Bartlett et al., 2017; Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Mosselson, 2007; Veronese et al., 2017; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008).

While a majority of participants shared positive feelings about their school environment, there were some participants with differing opinions. For example, some participants described difficulties with the initial transition to school, noting that adjusting to their new school environments involved feelings of confusion, stress, and disorientation (Mosselson, 2007; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Uptin et al., 2012). Importantly, certain aspects of the school environment contributed towards significant levels of stress. For example, participants shared that certain procedures such as ringing the school bell had the potential to trigger trauma responses due to past experiences of air raid drills and bombings (Posselt et al., 2014; Pryor, 2001). Furthermore, uncomfortable classroom environments such as overcrowding or ineffective heating and cooling were also described as being distressing (Salem, 2019).

Another consistent finding across these studies with regards to the school environment included the participants' preference for being allocated to schools with a smaller student body (with smaller school environments described as being less overwhelming), as well as attending schools that embraced multiculturalism and diversity (i.e., fostering an environment where all cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions are acknowledged and celebrated; Bartlett et al., 2017; Copolov & Knowles, 2020; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Pryor, 2001; Pucino, 2014; Uptin et al., 2012). Many participants shared that they felt the happiest when attending a school that was particularly diverse and noted that it was much easier for them to develop friendships with children from a range of backgrounds.

Positive and supportive school environments, coupled with policies that celebrated and embraced cultural diversity fostered a sense of safety, connectedness and belonging, contributed to better self-esteem and overall wellbeing (Crawford, 2017; Rousseau et al., 1996; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Conversely, participants described rather negative experiences in schools where there were not many other children of various cultural/linguistic backgrounds (McMullen et al., 2020; Mosselson, 2007). For example, in a study by Hyman and colleagues (2001), refugee students from Vietnam noted that the large presence of "Westerners" at school coupled with a lack of students from similar ethnic groups contributed towards being self-conscious, with reports of "not fitting in" or "feeling different". School policies and environments that lacked cultural sensitivity contributed towards feelings of intimidation, estrangement, and sadness with participants sharing that they often felt socially excluded and isolated (Bartlett et al., 2017). Overall, participants described the need for diverse school environments that were sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of children in order to promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

Theme Six: The Importance of School-based Initiatives in Promoting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. The last theme identified from the qualitative data ($k = 15$ studies) included a recognition and appreciation for various school-based initiatives that contributed towards the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. For example, school-based programs that were catered specifically to support newcomer students (e.g., integration/orientation classes; newcomer program) were particularly valued, with the students sharing that these programs facilitated the transition and adjustment to school (Fazel, 2015; Olivia, 2015; Pucino, 2014; Shallow & Whitington, 2014).

Many students found mainstream classes confronting, as they were typically assigned to classes based purely on age rather than ability level. As such, the students described feeling safe and comfortable in integration classes that were set up to cater for students from refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds, who often present with a wide range of language and academic abilities (Benounna et al., 2019). These programs not only facilitated academic and linguistic development, but also the development of self-esteem, confidence, and positive peer and student relationships (Crawford, 2017). Importantly, a study by McMullen and colleagues (2020) emphasised the need to ensure that these programs are provided for an appropriate length of time and that these supports are not withdrawn too quickly. It must be noted, however, that not all participants enjoyed and appreciated such programs. More specifically, some participants perceived the need to be in an integration class as a form of exclusion or alienation from the rest of the school (Svensson & Eastmond, 2013). As a result, some participants described feeling discouraged and marginalised, believing that they were being socially excluded. Furthermore, in a study by Salem (2019), the inclusion of mandatory weekend classes (created in an attempt to provide students with opportunities to catch up) was seen as frustrating as this severely reduced student leisure and free time.

Other school-based initiatives that were appreciated included after school programs dedicated towards homework support, material and financial support, college preparation courses, school-based excursions, as well as various recreational group-based activities such as sports and clubs (although these were not always accessible to refugee/asylum seeking children due to language/financial barriers; Olivia, 2015; Pryor, 2001; Pucino, 2014; Shallow & Whitington, 2014; Stark et al., 2015; Weine et al., 2014). Participants shared that due to past experiences of trauma, many felt that they did not have the capacity to fully engage with the

academic side of school (Crawford, 2017). Therefore, they appreciated schools that emphasised engagement and achievement in subjects such as music and sport (Al-Rhousan et al., 2018; Crawford, 2017; Fazel, 2015; Oliver, 2012; Salem, 2019; Uptin et al., 2012). These subjects provided students with an opportunity to be included in the school community and fostered the development of friendships and achievement (Olivia, 2015; Pryor, 2001). Overall, achievement and enjoyment in these subjects contributed towards the development of confidence, resilience, a sense of pride, and positive mental health and wellbeing.

2.4.4 Quantitative Findings

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed a series of school-based factors that contribute towards the development of positive or negative mental health and wellbeing. The analysis of this data resulted in the pattern of findings that were relatively consistent with the analysis of the qualitative data. Specifically, analysis of the quantitative data resulted in the identification of five major themes: *School Connectedness*, *Peer Relationships*, *Teacher Support*, *Positive Feelings and Perceptions*, as well as *Academic Achievement*. These themes will be discussed in detail below. In addition, information regarding key findings for all quantitative studies can be found in Table 2.4.

Theme One: The Relationship Between Peer Relationships and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Six quantitative studies (Correa-velez et al., 2010; Diab et al., 2018; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Nho et al., 2019; Olivia, 2015; Steiner, 2020) explored the relationship between peer relationships (i.e., the ability or inability to form meaningful and supportive friendships) and mental health and wellbeing. The quantitative results are based on data from samples of refugees aged between 9 and 20 years old. One study (Diab et al., 2018) consisted of a sample of children residing in a refugee camp, while the other five studies

included samples of children who had been resettled across various high-income countries (i.e., Australia, America, Germany, South Korea, United Kingdom).

Overall, most studies ($k = 4$) suggested a relationship between having meaningful and supportive peer relationships and positive student mental health and wellbeing. In a study by Mohamed and Thomas (2017), responses to a survey suggested that both students and school staff (e.g., teachers, welfare officers, etc.) indicated a relationship between the presence of friendships/ peer support and positive mental health. This was consistent with findings from a study by Steiner (2020), whereby the presence of positive student-student relationships and the presence of native-born friends in particular was related to positive impact on student wellbeing. Similarly, findings from a study by Correa-Velez and colleagues (2010) identified a significant association between possessing higher levels of peer attachments/popularity and positive psychological wellbeing. Lastly, in a study conducted by Nho and colleagues (2019), results identified a full mediation effect of social support (i.e., support received from parents, peers, and teachers) on the relationship between depression and school adjustment.

Conversely, the quantitative findings largely suggested that the presence of negative peer relationships, including bullying victimisation had the ability to compromise mental health and wellbeing. Findings by Mohamed and Thomas (2017) and Correa-Velez and colleagues (2010) reported that experiences of bullying were associated with lower levels of happiness and poor mental health. Similarly, while a study by Diab and colleagues (2018) found an association between peer problems and the development of poor mental health, a study by Olivia (2015) found no relationship between experiences of bullying/discrimination and student self-esteem.

Theme Two: The Relationship Between Positive Teacher Support and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Six quantitative studies (Diab et al., 2018; Mohamed &

Thomas, 2017; Nho et al., 2019; Olivia, 2015; Pucino, 2014; Steiner, 2020) explored the role of teacher support (i.e., the level of academic, social, and emotional support provided to students) and its possible impacts on student mental health and wellbeing. These six studies employed a range of self-report measures to collect data from students aged between 7 and 19 years. Four of these studies (Diab et al., 2018; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Nho et al., 2019; Olivia, 2015) also used a range of parent- or teacher-rated measures to assess perceptions of student functioning. While most studies recruited samples of students resettled across various high-income countries, one study (Diab et al., 2018) included a sample of students currently residing in a refugee camp.

The results were mixed, with some findings reporting a positive relationship ($n = 4$) while others reported no relationship. For example, in an investigation by Mohamed and Thomas (2017), responses to a survey completed by school staff (e.g., teachers) indicated that participants felt having appropriate teacher support, including teachers who were able to understand their students' specific needs, was related to the development of poor mental health. In a study by Steiner (2020), the presence of positive student-teacher relationships was found to have a significant and positive impact on student wellbeing. Interestingly, positive student-teacher relationships were also found to have a mediated positive effect on student-student relationships. Furthermore, in a study by Nho and colleagues (2019), findings identified a full mediating effect of social support (i.e., support received from parents, peers, and teachers) in the relationship between depression and school adjustment.

A study by Pucino (2014) reported that student self-esteem was positively related to positive teaching practices (e.g., grading fairness) and negatively related to reports of teacher discrimination against them. Conversely, a study by Oliva (2015) reported no association between teacher support/practices and self-esteem. Results from a mediation analysis conducted

by Diab and colleagues (2018) found no evidence to suggest that teacher support/practices (e.g., teacher encouragement) mediated the relationship between traumatic stress and mental health problems.

   Theme Three: The Relationship Between School Connectedness and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. A handful of papers (*n* = 3) employing quantitative designs explored the role of school connectedness (i.e., a student's ability to form a sense of belonging to their school, and also looks at their overall attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief in their schools) and its possible effects on student mental health and wellbeing. Results from three Australian-based studies utilising samples of refugee children aged between 11-19 (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Khawaja et al, 2017; Tozer et al, 2017) indicated a positive relationship between school connectedness and mental health and wellbeing. For example, results from two of these studies (Khawaja et al, 2017; Tozer et al, 2017) reported evidence that school connectedness was a significant predictor of positive wellbeing. In a mediation analysis by Khawaja and colleagues (2017), school connectedness also facilitated the development of higher levels of resilience, which in turn led to increased positive wellbeing.

   In a study by Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007), a sense of school connectedness was also found to be a predictor of higher levels of self-efficacy (regardless of the student's levels of past exposure to adversities). This study also found that school connectedness is associated with reduced symptom severity for depression, which is consistent with findings from the study by Tozer and colleagues (2017). Conversely, results from the study by Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007) found no evidence to suggest a relationship between school connectedness and symptom severity for PTSD, while Tozer and colleagues (2017) found no relationship between school connectedness and anxiety.

Theme Four: The Relationship Between Experience of Positive Feelings and Perceptions and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Three studies (Khamis, 2019a; Khamis, 2019b; Trentacosta et al., 2016) explored how the students' general perceptions and feelings about their school (i.e., whether positive or negative) contributed towards their overall levels of mental health and wellbeing. These studies used self-report measures with participants aged between 7 and 22 years. The participants had been resettled across various countries, including America, Lebanon, and Jordan. Findings across these studies were mixed, with some findings indicating a relationship between positive feelings and perceptions about school and the development of more positive mental health and wellbeing. For example, an investigation by Trentacosta and colleagues (2016) demonstrated that students who reported more positive overall feelings towards school were significantly more likely to have fewer traumatic stress symptoms. However, no relationship was found between positive feelings towards school and reduced symptom severity for depression. Similarly, in studies by Khamis (2019a; 2019b), positive feelings about the school environment were related to report lower levels of emotional dysregulation and neuroticism, as well as lower levels of behavioural and emotional difficulties. However, one of these studies (Khamis, 2019b) revealed no relationship between positive perceptions regarding the school environment and PTSD symptom severity.

Theme Five: The Relationship Between Academic Achievement and Student Mental Health and Wellbeing. Three studies explored the impact of academic achievement on student mental health and wellbeing. All findings indicated an association between average - high average school achievement and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing. For example, in a study by Correa-Velez and colleagues (2010), the results identified a significant relationship between increased psychological wellbeing and positive perceptions with regards to

school achievement and performance. Furthermore, in an investigation by Rousseau and colleagues (1996), academic achievement was associated with significant decreases in introversion. Interestingly, results from this study also suggested a significant association between learning difficulties and emotional/behavioural difficulties. For example, learning difficulties were found to be significantly associated with higher levels of aggression, introversion, depression, hyperactivity, and somatisation. Similarly, in a study by Lau and colleagues (2018), a significant association was found between below average school achievement and higher reported emotional and behavioural difficulties.

2.5 Discussion

Past research findings indicate that engagement in formal schooling and education can be a key determinant of child and youth mental health and wellbeing (Carta et al., 2015). This mixed-methods literature review identified and synthesised the available evidence of specific school and education-relevant factors that have the ability to impact mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. This review identified a growing body of research, with 27 qualitative studies, 12 quantitative studies, and 7 mixed-method design studies having been included. Data from across these studies were synthesised, with research findings revealing a series of school-based factors that had the ability to either positively or negatively impact on student mental health and wellbeing.

Findings across both quantitative and qualitative research were relatively consistent, with similar themes emerging from research regardless of their study design. For example, analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data suggested relationships between mental health and the presence or absence of supportive peers, teachers, and school staff. Results from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and surveys all revealed that students typically reported that the ability

to develop relationships with school staff and with other children often fostered a sense of belonging, safety and inclusion and was also associated with increased reports of happiness, improved life satisfaction, confidence, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing. These results are consistent with previous research utilising samples of individuals from non-refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds. For example, across various studies, the ability to develop and possess positive peer and teacher relationships has been found to be associated with lower levels of reported depression, anxiety, and stress (Foubister, 2017), and reduced substance use (Moore et al., 2018).

Findings across both qualitative and quantitative studies evidenced that these positive and caring relationships with peers and teachers are important contributors of the development of positive perceptions of schooling, and of school connectedness and belonging. A focus of quantitative research within this field was on exploring the impact of school connectedness in students holding refugee or asylum seeker status. School connectedness is a multidimensional construct that includes an exploration of a student's overall feelings, commitment, beliefs, and perceptions towards their school. It also refers to a state in which students feel connected, cared for, respected, and trusted within the school environment (McNeely & Whitlock, 2009). Past research has identified a series of benefits associated with the development of school connectedness. For example, in samples of non-refugee or asylum seeking adolescents, possessing strong school connectedness has previously been found to be associated with lower levels of substance use (Carter et al., 2007), suicide ideation (Langille et al., 2015), depression, and anxiety (Lester et al., 2013).

It must be noted that while students identified supportive school-based relationships as key contributors to positive mental health and wellbeing, qualitative and quantitative results also

revealed that there were obstacles to fostering these supportive relationships. For instance, both peers and teachers would discriminate against the students, and teachers were also reported to underestimate the abilities of their students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds relative to their peers. These recurrent experiences of discrimination often led to the development of emotional distress, with participants reporting high levels of anger, sadness, and anxiety on top of already complex mental health needs.

Another major challenge identified through qualitative data in particular, concerned challenges associated with language barriers. Language barriers were identified as hindering social and academic development, which could lead to feelings of frustration, insecurity, and low self-esteem. Interestingly, in a qualitative study with teachers of refugee students, language barriers were identified as being one of the biggest challenges faced by students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Cowling & Anderson, 2021). Results from this study suggested that challenges associated with language contributed to academic difficulties, as well as fear and decreased self-confidence. Given these results, it becomes evident that while students were able to identify a series of school-based protective factors, they also identified a series of unique challenges within the school environment that significantly prohibited the facilitation of mental health and wellbeing.

Importantly, experiences such as bullying, language difficulties, discrimination and negative peer and teacher attitudes are not only experienced by students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. All children, regardless of migrant status, culture, race, or religion may become victims to such negative experiences. However, it appears that children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are more vulnerable to becoming victims of such negative experiences and are more likely to encounter these difficulties as a result of their refugee and

asylum seeking status (e.g., language and social difficulties due to differences in host and home country language and culture, academic difficulties due to significant disruptions in education, prejudice associated with holding refugee status). Furthermore, these children will have to deal with these challenges on top of stressors not typically encountered by other children (e.g., experiences of displacement, trauma, minimal schooling), which may exacerbate existing social and emotional difficulties. As such, it becomes clear that students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds experience unique challenges within the school environment, and therefore require appropriate accommodations to ensure they are provided an opportunity to thrive.

Given these findings, it is unsurprising that students largely suggested the need for access to suitable school-based support services to help target their difficulties. For example, qualitative results largely suggested that having access to specialised support services, such as school psychologists and counsellors, were beneficial in targeting mental health concerns, such as grief and trauma. However, it became apparent that many students felt that most school-based services were led by staff who were unable to provide appropriate support due to limited training and understanding with regards to working with students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds who have experienced trauma. Besides specialised support services, the results also suggested that students appreciated various school-based initiatives aimed specifically towards newcomer students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. For example, the ability to engage in English immersion courses, afterschool homework support, newcomer programs and orientation classes were seen as being helpful. Students appreciated classes that were tailored towards their academic/linguistic ability and valued schools that went out of their way to foster diversity. Importantly, past findings propose that school policies and values that embrace and celebrate cultural diversity are fundamental in supporting students from refugee and

asylum seeking backgrounds in their process of resettlement and adjusting to their new school environments (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Furthermore, findings highlight the importance of fostering inclusive school environments for refugee children, with an emphasis on the provision of adequate language support, training with regards to supporting refugees, and ensuring that these students' psychosocial needs are met (Block et al., 2014; Rutter, 2006).

Across studies, there was evidence to suggest that there are a series of school-based factors that have the ability to contribute to positive mental health. Furthermore, most studies revealed no relationship between various school-based factors and reductions in PTSD. This is particularly important, as past research findings show that children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds typically present with high prevalence rates of various mental health concerns, such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Salari et al., 2017). Importantly, research also suggests that individuals presenting with PTSD (particularly in individuals diagnosed with comorbid psychiatric disorders) tend to experience more intense, chronic, and complex impairments. They may demonstrate delayed responses to intervention and can require more specialised, intensive, and extended periods of intervention before significant improvements are noted (Flory & Yehuda, 2015). As such, future studies should consider conducting longitudinal research that explores whether these school-based factors may have significant impacts on mental health over extended periods of time.

Future studies should also continue to explore which factors are particularly beneficial in promoting mental health and wellbeing. Many participants across studies alluded to the fact that they felt they needed greater access to appropriate school-based supports, interventions, and accommodations in order to target their unique social and emotional needs. Despite this, many felt that schools were unable to provide these services and were not well equipped to

appropriately address their complex problems. As students will undoubtedly spend much of their time in school, schools are an ideal setting in which stable supports and interventions can be implemented to promote mental health and wellbeing (Green et al., 2013; Schulte-Körne, 2016). Research acknowledges that if left untreated, mental health difficulties in children can have devastating effects, such as long-standing academic, social, behavioural and emotional difficulties, as well as poor physical health (Sheehan, 2017). Furthermore, untreated mental health difficulties may severely impact on overall childhood development and increase the risk of further mental health difficulties in adulthood. Therefore, if the right supports are provided, schools have the potential to make a significant impact on the mental health of children, through equipping them with higher levels of resilience, self-esteem, and confidence as well as by promoting emotional, social, cognitive, and identity development (Fazel & Stein, 2002). Based on these findings, it becomes evident that increased research into the types of school-based interventions, accommodations and strategies that are most effective when utilised with this population is warranted.

2.5.1 Limitations

This literature review aimed to synthesise the growing body of research that aims to understand how to tailor education in a way that promotes optimal mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. While the results from this study provided valuable insight and findings with regards to this field, there were methodological limitations that warrant discussion. For example, even though this review included studies that employed either quantitative and/or qualitative methods, the database search still resulted in a rather small body of research to synthesise. It is possible that this review did not include all

relevant data, such as results from conference proceedings and reports, and papers published in languages other than English.

While this review set out with the intention to meta-analyse the quantitative data within this field, this was not possible due to the small body of research papers located. Furthermore, the quantitative research papers identified were heterogeneous in regard to the measures they employed, thus making a meta-analysis challenging. It must also be noted that the studies included in this review largely recruited participants who were resettled across various high-income countries (e.g., America, Australia, Sweden). As a majority of refugees and asylum seekers are currently hosted or resettled across low-middle income countries (UNHCR, 2020a), it is possible that these results are biased and not representative of the range of schooling experiences encountered by these children. As such, there is a great need for further research in this field, particularly research that is conducted across various lower-middle income countries in order to provide a better understanding of how schooling and educational experiences may differ.

2.5.2 Conclusion

Results from this review suggest that schools play a critical role in promoting mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. While schools are well positioned to provide their students with key mental health interventions and support, it is important that these supports are appropriate and have been tailored in order to address the complex needs often presented by students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Without these supports in place, students are likely to encounter significant difficulties developing and maintaining positive relationships, lack motivation to engage within the classroom, and become susceptible to poor academic achievement and mental health and wellbeing.

Consistent with past reports and research findings, this review largely supports the need for whole-school reform in order to ensure that these students are able to appropriately engage with education to their full potential. Some research findings emphasise the need for schools to adopt 'holistic' models of education that better recognise and respond to the multiple and complex learning, and social and emotional needs of refugee and asylum seeker children (Khan, 2016). The results of this review support the need for schools to provide appropriate language support in order to facilitate linguistic and academic progress, as well as to foster social relationships and self-esteem. It is apparent that students require specialised support services, with clinicians and teachers that are trained in recognising and addressing trauma and the various other needs presented by their students. Furthermore, school-based initiatives that facilitate the development of positive peer and teacher attitudes as well as relationships are warranted. School-based policies that target discrimination and prejudice are crucial. It is also imperative that schools foster an environment that promotes safety, belonging, inclusion and the celebration of diversity.

Findings from this literature review largely suggest that with the right support in place, students can greatly benefit from engagement in schooling and education. Given these findings, it is imperative that schools remove barriers to successful engagement in education and support their students in reaching their full potential. It is hoped that the findings from this review provide educators with insight and increased knowledge with regards to the educational needs of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. It is also hoped that these results inform and support schools and educators in confidently tailoring education in a way that ensures the development of not only academic achievement, but also positive mental health and wellbeing.

Table 2.2

Extraction Table of Study Characteristics for Qualitative Literature

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Baker et al., (2019)	16 adolescents originating from Syria or Iraq 33 parents 16 key service providers	2-13	Australia	› Focus groups	› N/A	› Linking students and their families with mental health supports	100%
Bartlett, et al., (2017)	23 students (originating from Guinea, Honduras, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet) (+ 3 teachers) (+ 2 guidance counselors	Not specified (all currently enrolled in schools across New York)	International High Schools (New York)	› Interviews › Focus groups › Photo-cued group discussions and interviews	› Language barriers › Discrimination and prejudice › School cultures emphasising need to assimilate	› Catering to the needs of newly arrived students › Celebration of cultural diversity › Positive student-teacher relationships › Sensitive teaching practices › Friendships with similar peers (e.g., similar cultural backgrounds) › Access to support services (e.g., psychologist)	80%
Bennouna, C., et al., (2019).	30 youth (originating from Iraq, Syria, and Sudan) 30 caregivers 30 key informants (e.g., teachers)	13-23	Across Texas and Virginia (USA)	› Focus Groups › Semi-structured interviews	› Discrimination and prejudice › Language barriers › Teacher insensitivity (e.g., engaging in micro-aggressions) › Navigating new school systems	› Peer relationships › Welcoming/supportive students › Positive student-teacher relationships › Friendships with similar peers (e.g., same language) › Programs for newcomer students (e.g., English immersion courses)	100%
Blanchet-Cohen et al., (2017)	22 (originating from Colombia, Congo, Nepal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Togo, and Zimbabwe	15-30	Six local schools based in Canada	› Focus Groups › In-depth interviews	› Initial transition to school › Negative student/ teacher interactions (e.g., trivialising violence) › Covert and overt forms of racism › Lack of psychosocial supports	› Possessing strong educational aspirations › Ability to access support services (e.g., psychologist) › Peer relationships	100%
Closs et al., (2001)	14 families (13 mothers, 10	All children, age	Scotland	› Semi-structured interviews	› Language barriers › Racism and exclusion	› Peer relationships	100%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
	fathers, 12 refugee children) 24 school personnel's 5 key personnel from Scottish education authorities	range not specified			‣ Difficulties with developing and peer relationships ‣ Bullying and teasing		
Copolov & Knowles (2020)	18 (originating from Afghanistan or Pakistan)	18-30	Australia	‣ Semi-structured interview schedule (the YES-R)	‣ Difficulties with developing friendships ‣ Need to act in line with the host country (e.g., act 'Western' to develop friendships)	‣ Sense of safety ‣ Diverse and multicultural schools ‣ Positive student-teacher relationship ‣ Viewing education as providing hope for the future	100%
Crawford (2017)	10 students (originating from Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan (+1 principal) (+2 teachers)	13-17	F-12 College (Australia)	‣ Semi-structured interviews ‣ Classroom observations ‣ Teacher assessments	‣ Language barriers ‣ Difficulties with developing peer relationships	‣ Engagement in a music program ‣ Supportive school staff	80%
Dejong et al., (2017)	118 (originating from Syria)	10-16	Lebanon	‣ Focus groups ‣ Community mapping ‣ Photo elicitation	‣ Being socially excluded ‣ Bullying (verbal and physical) ‣ Negative teacher attitudes	‣ Viewing education as providing hope for the future ‣ Providing a sense of safety ‣ Peer relationships	100%
Demir & Ozgul (2019)	22 children (Originating from Syria)	8-15	Turkey	‣ Semi-structured interviews	‣ Discrimination ‣ Difficulties with forming friendships ‣ Negative peer/teacher attitudes ‣ Language barriers	‣ Development of friendships ‣ Friendships with similar peers (e.g., similar cultural) ‣ Increased knowledge of host country language	100%
Fazel (2015)	40 refugee or asylum seeking students originating from 20 countries	15-24	Schools across United Kingdom	‣ Semi-structured Interviews	‣ Negative teacher perceptions/ attitudes ‣ Bullying	‣ Linking with mental health services ‣ Positive teacher-student relationship ‣ Peer relationships ‣ Extracurricular activities ‣ Initiatives/programs that assisted with language development/ developing friendships	100%

Study	*N*	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Gilhooly & Lee (2017)	34 Karen refugees (originating from Myanmar) 30 parents	Adolescents	United States	‣ Structured and semi-structured interviews ‣ Information conversations ‣ Observation ‣ Drawings and letters ‣ Photovoice	‣ Bullying and discrimination ‣ Initial transition to school ‣ Language barriers		80%
Hyman et al., (2000)	16 (originating from countries across South East Asia)	15-20	Canada	‣ Semi-structured/ individual interviews ‣ Focus groups	‣ New school expectations and systems ‣ Language barriers ‣ Difficulties with developing peer relationships ‣ Bullying ‣ Negative teacher interactions (e.g., singling out refugee students) ‣ Schools that were not diverse ‣ Difficulties with meeting friends of similar cultural backgrounds	-	60%
Mosselson (2007)	15 female refugees originating from Bosnia 6 related family members (siblings, parents) 4 additional participants (unrelated to core group of participants)	16-24	New York	‣ Semi-structured interviews	‣ Initial transition to school ‣ Social isolation ‣ Being of a different ethnic group when compared to the majority ‣ Insensitive teaching practices ‣ Peers/teachers possessing negative perceptions ‣ Bullying and teasing ‣ Difficulties with connecting with classmates due to no/limited shared experiences ‣ Language barriers	‣ Valuing education and seeing it as providing future opportunities ‣ Ability to learn and acquire new knowledge and skills ‣ Academic achievement	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Oliver, M (2012)	20 (originating from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo.	13-19	Enrolled or recently graduated from Australian High Schools	‣ One-on-one interviews ‣ Focus groups	‣ Discrimination and prejudice ‣ Teachers possessing low academic and behavioural expectations	‣ Peer relationships ‣ Friends of similar cultural backgrounds ‣ Access to support services (e.g., counselors) ‣ Empathetic and supportive teachers and school staff ‣ Viewing education as providing hope for the future	60%
Pastoor, L. (2015)	40 refugee students (from Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Chechnya, Nigeria,Zimbabwe) 25 school staff	16-23	Five schools across Norway	‣ Semi-structured interviews	‣ Insensitive teachers ‣ Lack of academic/ emotional support from teachers ‣ Teachers lacking specialised training, and skills in supporting refugees ‣ Ill-equipped support services	‣ Friendships ‣ Sense of normalcy and structure	80%
Posselt et al., (2014)	15 refugee youth (from Bhutan, Afghanistan, and countries across Africa) 15 service providers	12-25	Australia	‣ Semi-structured interviews	‣ Being placed in classes based on age and not ability ‣ Understanding school expectations ‣ Limited training in supporting complex mental health needs ‣ Language barriers ‣ Limited experiences of past schooling ‣ Prejudice, discrimination, and bullying ‣ Absence of culturally appropriate information (mental health)		80%
Pryor, C. (2001)	35 immigrant/ refugee adults and 40 children (various countries of origin) 13 residents, 15 staff, 10 community leaders	Not specified	School district in Michigan (USA)	‣ Interviews ‣ Focus groups	‣ Certain elements of school environment (e.g., school bell) can trigger past traumas (e.g., air raid drills) ‣ Not being challenged academically ‣ Language barriers	‣ Sense of safety and security ‣ Supportive and encouraging teachers ‣ Diverse school environments ‣ Engagement in team-based activities (e.g., sports)	60%
Salem (2019)	80 Syrian refugee students 5 teachers	13-16	Jordan (double-shift schools)	‣ Interviews ‣ Classroom observations	‣ Negative teaching and disciplinary practices (e.g., corporal punishment) ‣ Racism and discrimination ‣ Language barriers	‣ Sense of stability and normalcy ‣ Positive student-teacher relationships ‣ Engagement in leisurely activities (e.g., sports)	100%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
				‣ Visual-based methods (i.e., visual diaries)	‣ Ineffective teaching (e.g., lack of specialised training) ‣ Afternoon school hours (i.e., starting and finishing school at a later hour) ‣ Uncomfortable environments (e.g., overcrowding) ‣ Mandatory classes on the weekend (lead to reduced leisure time) ‣ Bullying and harassment	‣ Peer relationships	
Schapiro, A. (1988)	15 (originating from Laos)	13-19	Junior High or High Schools in America	‣ Open ended interview	‣ Bullying and discrimination ‣ Challenging school experiences ‣ Academic difficulties	‣ Peer relationships	60%
Sleijpen et al., (2017)	16 (originating across countries across the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia)	13-21	Netherlands	‣ Semi-structured interviews	‣ Switching schools frequently ‣ Inability to engage with education at the same level experienced within home countries	‣ School provided distraction from negative thoughts resulting from past traumas ‣ Viewing education as hope for the future ‣ Sense of control/power ‣ Peer relationships ‣ Positive student-teacher relationships	80%
Stark et al., 2015	51 focus groups 175 in-depth interviews 40 key-informant interviews Refugees originated from Congo or Somalia	Sample consisted of adults and adolescents (aged 13-17)	Uganda	‣ Focus groups ‣ Interviews	‣ Lack of English fluency ‣ Bullying/ discrimination ‣ Negative teacher perceptions of students' academic abilities ‣ Insensitivity towards students' religious needs ‣ Teacher favoritism	‣ Initiatives that assisted students and families (e.g., reducing school fees; providing meals; creation of Islamic prayer spaces)	100%
Svensson, & Eastmond (2013)	14 asylum seekers (originating from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine)	6-16	Sweden	‣ Semi-structured interviews ‣ Drawings ‣ Photography ‣ Observations	‣ Discrimination and prejudice ‣ Language barriers ‣ Difficulties with forming friendships ‣ Being placed in an integration class (seen as a form of exclusion)	‣ Provision of routine and predictability ‣ Viewing educations as hope for the future ‣ Developing host country language skills ‣ Peer relationships	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Uptin et al., (2012)	12 refugee students (from Myanmar, Burundi, Sudan, Congo, Sierra Leone, Togo) 1 youth worker	16-19	Schools in Australia	› Semi-structured interviews › Focus groups	› Difficulties with developing friendships › Challenging transitions to school › Racism, prejudice, and discrimination › Language barriers › Lack of social support › Assumptions about student abilities (e.g., assignment to lower-level classes)	› Subjects like sport and music › Peer relationships › School cultures that celebrate diversity	60%
Veronese et al., (2017)	200 (originating from Palestine)	6-11	4 primary schools based in refugee camps (Gaza)	› Narrative games (e.g., drawing; role-playing) › Dialogic conversation	› Worry about being at school due to past experiences of bombings	› Sense of safety and security › Views of education as providing hope for the future › Opportunity to learn resilience and coping/survival skills › Positive teacher and peer relationships	100%
Weine et al., (2014)	73 refugees from Liberia and Burundi (+ family members and service providers)	*All adolescents* *M =* 15.3	Boston/ Chicago (USA)	› Minimally structured interviews › Shadowing observations	› Teachers lacking specialised knowledge, training, and skills in supporting refugee students	› Positive student-teacher relationship › Provision of homework assistance › Access to support services (e.g., social workers)	80%
Winthrop & Kirk (2008)	Refugee students from Eritrea (48 interviews, 64 completed questionnaire) and Liberia (38 interviews, 22 focus groups. Teachers (46 interviews, 48 completed questionnaires)	7-19	Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone	› In-depth interviews › Focus groups › Classroom observations › School mapping › Video and photo documentation › Questionnaires	› Experiences of abuse (e.g., corporal punishment) and exploitation (e.g., bribing) perpetrated by teachers › Disruptive peer behavior › Peer conflict	› Enjoyment in learning › Peer relationships › Belief that education would provide better opportunities in the future › Supportive teaching practices › Developing English fluency › Positive and supportive school environment	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	*Negative* impacts on the development of wellbeing	*Positive* impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Ziaian, T., et al., (2017)	85 (from Bosnia, Serbia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Liberia)	13-17	Australia	Focus Groups	• Transitioning into mainstream schools • Being placed in classes based on age, rather than ability level • Lack of educational support • Discrimination • Negative teacher attitudes (e.g., possessing low expectations)		80%
Mixed-Method Findings (Qualitative)							
Al-Rhousan, T., et al. (2018)	65 Syrian students	*M* = 17.3	High School in Jordan (based in a refugee camp)	Focus Groups	• Limited engagement in school-based recreational activities • Due to trauma, students felt that they may not have capacity for academic success. • Corporal punishment • Teachers lacking training and knowledge in teaching refugee students • Financial difficulties leading to difficulties with acquiring resources (e.g., stationary)	• Viewing education as providing hope for the future • Complementary and supplemental education classes	80%
McMullen et al., (2020)	39 newcomer students (including refugees from countries across Europe, Asia, The Middle East) 8 key staff members 130 youth workers	9-18	Schools across Northern Ireland	Focus group with students Semi-structured interviews with key staff members	• Being of a different ethnicity when compared to the majority • Language barriers • High academic expectations • Withdrawal of support too quickly (e.g., language support) • Insensitivity towards difficult issues (e.g., teachers asking about refugee experience) • Cultural and religious discrimination	• Long-term peer relationships • Peer relationships with children of similar linguistic or cultural groups • New opportunities and experiences • Supportive student-teacher relationships	100%
Mohamed, S., & Thomas, M. (2017).	21 refugee children (from countries across Africa and The Middle East) 3 refugee parents	9-19	Schools in The United Kingdom	Semi-structured interviews	• Bullying and racial harassment • Social isolation • Unable to make friends with peers of similar cultural backgrounds	• Diverse, multicultural school • Peer relationships • Provision of a sense of safety, security, and routine • Developing English proficiency	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Methods	_Negative_ impacts on the development of wellbeing	_Positive_ impacts on the development of wellbeing	Quality
Olivia, D. (2015)	8 students (refugees or immigrants from Iraq, Congo, Colombia, Nepal) 4 counsellors	14-20	Two high schools in America	Semi-structured interviews	‣ Language barriers ‣ Financial difficulties meaning students could not participate in sports-based activities/ school clubs ‣ Difficulties with forming friendships	‣ Supportive and encouraging school staff (e.g., counsellor) ‣ Engagement in a newcomers program ‣ Engagement in after school programs, homework clubs	60%
Pucino, A. (2014)	17 Iraqi students	14-20	High Schools in America	Semi-structured interviews	‣ Bullying ‣ Prejudice and discrimination by both teachers and students	‣ English as 2nd language courses ‣ Peer relationships ‣ Positive student-teacher relationships ‣ Smaller schools that were diverse ‣ Academic success ‣ Access to college preparation courses/ internships	80%
Rousseau et al., (1996)	3 principals 5 school psychologists 3 teachers 7 parents	8-12	Canada	Semi-structured interviews with school staff and parents	‣ Teachers lacking the appropriate resources to help support their students ‣ Language barriers ‣ Teachers lacking time/ability to target their student's poor academic achievement ‣ Challenging transitions to mainstream school ‣ Lack of appropriate remedial services	‣ Schools that celebrated diversity ‣ Absence of discrimination	60%
Shallow & Whitington, (2014)	3 families, including 8 refugee children originating from Myanmar and Congo 5 school staff	5-8	Australia (New Arrivals Program within Primary School)	Interviews with parents and school staff Observations	‣ Initial transition to school ‣ Lack of communication between school staff and parents (e.g., due to language barriers) ‣ Racism	‣ Enjoyment in learning ‣ Positive teacher-student relationships ‣ School-based activities such as music and excursions ‣ Supportive school community and values ‣ New Arrivals Program ‣ Language support ‣ Peer relationships	100%

Table 2.3

Overarching Themes, and Relevant Quotations from Qualitative Literature

Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
Baker et al., (2019)				"The school is the right and the best one to direct the child to those services. I have learned about the services through the school if it wasn't for the school, I wouldn't have known" (p.7)		
Bartlett et al., (2017)	"When I went the students only speak English. There was no one who speak the same language as me, and it was very hard to deal with that" (p.113)	"People thought I was a terrorist and everything like that, which is so funny for me, because I was running away from terrorists, and they think I'm the one who is a terrorist" (p.113)	"She always comes to me and talks to me even though I don't speak it. But she be doing movements like sign talking" (p.115)	"If you need help, they are always there for us. We don't have to make an appointment for them to meet, they are always there, they make the time for us" (p.114)	"We are safe. [Different] cultures are accepted. Like there's no bullying in our school about other people's English" (p.114)	
Benounna et al., (2019)	"I didn't really know English. I couldn't speak very well" (p.7)	"There was [an] American boy, he was talking about my religion in a bad way and talking about me that I'm wearing hijab" (p.7)	"I was like the only Arabic girl and I had recently moved towns. And the town was like most populated with like, Latinos and like Latinas, and so they weren't very nice that I didn't speak Spanish. And they would like speak behind my back. And I got like very — I got angry, and sad" (p.9)	"When we came to this country like totally lost, and you don't know, just don't know what to do. And she's just right there for you. She opens the way." (p.10)		"They put me [in] Newcomer and the teacher [was] always caring and helping and stuff" (p.9)
Blanchet-Cohen et al., (2017)		I don't know, here, well [the kids] have not really experienced war. They	"I had good friends who I established myself with so I couldn't feel any trauma" (p.166)	"For the teachers to be more…to pay more attention, or for them to know more" (p.165)		

Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
		actually find it funny" (p.164)				
Closs et al., (2001)	"I am really glad I spoke good English already – you need it to survive" (p.142)	"Whenever it's happened to me (name-calling), like other people in my year stick up for me" (p.142)	"I came in the 6th grade and by then all the groups were formed, and I didn't want to look for new best friends just then because I have just lost my best friends 2 or 3 months ago" (p.142)			
Copolov & Knowles (2020)	"At the beginning, it [making friends] was very difficult, I couldn't speak English" (p.191)	"In my classes, usually I'm the only Muslim there and I'm wearing the scarf so it's very difficult" (p.193)	"I was embracing the Western culture more and I wanted to be like that because the friends I had, some lived in a Western World" (p.191)	"My teacher used to tell me don't sit with people from your background, if you sit with them, you will not improve, go sit with the people who is different from you and who speak different from your language and that way you can improve" (p.192)	"When you are living in a very multicultural suburb and you are going to a multicultural school, it is very different to going to a school where there is very little people from other cultures" (p. 190)	
Crawford (2017)	"It was hard because of language. I did not know English, just a little, but after one month my English was good" (p.348)		"At that time I feel bad and didn't have any friends and did not know how to make friends" (p.348)	"The most important thing is to make them feel comfortable, to build rapport with them and to build trust and make sure that the classroom is warm and friendly" (p.350)		"When they have just come into a country after trauma, to have a music programme that incorporates something that is positive, enjoyable, that they can achieve in, is fantastic" " (p.351)
Dejong et al., (2017)		"Lebanese kids wait for us till we leave school and they hit us" (p.28)	"We are safe because our parents are with us and in school our friends are there" (p.29)	"If you didn't do anything they still come at you, shout and hit you…if you did something good they still come and tell you it's not good. Some teacher hates us and they put zero" (p.28)		

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Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
Demir & Ozgul (2019)	"I don't feel like going back to school anymore. I have lost my motivation. I am not competent either in Arabic or Turkish, so instruction at school makes no sense" (p.1,999)	"Nobody wants to sit next to me in the classroom because of my Syrian background" (p.1,998)	"I spend more time with Syrians. I prefer playing with them. Turkish children do not play with me anyway. I, therefore, play with Syrians. It is more fun" (p.1,998)	"My classroom teacher made me sit at the back of the classroom. He criticizes me. I feel that he doesn't like me" (p.1,998)		
Fazel (2015)	"I was struggling a lot, I didn't have confidence with my English language" (p.258)	"Just some of the teachers, they are like racist" (p.257)	"How did I come out from that depression… and that's it. It was, from the kids in the school, really from the kids, really they help me a lot" (p.258)	"I spoke to a bilingual base teacher at school, he knows more than I know about myself" (p.257)		"Talking to them, taking them places, introducing them to English teenagers, let them spend time with them, make friends with them, they are different. See the differences between the two cultures (p.258)
Gilhooly & Lee (2017)	"In school they see me, and people think 'he don't know English good' and don't want to talk so it not easy" (p.146)	"I try not to go to ISS (In-school-suspension) so that why I don't listen the people that make fun of me" (p.148)				
Hyman et al., (2000)	"Other people, they would take only half an hour to study for a test. You had to study for 2 or 3 hours... Many times, it's like you couldn't do as well as others, so you got discouraged and you cried" (p.285)	"The fact that I'm a racial minority makes a difference. It makes my struggle a lot harder than a racial majority" (p.289)	"I know that even if I was somewhere and there were some Orientals behind me, and I didn't know them, I know that there was a pretty good chance if I got into a fight, I'd get help from them" (p.285)	"All the teachers kept telling everyone to be nice to me. I guess they meant well, but that doesn't make you feel good, because it shows that you don't belong" (p.285)		
Mosselson (2007)	"I remember being at school and these kids	"They had their own image of what I was	"No one wanted to talk to me. I was the only person	"The teachers were horrible. Some of them were really nice,		

Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
	are all talking to me, and I didn't know anything and then this one kid says, 'she's stupid' and that's one word I recognise" (p. 107)	supposed to be, and I wasn't that" (p.107)	in the class that no one ever talked to because I'm so different" (p.107)	some of them were really insulting, asking me questions like do you know what rock music is" (p.107)		
Oliver (2012)	"We can't do it alone, because English is our second language, we have to get help you know" (p.159)	"Like they will start saying things that you don't want to hear, like about where you come from and everything you know?" (p.156)	"When I went and sat with my 'African' [making finger quotes] people, it was more fun and we got all kids all laughing, joking. It helped me cope, I can actually say, it really did help me cope because it was like an instant boost" (p.157)	"He made us feel like we were part of the school community. All the other teachers didn't care whether we were part of the school community or not" (p.158)		"Sports you get involved, class discussions you get involved, you know, excursions, ah pretty much a bit of everything that's provided at school helps you get into the system" (p.158)
Perez-Aronsson et al., (2019)	"It was a bit difficult for my child to go to school and talk to the teachers there. Everyone spoke Swedish; no one spoke Arabic" (p. 5)		"They talk a lot about school, that they're happy, that they're going to invite their friends home and that kind of stuff" (p. 6)	"She said that she would book an appointment with a counsellor so we could talk to them" (p.7)		"When they're going on some excursion, they'll talk about that day all week" (p. 6)
Pastoor (2015)	"I don't want to go to school. I think if I go there, I will not understand anything, so it is better for me to be at home" (p.249)			"I need someone who can tell me what to do, as I have no parents. Some who can say do 'such and such'" (p.249).	"School, going to school it's in itself positive, as it is offering structure in everyday life" (p.250)	
Posselt et al., (2014)	"They don't go to school. Wagging school- they say it's hard and then they don't understand stuff and say it's all too hard and they just give up or they only go to	"The only difficulties I have experienced here is being called a terrorist. I always end up in fights" (p.136)	"If the friend is really bad and he will make you do the wrong things like smoke, follow bad people with smoking, drugs, sexual stuff, and alcohol" (p.137)	"I don't trust them and most of them are racist" (p.138)	"Schools aren't necessarily set up for someone who's having flashbacks and nightmares and lack of sleep" (p.134)	

Author (year)	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
	school sometimes" (p.135)					
Pryor (2001)			"Everyone here gets along. It's amazing. You have people from 30 different countries, and everyone gets along". (p.280)	I like the fact that teachers are OK with having to work with kids from all over the place. They don't give anybody a hard time" (p.280)	"The thing I like about the school is it is so diverse. People come from all different countries. I don't think I would be comfortable going to a school with just one or two races" (p.280)	"I think the teams, like basketball games. We have clubs and councils and people from everywhere come to those clubs and councils, and then you have to work together to make something" (p.280)
Salem (2019)	"If we talk using our Syrian dialect, they (teachers) start saying ugly things" (p.73)	"Some teachers here are racists. They say bad words to us, and they hit us" (p.72)	"The day I started school again was a very happy day because I started to make friends after leaving Syria" (p.101)	"There are teachers who don't like to teach. They just want the classroom time to end quickly" (p. 73)	"There is no calmness in the classroom. It is chaotic the entire time through" (p.86)	"Trips, sports, activities like drawing or clay, and group activities with teachers anything more engaging" (p.97)
Schapiro (1998)	"I was afraid that I couldn't speak English and so lonely that it was – oh my god- only my family speaking Laos" (p.169)		"I was scared. I was afraid that we have no friends and Laos friends, y'know, be able to communicate together" (p.169).			
Sliejpen et al., (2017)			"Maybe school is better for me; I can laugh with classmates and make jokes too" (p.355)		"I know that school is my only rock… at school, I forget everything" (p.355)	
Stark et al., (2015)	"For this issue of going to school, you can go to school, and they discriminate you. They say, 'what should we talk about	"Often we have witnessed that in class, these ones they laugh at them just because the way they pronounce words, the way they speak" (p.176)		"I was at the same desk as girls around 17 years old and me I was 12 years… sometimes the teacher neglected them because he thinks they are mature		"School fees have been reduced by 10,000 Ugandan shillings for refugees. Even payment is instalments. We feed

Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
	to you who do not know the language?" (p.176)			people; he doesn't care, and the girls are feeling shame" (p.176)		all school children whether or not they have paid fees"
Svensson & Eastmond (2013)	"I've got to learn Swedish, which is really good, I force myself and I really try. But then came English, mother-tongue tuition and then all the other subjects. So I've become much worse at maths" (p.166)		"Many can be turned down. On those days he is very, very uneasy. He comes home and tells us with a lot of concern and anxiety and is extremely irritated" (p.166)			
Uptin et al., (2012)	"Sometime we are lonely, we speak only to Burmese friend, we can't speak English language like they do" (p.130)	"Then all of a sudden he was like, 'Oh why don't you stay in your country.' And then I thought about that and then he went too much and he's like 'Oh look at you, your f— black' and my eyes just shut and I had a fight there" (p.129)	"I found that the Australian students didn't want to make friends with kids from anywhere else and I was really lonely" (p.130)		"Oh I have way more friends here. — 'Cause most people here accept you for who you are, they're nice" (p.134)	"My dream was to become a singer. At my school I have Music, I can sing, rap and play drum" (p. 133)
Veronese et al., (2017)			"I love going to school. I feel happy with my beloved friends" (p.371)	"The teachers make me feel good when I'm afraid" (p.371)	"When I am at school and some unexpected explosions happen, I think I'm okay because my friends and my teachers will protect me" (p.371)	
Weine et al., (2014)			"J. is a close friend. We talk about everything that happens, do homework	"Teachers in the U.S. are good, they care about you a lot. They keep an eye out for me and my sister and try to make sure that		

Author (year)	Overarching Theme					
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
			and play soccer and basketball together" (p.8)	we are getting the extra help we need" (p.12)		
Winthrop & Kirk (2008)	"I feel proud of my school because I am learning an international language. I am important in the community. I can read and write in English" (p.653)		"I have a classmate and a friend. I study with them in order to have good results and to be a good student too" (p.651)	"The things that a teacher does that I hate are beating me roughly like a criminal, depriving me of my right" (p.655)		
Ziaian et al., (2018)		"I think we have too much racist teachers in school. They're always saying, "Stop acting like Middle-Eastern" or, "stop doing that because you're Iraqi" (p.351)		"Sometimes they (teachers) give the black people easy stuff to do cos (they think) we're stupid. (They think) we don't know what's going on and we're not going to do the work cos we're going to fail" (p.351)		
Mixed-Method Findings (Qualitative)						
McMullen et al., (2020)	"Well, it was easy at the beginning. They were like 'oh you are so cute, you are a newcomer' and everything but as you start to speak English the friends who used to be start to change" (p.132)	"The boys laugh at me and keep asking 'Why do you wear this? Why do you wear this? (head scarf) and I still tell them it is part of my religion" (p.131)	"You need to find new friends. And then you find your real friends. That is just amazing, when you find the real ones" (p.132)	"In my last year (teacher) asked me to go to their classroom and talk more about Syria and the refugees and things. I found it hard to talk at the back, old, harmful memories. And like I actually don't want to talk about it" (p.130)		"When I was first here I went to (support teacher) the whole day but then last year I only got two periods and then this year they said 'no you can't come anymore"
Mohamed & Thomas (2017)		"They do make jokes about us ... the Taliban's arrived or something like that ... she's gonna blow a bomb or something" (p.255)				

| Author (year) | Overarching Theme | | | | | |
	Language	Prejudice and Discrimination	Peer Relationships	School Staff Support	The School Environment	School-based Initiatives
Olivia (2015)	"I can say, like last year, when I got here, I can't play soccer because I had no English" (p.132)	"Maybe my color, but I'm not sure about it, because I'm Black. Yeah, with White student, maybe, but I don't know" (p.148)	"I don't have many friends, only like, in ELL" (p.141)	"Pretty much, she helping me. Not only me, all of us ELL students. She's our counsellor and she's doing really fantastic job" (p.125)		"Last year I used to stay after school, like every day. That's helpful, like, to finish my homework, yea. Like, if I have tests I didn't finish, I will finish it after school. Like afterschool, helpful a lot" (p.126)
Pucino (2014)		"Like some of the people when I am talking to them, When I say to them like I am from Iraq and stuff like that, they are just saying 'Oh my God! You're from Iraq? Oh my God' and they just walking away from me" (p. 127)	"I had a friend but she wasn't a U.S citizen. She was like from China. And she didn't really speak English that well, so we were together always" (p.123)	"Without her (my English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher), I would be something else. I will say that. She helped me a lot. She really did" (p.132)		"Teacher cares about me for going to college. Because for one week, he take me from the school. We had a half day, and he take me to the community college" (p.164)
Shallow & Willington, (2014)	"To start I let them speak in their language but once they develop a bit of English, I don't let them speak their language in the classroom" (p.28)			"In classrooms, teachers are really supportive in developing an environment that is calm, safe, and secure and has routines and gets away from that fear of a new place and new people" (p.28)	"It helps them on an emotional level, they don't feel like they're segregated and helps them to integrate with mainstream kids"	"For children we've just started soccer at recess and lunch time which started as a NAP thing and then evolved into trying to get NAP kids and mainstream kids together" (p.27)

Table 2.4

Extraction Table of Study Characteristics for Quantitative Literature

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
Correa-Velez et al., (2010)	97 refugees (originating from 11 countries across Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe and South Asia)	11-19	Schools in Melbourne, Australia	• The World Health Organization Quality of Life-Bref Questionnaire • Item assessing subjective health status • Item assessing happiness	• N/A	*Bullying:* • Associated with lower levels of happiness (p = .03). *Positive perceptions of school:* • Associated with increased wellbeing (p = .02). *Peer relationships:* • Associated with increased wellbeing (p = .04).	80%
Diab et al., (2018)	303 (Palestine)	10-13	Refugee Camp in Gaza	• Child Post-traumatic Symptoms (CPTS-R) • The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire • Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices • Motivational Strategies for Learning Questionnaire • Children's Loneliness Scale • Students' Perception about School Work Scale • The Inclusive Gaza Traumatic Event Checklist • The Negative Life Event Checklist	*Teacher support:* • Did not correlate with post-traumatic stress symptoms (r = -.04, p > .05). • Correlated with psychological distress (r = -.19, p < .01). *Teacher encouragement:* • Did not correlate with post-traumatic stress symptoms (r = 0.02). • Correlated with psychological distress (r = -.13, p < .05). *Peer relationships:* • Did not correlate with post-traumatic stress symptoms (r = -.06) or psychological distress (r = -.08). *Peer loneliness:* • Correlated with post-traumatic stress symptoms (r = .17, p < .05) and psychological distress (r = .30, p < .01).	Study used a mediating SEM model to examine the mediating role of school factors in the relationship between traumatic stress and child mental health. *Peer problems:* • Traumatic stress was significantly associated with peer problems (β = −0.51, t = −2.36, p = .02), which in turn was further associated with higher levels of mental health problems (β = −0.30, t = −1.95, p = .05). Peer relationships fully mediated this association. *Teachers' practices:* • Not found to significantly mediate between traumatic stress and mental health problems.	80%
Khamis, V (2019a)	1000 (Syria)	7-18	Lebanon and Jordan	• Trauma Exposure Scale • The strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	• N/A	Two separate hierarchical regression analyses conducted to examine the relationship between the variables and emotional and behavioural disorders. *School environment:* • When variables were held constant, school environment (e.g., supportive	80%

Study	*N*	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
				● Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (neuroticism scale) ● The Kidcope ● The Family Environment Scale ● The School Environment Scale		relationships with teachers and peers) was a significant predictor of behavioural and emotional disorders (sr^2 = -.27, $p < .001$) as well as a significant predictor of neuroticism (sr^2 = -.31, $p < .001$).	
Khamis, V (2019b)	1000 (Syria)	7-18	Lebanon and Jordan	● Trauma Exposure Scale ● PTSD diagnostic criteria from DSV-IV ● Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short Form ● The Kidcope ● The Family Environment Scale ● The School Environment Scale	● N/A	*School environment:* ● Results from a multivariate binary logistic regression indicated that school environment (e.g., supportive relationships with teachers and peers) was not a significant predictor of PTSD (B = .02, p = .43). ● Results from a MRA[2] found school environment to be a significant predictor of emotional dysregulation (β = -.25, $p < .001$).	100%
Khawaja et al., (2017)	221 – 55.8% refugees (originating from countries across Asia, the Middle East and Africa), 44.2% migrants	11-18	High School based in Brisbane, Australia	● Support Functions Scale ● Psychological Sense of School Membership ● Acculturation and Resilience Scale ● The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale	*School connectedness:* ● Significantly and positively correlated with wellbeing (r = 0.60, $p < .01$) and resilience (r = 0.51, $p < .01$).	*School connectedness:* A mediation analysis and hierarchical regression analysis revealed: ● Step 1: A significant relationship between school connectedness and wellbeing (B = .60, $p < .001$) ● Step 2: When resilience was added into the model, school connectedness remained a significant predictor of wellbeing (B = .32, $p < .001$)	80%
Kia-Keating & Ellis (2007)	76 (Somalia)	12-19	United States of America (Massachus etts or Maine)	● War Trauma Screening Scale ● Psychological Sense of School Membership ● UCLA PTSD Index for DSM-IV ● Depression Self-Rating Scale	*Sense of school belonging:* ● Negative correlation with PTSD (r = -.258, $p < .05$) and depressive symptoms (r = -.485, $p < .001$). ● Positive correlation with self-efficacy (r = .558, $p < .001$).	Three 3-step hierarchical MRAs tested relationships between exposure to adversities and psychological adjustment (PTSD, depression, self-efficacy), and the moderating role of school belonging. *School belonging:*	80%

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[2] MRA – Multiple Regression Analyses

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
				● Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Self-efficacy		● Did not moderate the relationship between exposure to adversities and PTSD symptom severity. ● Predicted symptom severity for depression (β = -.44, $p < .001$), but no interaction effects (β = -.02, $p > .05$). ● Predicted self-efficacy (β = .53, $p < .001$), but no interaction effects (β = -.17, $p > .05$).	
Lau et al., (2018)	694 children 426 primary caregivers (originating from various countries across Asia, the Middle East and Africa)	5-17	Australia	● The child module ● Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire ● Items related to specific domains (e.g., school, community, family, individual)	N/A	*School achievement:* ● When controlling for other predictors, below average school achievement was significantly associated with higher scores on the SDQ ($p < .01$). *School absenteeism:* ● When controlling for other variables, high rates of school absenteeism were significantly associated with higher scores on the SDQ ($p < .05$). *Number of school awards received:* ● No significant relationship found *Results derived from MRA	80%
Nho et al., (2019)	65 refugee students originating from Bangladesh, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Thailand, and Yemen	7-18 years old	South Korea	● Author adapted school-adjustment scale ● Korean Youth Self Report ● The Survey of Children's Social Support (adapted)	*Depression* ● Negatively correlated with social support (r = -.32, p < .05) and school adjustment (r = -.26 p < .05) *Social Support* ● Positively correlated with school adjustment (r = .60, p < .01)	*Social Support (i.e., support received from parents, peers, and teachers)* ● Results indicate a full mediating effect of social support in the relationship between depression and school adjustment (β = .49, p <. 01)	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
Steiner (2020)	694 students (65% originating from refugee regions across the Middle East or Africa)	10-19	Germany	• Student Well-being: 3-item self-report scale • Original items querying attendance in a preparatory class, participation in extracurricular activities, presence of native-born friends • Student-student relation: 5-item self-report scale • Student-Teacher Relation: 4-item self-report scale	N/A	*Presence of native born friends* • Had a direct impact on student wellbeing ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) *Student-Student Relationships* • Had a direct impact on student wellbeing ($\beta = .08$, $p < .05$) *Student-Teacher Relationships* • Had a direct impact on student wellbeing ($\beta = .36$, $p < .05$) • Mediated positive effect on student-student relationships ($\beta = .02$, $p < .05$) *Attending a predatory class* • No direct impact on student wellbeing *Participation in Extracurricular Activity* • No direct impact on student wellbeing *Time spent in current school* • No direct impact on student wellbeing	80%
Tozer et al., (2018)	93 refugee youth (originating from 24 countries)	12-18	School in Brisbane, Australia	• Psychological Sense of School Membership • Adult Acculturation and Resiliency Scale • Hopkins Symptoms Checklist • Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale	*School connectedness:* • Negatively correlated with symptoms of depression ($r = -0.48$, $p < .01$) and anxiety ($r = -0.46$, $p < .01$) • Positively correlated with positive wellbeing ($r = 0.62$, $p < .01$).	*School connectedness:* • Hierarchical MRA were performed: School connectedness significantly predicted reduced depression ($\beta = -.28$, $sr^2 = .04$, $p < .05$) and positive wellbeing ($\beta = .43$, $sr^2 = .10$, $p < .01$), but was not found to be a significant predictor of anxiety ($\beta = -.13$, $sr^2 = .01$, $p > .05$).	80%
Trentacosta et al., (2016)	211 refugee youth (Iraq)	8-22	Detroit, America	• Harvard Trauma Scale • The Impact of Event Scale-Revised • The Depression Self-Rating Scale for Children • Items taken from the Communities that Care Youth Survey	*Feelings and perceptions about school:* • Number of traumatic events correlated with positive feelings about school ($r = 0.21$, $p < .01$). • Did not correlate with symptoms of depression ($r = -.13$).	Two MRAs examined associations with traumatic stress symptoms and depression with traumatic events, supportive relationship with parents, positive feelings about school and demographics (e.g., age). *Feelings and perceptions of school:* • Participants with positive feelings about school had fewer symptoms of traumatic stress ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$) – No interaction effects.	60%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
						• Positive feelings about school were not related to depressive symptom severity (β = -.13, *p* > .05). • No interaction effect for traumatic events X positive school feelings. • For participants aged between 12-17 years, positive feelings about school were not related to traumatic stress symptoms (β = -.15, *p* = .14). • For Christian participants, feelings about school were unrelated to traumatic stress symptoms (β = -.11, *p* = .26).	
Mixed-Method Findings (Quantitative)
Al-Rhousan et al., (2018)	65 (Syrian high school students; control group) 33 (University students; intervention group)	M = 17.3	Jordan	• Peace Evaluation Across Cultures and Environments Survey (PEACE)	*Results of PEACE Survey* • When compared to university students (intervention group), the high school students demonstrated lower overall PEACE scores, including lower scores across seven subscales (emotional tone, agency, hope, tolerance, access, personal safety, group cohesion).	*Results of PEACE Survey* • Findings of the PEACE Survey indicate that high school students received significantly lower scores across all PEACE subscales when compared to university students.	80%
McMullen et al., (2020)	39 newcomer students (including refugees) 33 teachers	10-17	Schools across Northern Ireland	• Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	*Results of SDQ* • Overall scores across subscales (i.e., Emotional Problems, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity, Prosocial, Total Difficulties) were in the Average range except for Peer Problem subscale which demonstrated that scores were in the Slightly raised range.	N/A	100%
Mohamed & Thomas (2017)	21 refugee children (originating from countries across Africa	9-19	Schools in The United Kingdom	• The Multi-dimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) • Questionnaire for staff devised by researchers	*Results of MSLSS* • Responses indicated that 95% of students had high life satisfaction **Risk factors** for learning included: experiences of abuse/ bullying, increased feelings of loneliness/isolation, loss of	N/A	80%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
	and The Middle East) 63 school staff				family, threats to personal safety, poor accommodation. **Protective factors** for learning included: feelings of safety and security, having an adult to trust and confide in, appropriate teacher support (including teachers who can understand their students' needs as well as positive peer support/ mentoring).		
Olivia (2015)	75 refugee and immigrant secondary students (from 21 countries)	14-20	America	• Items taken from the International Comparative Study of Ethnocultural Youth (ICSEY) survey • Items designed by researchers	*Perception of school personnel and program support:* • Did not correlate with self-esteem (r = .08). *Experiences of discrimination:* • Did not correlate with student self-esteem (r = -.06).		60%
Pucino (2014)	1055 students (sample comprises both second-generation youth and first-generation youth)	M = 14.17	America	• Data taken from Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study	N/A	*Perceptions of teachers:* • Self-esteem was found to be associated with teachers' interest (β = .22, p < .001), grading fairness (β = .13, p < .001), and teachers' goodness (β = .17, p < .001). • Lower self-esteem was associated with teachers' discrimination (β = .06, p = .05). • Only teacher goodness was a significant predictor in the final model (B = .12, p < .001).	80%
Rousseau et al., (1996)	156 (originating from countries across Southeast Asia and Central America)	8-12	Canada	• Child Behaviour Checklist • Academic Achievement/ Learning Difficulties as identified by school authorities	*Learning difficulties:* • For Southeast Asian children: correlated with aggression (r = .18, p = .04), introversion (r = .20, p = .01), depression (r = .18, p = .04), and somatization (r = .20, p = .03). • For Central American children: correlated with extroversion (r = .27, p = .02) and hyperactivity (r = .42, p = .001). *School achievement:* • For Southeast Asian children: French achievement correlated with	N/A	60%

Study	N	Age	Setting	Measures	Univariable Findings	Multivariate Findings	Quality
					introversion (r = -.21, p = .02) and extroversion (r = .24, p = .01). • For Central American children, math and French achievement correlated with introversion (r = -.23, p = .04).		
Shallow & Willington (2014)	8 refugee children	5-8	Australia (New Arrivals Program within Primary School)	• Children observed using the RRR Wellbeing Scale	Overall, the participants involved in this study scored an average of 3.96 (out of a possible 5) on the RRR Wellbeing Scale – indicating that the school was functioning at a mid-to-high level of supportiveness.		100%

Chapter 3 – The Malaysian Context

The systematic literature review presented in Chapter 3 provided evidence to support the role of education and schooling in promoting the development of positive mental health and wellbeing for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Several school-based factors were found to be significant, such as the development of supportive peer/teacher relationships, school values that embraced inclusivity and diversity, as well as tailored support services and accommodations to meet the unique needs of these students. The results indicated that with the right support, children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds stand to gain substantial benefit in terms of their overall mental health and wellbeing.

While the review provides insight into the role of schooling and education for this population, it found that most studies have been restricted to samples of students who have been permanently resettled in high-income countries. Given that a vast majority of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are located in low-middle income countries of first or temporary asylum, the neglect of their experiences is of concern.

Further, almost all refugee children residing in countries of permanent resettlement will have had previous experiences of education within countries of first/ temporary asylum. Educators within countries of permanent resettlement risk having insufficient awareness and understanding of these experiences in order to relate effectively with the children. Past research has shown that such a lack of understanding can lead educators to negatively regard their students' knowledge and abilities (Davies, 2008; Dryden-Person, 2016; Mendenhall et al., 2017). In addition, as indicated in the systematic literature review presented in Chapter 3, negative perceptions and assumptions have been found to be associated with the development of adverse mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, further research is needed to represent these experiences

in order to foster the development of sensitivity and empathy, as well as allow school communities and educators to better adapt to, and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of these children. Given the above, this dissertation will now present a series of studies dedicated towards exploring the educational and schooling experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children within a country of first or temporary asylum – Malaysia.

3.1 Refugees in Malaysia

Over the past 40 years, Malaysia has become a major destination for individuals seeking temporary or permanent refuge from devastating situations, including war, persecution, disaster, and violence (Hoffstaedter & Lamb, 2019; Sahak et al., 2020). Despite this long history of hosting refugees and asylum seekers, Malaysia is not actually a signatory to the *1951 Refugee Convention* or its 1967 Protocol (Ahmad et al., 2016; Stange, et al., 2019). Therefore, while Malaysia currently allows for the registration and presence of refugees and asylum seekers within the country, it does so using ad hoc processes, with no official policies in terms of how to best manage and protect these vulnerable individuals (Prabandari & Adiputera, 2019; Yunus et al., 2021). To better understand the unique challenges encountered by refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia, this chapter contains a brief history of the refugee situation in Malaysia. Then, it will detail the present-day situation in Malaysia with regards to refugee hosting and resettlement.

3.2 History of Refugees in Malaysia

Malaysia's first reported encounter with refugees came in 1975 (Hoffstaedter, 2017). At the time, a huge influx of Vietnamese refugees fled to neighbouring Southeast Asian countries in an attempt to seek refuge in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This initial influx of refugees triggered the formation of the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur, with the UNHCR tasked with

providing protection and assistance to these refugees (Parthiban & Hooi, 2019). At the time, Malaysia was only willing to act as a temporary place of protection, as it deemed this rather large and sudden influx of refugees as being potentially problematic to the local Malaysia atmosphere (i.e., largely due to these refugees being more culturally and religiously aligned with the ethnic Chinese minority of Malaysia; Ahmad et al., 2016).

To address this large scale and sudden introduction of refugees, conferences convened by the United Nations in 1989 ultimately resulted in the creation of the 'Comprehensive Plan of Action' for Indo-Chinese refugees (CPA; Davies, 2008; Hoffstaedter, 2017). Under this agreement, Southeast Asian countries would only be expected to provide temporary asylum to Vietnamese and Laotian refugees, with the expectation being that these refugees would ultimately be resettled across various Western countries (Crsip et al., 2012; Sahak et al., 2020). Following this agreement, Malaysia would host approximately 250,000 refugees from Vietnam, with these refugees provided temporary asylum in designated refugee camps (Munir-Asen, 2018).

While the CPA came to an official end in 1996, its legacy lives on in Malaysia. More specifically, Malaysia continues to endorse the view that it is only to be a temporary host country for individuals seeking asylum and refuge, with the ultimate aim of having refugees repatriated to their home countries or resettled across third countries (Nungsari et al., 2020). Interestingly, despite this stance, Malaysia's treatment of various refugee groups over the years has been inconsistent (Lego, 2012). For example, despite arriving at approximately the same time as the Vietnamese refugees, Malaysia provided Cham refugees from Cambodia two options: resettlement to a third country, or integration within Malaysia (Hoffstaedter, 2017). Bosnian refugees were treated in a similar manner, with the Malaysian government referring to these

refugees as 'guests' (Munir-Asen, 2018). Refugees from Bosnia were not required to obtain visas to enter Malaysia, and were even afforded opportunities such as scholarships, basic housing, and employment. It has been argued that refugees such as those from Bosnia and Cambodia were afforded better opportunities within Malaysia due to them being more culturally and religiously aligned with the Muslim Malays, who form the majority of Malaysia (Idris, 2012). As a result, refugees from Muslim backgrounds were seen as having been provided with a sense of Islamic solidarity as while Malaysia is a multicultural country that is comprised of many races, ethnicities, and religions, it is also officially an Islamic country (Missbach & Stange, 2021).

Other notable examples of Malaysia's inconsistent treatment of refugees can be seen through the treatment and handling of Filipino and Acehnese refugees. More specifically, Filipino refugees who arrived in Malaysia in the late 1970s were granted resettlement and were permitted to stay without limitations. Initially, these refugees were even provided with work permits and were legally allowed to work (Missbach & Stange, 2021; Munir-Asen, 2018). Similarly, while Acehnese refugees from Indonesia were initially arrested and deported, Malaysia ultimately issued these refugees with temporary residence permits in 2005, allowing them to work lawfully while in the country. It has been speculated that these refugees were provided with such rights due to labour shortages in Malaysia at the time, therefore creating an economic imperative (Munir-Asen, 2018). Importantly, subsequent generations of refugees in Malaysia, such as the Filipino refugees, encountered significant difficulties with renewing visas (i.e., due to exorbitant costs; reduced government support), with many now undocumented and living in limbo. The UNHCR (2014) estimates that many Filipino refugees in Malaysia now live below the poverty line, with many subjected to a series of challenges including limited educational opportunities, poor sanitation and barriers to accessing health care.

Through considering the history of asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia, the ebb and flow nature of the Malaysian government's policies towards refugees and asylum seekers becomes evident. While Malaysia continues to endorse that it will provide temporary assistance and protection for refugees and asylum seekers, this appears dependent on a series of factors, such as the cohort of refugees involved, as well as potential prospects of resettlement (e.g., employment; cultural or religious integration; Munir-Asen, 2018). More specifically, while some refugee groups have been afforded protection and opportunities within Malaysia, Malaysia has also employed punitive approaches to managing a large majority of refugees and asylum seekers. As such, many refugees past and present live in a state of prolonged stress and uncertainty. While not much has changed since the arrival of the first refugees, this next section will outline the present-day situation in Malaysia. In particular, this section will explore the range of challenges faced by the refugee community and the subsequent impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

3.3 Present Day Malaysia

It has been over 40 years since the arrival of the first refugees in Malaysia, and the country remains a popular Southeast Asian destination for individuals seeking asylum and refuge for a number of reasons (Crisp et al., 2012). For example, asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia do not currently reside in refugee camps but instead are permitted to reside within towns and cities across the country (McConnachie, 2019). Furthermore, refugees tend to view Malaysia as possessing relative peace and economic stability (Crisp et al., 2012). Importantly, Malaysia also provides good prospects with regards to engagement in informal work, therefore allowing for the attainment of higher rates of income when compared to other countries in the region (Chuah et al., 2019).

Figures indicate that alongside Thailand and Indonesia, Malaysia is one of the main host countries for refugees and asylum seekers within the Southeast Asian region (Hoffstaeder, 2017). Latest figures reveal that by the end of March 2021, the UNHCR (2021) had registered approximately 178,920 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia (although there remains a relatively large number of people of concern that are unregistered). Amongst the population, the UNHCR (2021) also registered 45,720 refugee and asylum seeker children, all under the age of 18. Despite these large figures, Malaysia continues to experience challenges with regards to managing the inflow of asylum seekers and refugees into the country (Crisp et al., 2012). While the situation for refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia has improved over recent years, significant progress has yet to be made.

Presently, Malaysia has chosen to ratify a number of United Nations Conventions, all which aim to provide and protect human rights for both citizens and non-citizens of Malaysia. However, Malaysia has yet to ratify the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its 1967 protocol – with both representing key legal and international laws pertaining to the rights of refugees (Stange et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2011a; UNHCR, 2011b). These legal instruments provide refugees with legal protection by defining what constitutes a refugee (recognising that asylum seekers are individuals who identify as refugees but whose claims have not yet been processed), through outlining the rights of refugees, and establishing the responsibilities and legal obligations of state parties. Rights outlined across these documents include: the right to non-refoulement, the right not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory, the right to work, the right to housing, the right to education, and the right to public relief and assistance. These legal documents are crucial in ensuring that the basic human rights of refugees and asylum seekers are being met.

While both the convention and protocol have been ratified by numerous nations across the world, Malaysia has chosen not to be a party to both instruments despite many calls to do so. The Malaysian government has argued that such instruments pose a significant burden on developing nations and that ratifying the convention may create a significant pulling factor for asylum seekers and refugees. More specifically, there are concerns that ratifying this convention may substantially increase the amount of individuals who choose to seek refuge and asylum in Malaysia, particularly due to Malaysia's strategic location within Southeast Asia (Prabandari & Adiputera, 2019). Therefore, there are fears that such actions will lead to difficulties with containing and managing an even larger population of refugees and asylum seekers within the country (Parthiban & Hooi, 2019).

In addition to the convention and protocol, Malaysia has chosen not to ratify a series of international treaties that set out to protect and promote the rights of refugees and asylum seekers (Amnesty International, 2010). For example, Malaysia has not ratified the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the *UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, the *International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, and the *International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. However, it is important to recognise that Malaysia has ratified the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which outlines the need for state parties to recognise and protect refugee and asylum seeker children (Amnesty International, 2010). Despite being a state party to this treaty, Malaysia continues to demonstrate challenges with regards to the protection and provision of assistance to refugee and asylum seeking children (to be described in further detail in the next section).

While Malaysia has chosen not to be a party to both the convention and protocol, the government of Malaysia has also yet to establish a formal system for assisting and providing protection to individuals from asylum seeking and refugee backgrounds (Missbach & Stange, 2021). The main legal instrument used in Malaysia with regards to the management of refugee and asylum seekers is the *Immigration Act 1959/63* (McConnachie, 2019). Under this law, refugees and asylum seekers are not afforded legal status under Malaysian law, with the Malaysian government making no clear distinction between illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (McConnachie, 2019). In fact, these legislations make no reference to refugees, asylum seekers or other persons or concerns at all (Munir-Asen, 2018).

As a result of Malaysia's stance, refugees and asylum seekers are not afforded any rights that are traditionally provided to those from refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds but are instead, often subjected to the same penalties and punishments typically experienced by illegal migrants (Amnesty International, 2010; Siah et al., 2015). For example, refugees and asylum seekers become highly vulnerable to arrest, extortion, harassment, ill treatment, corporal punishment, detention, and deportation (Hoffstaedter, 2014; Shaw et al., 2018). However, it is worth mentioning that the Malaysian government does not fully enforce the Immigration Act when it comes to refugees and asylum seekers. Instead, the Malaysian government currently tolerates and allows for the presence of asylum seekers and refugees within the country, as long as the UNHCR assumes primary responsibility for these individuals (Prabandari & Adiputera, 2019; Yesmin, 2016).

3.4 The role of the UNHCR

Upon arrival in Malaysia, an asylum seeker's first point of contact is the UNHCR. The UNHCR in Malaysia undertakes all activities with regards to the processing of asylum seekers

and refugees, including registration and documentation (Hoffstaedter & Koizumi, 2015). The UNHCR is also responsible for organising long-term solutions such as determining the status of asylum seekers and refugees and assisting in resettlement. Once the UNHCR has processed and determined that an individual requires international protection, these individuals are provided with an UNHCR card (Bemma, 2018). This card is issued as a form of identity document (as the Malaysian government does not issue refugees or asylum seekers with any form of documentation) but has no formal or legal value in Malaysia (Hoffstaedter, 2017). As a result, while bearing this card may provide individuals with a degree of protection against arrest and deportation, reports indicate that these cards are often overlooked and not respected by the Malaysian authorities (Amnesty International, 2010; Hoffstaedter, 2014). That is, refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to regular immigration raids that may result in arrest, extortion, detention and in some cases – refoulement (Wake & Cheung, 2016). As such, refugees within Malaysia live in constant fear of such raids, including the potential consequences that may arise.

3.5 Present Day Challenges

At present, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia experience significant difficulties achieving sustainable lifestyles due to a range of challenges and barriers. In particular, due to their illegal status within Malaysia, refugees are ultimately barred from accessing a range of public services, such as entering the local labour market, accessing affordable health care, and engaging in formal education (Lego, 2018; Nungsari et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2016). Furthermore, refugees in Malaysia are unable to obtain driving or trading licenses, cannot sign a lease, are unable to open bank accounts and are generally denied access to a range of other services (Smith, 2012). While the UNHCR endeavours to provide these individuals with humanitarian support, limited funding often results in the inability to provide shelter or any financial aid (Wake, 2016).

While the cards issued by the UNHCR entitle refugees to certain benefits (i.e., reduced healthcare), these benefits often still result in exorbitant costs (Bemma, 2018). Furthermore, as the process of successful resettlement often spans many years (e.g., due to claims of asylum needing to be verified; limited number of countries involved in third country resettlement), refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia often find themselves in a state of limbo for prolonged periods of time (Hoffstaedter & Lamb, 2019; Shaw et al., 2018).

Over recent years, positive developments with regards to refugee rights in Malaysia have been made. Notably, the UNHCR has been provided with increased opportunities to advocate for the development of strategies and frameworks to support the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Various programs and schemes have been piloted, which have been aimed to provide refugees with increased rights within Malaysia. For example, in 2006 Rohingya refugees were provided with IMMI3 permits - temporary residence permits that allow for engagement in lawful employment and access to public education (Yasmin, 2019). However, this scheme was halted after only 17 days due to reports of possible corruption and fraud (Missback & Stange, 2021). Therefore, while the Malaysian government has been more receptive to suggestions made by the UNHCR (e.g., increased recognition of UNHCR documentation), there remains significant need for change, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and health care (Letchamanan, 2013).

Currently, refugees and asylum seekers are unable to work legally (as prohibited by the Immigration Act; Buscher & Heller, 2010; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Given that they receive no assistance or financial support from the Malaysian government, they often resort to informal methods of employment, which renders them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Hoffstaedter, 2014). For example, many are severely underpaid (leading to difficulties with securing basic

needs) and are likely to experience a range of stressors including physical and verbal abuse, unfair dismissals as well as non-payment of wages (Smith, 2012; Shaw et al., 2019). Women also become highly vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, harassment, and abuse (Women's Refugee Commission, 2008). Despite these challenges, many refugees persevere with these methods of informal employment in order to make ends meet.

As part of their illegal status, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are also denied access to the local health care system (Letchamanan, 2013). This is of particular concern as refugees and asylum seekers are often subjected to traumatic and dangerous circumstances that can leave them vulnerable to the development of poor health and wellbeing. For example, during their journeys to resettlement, refugees and asylum seekers may encounter a series of dangerous land and/or sea journeys, may face prolonged food and water insecurity, malnutrition, and may also be subjected to overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions (Chuah et al., 2018; Chuah et al., 2019). These circumstances can lead to compromised health, therefore this population needs access to quality and affordable healthcare and medical services. Indeed, high levels of ill-health and stress have been found amongst refugees in Malaysia, with common conditions including hypertension, respiratory tract infections, musculoskeletal diseases, and gastritis (Chuah et al., 2019; Smith, 2012). While refugees and asylum seekers are unable to seek free healthcare within Malaysia, they are now entitled to a 50% discount at public healthcare facilities following an agreement with the Ministry of Health (Wake & Cheung, 2016). Unfortunately, even with this initiative in place, refugees and asylum seekers continue to face costly medical care and out-of-pocket payments that severely restrict their opportunities to access affordable and much needed health care (Bemma, 2018; Chuah et al., 2018). As a result, many refugees report not seeking medical care or treatment even following a serious medical problem (Smith, 2012).

Refugee and asylum seeker children in Malaysia are also denied basic human rights to access schooling and education (Farzana et al., 2020). Due to a lack of legal status within Malaysia, refugee and asylum seeker children are denied access to the public schooling system (Siah et al., 2019). Since most are unable to afford private schooling, many of these children become reliant on informal community or volunteer run schools to obtain an education (Mayberry, 2015; Bailey & İnanç, 2018). These schools are often underfunded and under-resourced, leading to challenges such as obtaining adequate educational materials and resources, difficulties with training and recruiting suitable educators, and high staff turnover rates (Bemma, 2018; Farzana et al., 2020; O'Neal, 2018; Palik, 2020). Importantly, programs run by these community-run schools are often not accredited, resulting in difficulties with obtaining certificates or proof of educational attainment. This can significantly prohibit refugees from further advancing their education (Smith, 2012). Teachers and students within these schools also face the constant fear of harassment from the local Malaysian community and authorities (O'Neal et al., 2017). Furthermore, schools are often overcrowded, with minimal space/capacity to support the large community of refugee children (Siah et al., 2020). As a result, many refugee children go years without engagement in education, with the UNHCR estimating that only 30% of refugee children in Malaysia are currently enrolled in some form of schooling (Palik, 2020).

In summary, it becomes evident that refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are often subjected to numerous stressors, including: an inability to secure stable housing and employment, economic insecurity, limited access to affordable health care, difficulties with accessing schooling and education, discrimination, and risks of arrest, harassment, and exploitation (Smith, 2012). Unsurprisingly, due to the range of stressors and challenges faced by the refugee and asylum seeker community within Malaysia, high levels of psychological distress

are common. Indeed, while research in this area is limited, a handful of studies have suggested high levels of distress in adult refugees living in Malaysia (Kok et al., 2017; Low et al., 2014; Pereira et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2012, 2019; Tay et al., 2020). This can be attributed to difficulties with securing employment, financial difficulties, as well as being subjected to discrimination within Malaysia.

A small body of research has also begun to explore the mental health and wellbeing of refugee children residing in Malaysia. For example, in a study by Low and colleagues (2018), refugee children and youth residing in Malaysia were recruited to complete a series of measures assessing symptoms of depression and anxiety. The results indicated that participants demonstrated mild-moderate levels of stress and depression, as well as moderate-extremely severe levels of anxiety. Furthermore, in a study by Siah and colleagues (2015), refugee children residing in Malaysia completed a series of measures assessing overall quality of life. It was found that deportation experiences (e.g., stays within refugee camps) were significant predictors of reduced quality of life, while the ability to engage with education was a significant predictor of improved quality of life. In a study by O'Neal and colleagues (2015), refugee teachers from Malaysia reported having witnessed high levels of both internalising (e.g., withdrawal, apathy) and externalising (e.g., anger, insolence, physical aggression) emotions and behaviours within the classroom environment. The teachers attributed these behaviours to a combination of familial, societal, and life stressors experienced within Malaysia.

The number of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia is predicted to continue to grow over coming years, and so there is a need for further research and advocacy within this space. In particular, Malaysian-based research exploring the experiences of child refugees and asylum seekers remains sparse. Importantly, refugee children in Malaysia tend to spend much of their

formative years awaiting permanent resettlement. As a result, they are at risk of developing poor

mental health and wellbeing due to living in a state of long-term uncertainty and stress. The

following studies aim to contribute to this invaluable body of research, by exploring how

institutions (schools in this particular case) can play a role in promoting the mental health and

wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia.

Chapter 4 - Conducting Ethical Research with Children from Refugee and Asylum Seeking Backgrounds

4.1 Research with Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The number of individuals seeking refuge and asylum globally has increased dramatically over the past decade (Ostrand, 2015). This has led to an increase in the need for knowledge and awareness surrounding their needs. Research involving those from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds is critical to allow a better understanding of this vulnerable population, along with the development of evidence-based interventions, policies, and services.

In this dissertation, a series of studies explores the educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. The research questions explore the perceived barriers and facilitators of refugee education, as well as the relationship between participation in schooling and education and positive mental health and wellbeing. To address gaps in the literature, it focuses on children residing in countries of first and temporary asylum. While sorely needed, it is important to recognise that the complexities of refugee and asylum seeker experiences means that there needs to be careful consideration of methodological and ethical issues.

For example, as a result of prolonged exposure to trauma typically associated with the displacement process (e.g., exposure to violence, relocation, uncertainty about the future; Seedat et al., 2004) refugee and asylum seeking children can be especially vulnerable. Engagement with poor research practices can add to this sense of burden (Leaning, 2001; Tilbury, 2006). Therefore, researchers need to be ensure voluntary and informed consent, navigate the presence of potential power imbalances between researchers and participants (e.g., due to cultural/linguistic differences), obtain representative samples, ensure the absence of perceived or real coercion, reduce the presence of undue influence (e.g., economic), use culturally validated

research tools, deal with wariness and mistrust directed towards researchers, and minimise

burdens that may be experienced as a result of participation (Ford et al., 2009; Hirani et al.,

2019; Müller-Funk, 2021; Obijiofor et al., 2016; Seagle et al., 2020; Zwi et al., 2006).

In this dissertation, it was important to recognise that refugee and asylum seekers in

Malaysia lack the rights that are typically afforded to those in countries of permanent

resettlement (Leaning, 2001; McConnachie, 2019). As discussed in the previous chapter,

refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia lack legal status. This threatens the rights of refugees

and asylum seekers who are engaged in research (Bailey & Williams, 2018). For example,

refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia are denied access to employment, education, and

health care. As a result, they may find themselves in positions of economic hardship and material

poverty which may lead to difficulties with accessing any form of legal representation. In

addition, severe disruptions or limited access to education may result in lower levels of literacy

which may result in communication barriers and difficulties with truly understanding the

research process (Kavukcu & Altintas, 2019; Seedat et al., 2004). These circumstances guided us

to ensure that an ethical research methodology was used that did not threaten the dignity, rights,

and wellbeing of the individuals who participated. The ethical considerations of conducting

research extended from pre- to the post-investigation phase.

4.2 The Pre-Investigation Phase

4.2.1. Literature Review

Before proceeding with the empirical studies, an extensive review of the literature was

conducted to both synthesise the available research as well as identify whether similar research

questions had already been investigated (i.e., Chapter 2). This was to ensure that there was a

genuine need for these studies, and the communities being investigated would not be overly

burdened due to having previous experience with similar investigations (i.e., over researching; Omata, 2019; Seagle et al., 2020). The protocol for the systematic literature review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis statement (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA statement assists researchers with transparency, providing a checklist that prompts them to reflect on why and how the review was conducted, and to provide the emerging findings. The search strategy for this review was developed in consultation with a librarian who had expertise in conducting systematic reviews. Broad search terms were selected to ensure that all potentially relevant papers were identified. The methodology for this review (e.g., search terms, inclusion/exclusion criteria, databases searched, extraction, quality assessment) was provided in detail in the manuscript to ensure that it could be replicated and updated as required.

4.2.2 Design Selection

Once the literature review was complete, attention was paid to selecting appropriate research designs for the empirical studies. According to Schweitzer and Steel (2008), a reliance on quantitative research designs when working with individuals from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds brings about limitations in being able to understand the unique experiences of individuals who have undergone forced displacement. It has been argued that qualitative designs (in combination with quantitative methods) allow for a fuller and richer understanding of the complex experiences faced by these individuals, including children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Miller & rasco, 2004). As such, a multi-method approach was used that incorporated a systematic literature review, partnered with empirical studies employing both qualitative and quantitative designs.

4.2.3 Community Consultation

An early step included establishing contact with representatives of the refugee community, such as teachers and directors of refugee schools. This not only provided an opportunity to discuss the reasoning and potential benefits of the studies, but also allowed for trust and rapport to be established with these communities. These consultations allowed for key stakeholders within these communities to identify their particular priorities, interests, and research gaps. Additionally, these individuals were consulted regarding the suitability and feasibility of conducting such research. These relationships also led to opportunities such as invitations to visit the schools, as well as observe and partake in school-based events and activities. This enabled me to gain insight into the daily educational experiences of these children, and further establish relationships with staff and potential participants.

4.2.4 End-user Associate Supervisor

We also sought the expertise of Heidy Quah – founder of the Malaysian based non-profit organisation Refuge for the Refugees. Heidy has extensive experience working directly with refugee communities across Malaysia and agreed to contribute her expertise through the role of an end-user associate supervisor.

4.2.5 Measure Selection

The measures were shared with the stakeholders to ensure they were suitable for the participants involved. Opinions particularly regarding the need for translation of measures were sought, with all consulted agreeing that provision of an English-based questionnaire would suffice. Importantly, risk minimisation was at the forefront during the selection and creation of materials. Measures that were used in the quantitative component (Chapters 7 & 8) and the questions incorporated in the interview schedules (Chapters 5 & 6) were screened to ensure they

did not touch on topics that were likely to be sensitive to the participants with the potential to re-traumatise them. For example, it was ensured that items and questions did not require reflection on past experiences of trauma. Regardless, a number of external resources and support services were provided to the participants and their families should the need arise, with this information documented in the participant information letter.

A difficulty encountered during the pre-investigation phase was sourcing measures that had been validated for use with the target sample. Where possible, measures that had been previously used and validated for samples of refugee and asylum seeking children youth were employed (i.e., The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; Goodman, 1997; The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale; Liddle & Carter, 2015). For all other constructs (e.g., student perception of school safety), extensive consultation was used with supervisors and representatives from the refugee community to ensure that the measures were valid for use.

4.3 The Investigation Phase

Several further steps were implemented to ensure ethical research practices were used during the investigation phase. Given that two studies included the recruitment of children (i.e., Chapters 6 & 7), there was a focus on ensuring that the children were comfortable with and understood what participation in the studies entailed.

4.3.1 Collection of Consent

One of the biggest challenges was ensuring the collection of voluntary and informed consent (particularly in studies involving the recruitment of child participants; Chapters 6 & 7). According to Seagle et al. (2020), obtaining such consent can be complex amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking populations due to such factors as mistrust towards research professionals, lack of understanding surrounding research investigations, language barriers, and

fear of stigma or persecution (Seagle et al., 2020). To address this, the following steps were implemented. First, a verbal description of the consent process was provided to the teachers and children (and their parents). Second, the research candidate ensured that interested participants were provided opportunities to ask questions and clarify any concerns with regards to consent. Third, the teachers provided their students with further instruction regarding the consent forms, with children allowed to seek clarification. Throughout these steps, the ability to withdraw at any point was stressed, and participants were told they could choose to bypass questions they did not want to answer. Finally, consent was ascertained at multiple stages of the study. That is, even after consent and assent forms had been collected for the qualitative study (Chapters 5 & 6), participants were asked before and during the interview process whether they were happy for the interviews to proceed.

4.3.2 Data Collection

During the interviews, a number of steps were taken to establish and maintain trust and rapport and ensure participant comfort. For example, all participating teachers (Chapter 5) were able to nominate a time and place that they felt comfortable conducting the face-to-face interviews. Similarly, with the interviews conducted with the students via a video conferencing platform (Chapter 6), the students were able to nominate their preferred day and time. At the start of the interviews, participants were given another overview of the study and a description of what the interview process would entail. Only when participants identified that they were ready to proceed were interviews started. Furthermore, once the interviews concluded, a debrief was conducted with participants to ensure no discomfort or distress.

4.3.3 Participant Confidentiality

Another ethical issue was ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. This was particularly important given the precarious legal situation that is faced by members of the refugee and asylum seeking community in Malaysia. It was decided to conduct individual interviews as opposed to focus groups to limit their exposure. Prior to conducting the qualitative interviews, consent was obtained from participants to allow them to be audio recorded – all participants agreed. Given lockdown and restrictions imposed by the covid-19 pandemic, the interviews with the students took place via an online video conferencing platform (as opposed to face-to-face). Here, the participants were given the choice as to whether they wanted to utilise the video and/or audio features to ensure comfort and establish trust and rapport. The interview schedule was designed to minimise participants having to share highly personal information, with any personal information (e.g., school names) collected subsequently anonymised through using pseudonyms or generic descriptors. Further, only demographic information that was required for data analysis (e.g., age, country of birth) was collected.

4.4 The Post-Investigation Phase

4.4.1 Participant Information Letter

Once data were collected, additional steps were taken to ensure participant wellbeing and ethical integrity. For example, after the interviews, the participant information letter was re-sent to the participants, as this document provided contact details of the researchers involved, and a list of accessible mental health services in Malaysia if the need arose. These contacts were made available in all participant information letters across the studies.

4.4.2 Financial Compensation

Careful consideration was given to ensuring reasonable financial compensation. On the one hand, we did not want to coerce individuals into participating, particularly as those from

refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds may be undergoing economic hardship. While on the other, we wanted to ensure that participants were thanked for their time. To achieve this, it was decided that there would be no mention of any material or financial reimbursements in the participant information letter during the investigation process. This was to ensure that participants did not feel as if compensation depended upon their completion of the study. Following data collection, we consulted with members of the refugee community that assisted with recruitment (e.g., schools, organisations) in order to obtain advice about appropriate methods of reimbursement. Subsequently, a series of donations were made for the purchase of stationery and academic resources.

4.4.3 Dissemination of Research

Lastly, efforts to maximise the dissemination of the findings were undertaken. For example, upon completion of data analysis and manuscript preparation, key findings were presented to members of the refugee community for feedback. This procedure has been recommended to address potential power imbalances by providing transparency as well as giving representatives the opportunity to make comments and interpretations of the results (Tilbury, 2006). Furthermore, the manuscripts were subsequently submitted to journals for publication. At present, one study (Cowling & Anderson, 2021) has been accepted for publication in the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* as a response to a call for papers to form a special issue on interventions that promote health and wellbeing in forcibly displaced populations (once published, participants were made aware how they could access this publication). The literature review (Chapter 2) and remaining empirical studies (Chapter 6, 7, and 8) are also currently under review across several journals (see Appendix C).

Chapter 5 - Teacher Perceptions of the Barriers and Facilitators of Education Amongst Chin Refugees in Malaysia: A Qualitative Analysis

The previous two chapters endeavoured to provide an overview of the current refugee situation in Malaysia, as well as provide greater insight into the ethical considerations that were taken into account when developing the methodology for the studies presented across the following four chapters. To begin, this chapter will first present a qualitative analysis into the teacher perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of schooling and education amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia.

Dissemination strategy:

This study has been successfully published in the *Asian American Journal of Psychology* as part of a special issue on interventions that promote health and wellbeing in forcibly displaced populations:

Cowling, M. M., & Anderson, J. R. (2021). Teacher perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of education amongst Chin refugees in Malaysia: A qualitative analysis. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 12*(3), 161–175. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000224

Statement of contribution:

Misha Cowling: Study conception and design, data collection, data transcription and analysis, interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

Joel Anderson: Study conception and design, supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript

Tom Whelan: Supervision, reviewing, and editing of manuscript.

Chapter 6 - "Our School is Small, but it has a lot of Memories": A Qualitative Analysis of the Educational and Schooling Experiences of Chin refugees in Malaysia

Statement of contribution:

Misha Cowling: Study conception and design, data collection, data transcription and analysis, interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

Joel Anderson: Study conception and design, supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

Tom Whelan: Study conception and design, supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

Dissemination strategy: This study is currently being reviewed for publication in the *Journal of Refugee Studies.*

6.1 Abstract

By the end of January 2022, the UN Refugee Agency had registered 45,650 refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia, where these children are not distinct from illegal immigrants (as Malaysia is not yet party to the *1951 Refugee Convention*). As a result, these children are denied access to the public schooling system and are reliant on volunteer-run schools that are often under-funded and under-resourced. Since engagement in schooling and education is associated with a range of long-term benefits, there is a need for research that examines the educational experiences of these children, in order to gain an understanding of existing challenges and barriers to education from the students' perspective. This study explored the schooling experiences of Chin refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia, with a focus on exploring both the challenges as well as the positive experiences associated with engagement in schooling and education. To do this, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 refugee students ranging in age from 13 to 18 years old. A grounded theoretical framework was employed to analyse the data, from which we identified seven themes: *Student-Teacher Relationships, Peer Relationships*, *Positive Feelings and Perceptions,* challenges posed by the *COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown, Learning and Academic Achievement, Language Barriers,* and *Engagement in Extracurricular Activities*. It is anticipated that these findings will provide educators and clinicians with guidance on tailoring educational environments to better support the needs of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Keywords: refugee, asylum seeker, children, education, qualitative research.

6.2 Introduction

According to Dryden-Peterson (2016), the pre-resettlement educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children are a 'black box' due to a lack of research in countries of first asylum. She notes that this has significant implications for the future educational experiences of these children, particularly since once they are resettled in a third country their educators remain largely unaware of the backgrounds and past experiences of their students. As such, it is imperative that more research be conducted in this area, so that appropriate support and services can be provided. Therefore, this study consisted of a qualitative exploration of the educational experiences of Chin refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia.

6.2.1 Seeking Refuge or Asylum in Malaysia

By the end of January 2022, the UN Refugee Agency (also commonly referred to as the UNHCR, 2021a) recorded approximately 181,510 registered refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia, although the real figure likely surpasses this number, as many individuals remain undocumented. Further, it is estimated that over one quarter of this population (~45,650) are under 18 years of age. A majority of the refugees and asylum seekers currently residing in Malaysia have fled from nearby Myanmar, with the UN Refugee Agency having registered some 155,610 Myanmarese refugee and asylum seeking individuals. Of this population, approximately 22,580 are ethnic Chin refugees, who have fled from the Chin state in the West of Myanmar. The Chins represent one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar and consist of individuals who are typically Christian. Many have had to flee Myanmar (a Buddhist-majority country) due to religious persecution and violent civil conflict over recent years (Hoffstaedter & Lamb, 2019).

People who are refugees or seeking asylum have typically fled from traumatic and life-threatening events. Examples of such events include exposure to war, persecution (e.g., forced

assimilation in the case of the Chins), violence, conflict, death, or torture (Dowling et al., 2019; Sangalang et al., 2018). Prior to their displacement, these people may have also experienced the loss of family members, friends, and their homes (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006). Refugee and asylum seeking children in particular can experience limited exposure to school and severe disruptions to their education (Block et al., 2014; Letchamanan, 2013; McBrien, 2005). Furthermore, in order to get to Malaysia, refugees and asylum seekers may have encountered lengthy and arduous journeys (e.g., crossing the Myanmar-Thailand border to get to Malaysia; UNHCR, 2021d), been separated from their family members or caregivers, and experienced difficulties with accessing basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, and health care (Fazel, 2002; Foundation House, 2016; Miller et al., 2019; Park & Katsiaficas, 2019).

The stressors and challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers continue following their arrival in Malaysia. Unfortunately, being a refugee or asylum seeker in Malaysia brings a set of unique challenges and difficulties, largely since Malaysia not yet party to the *1951 Refugee Convention* or its 1967 protocol – both represent key legal documents and laws that aim to provide refugees with legal protection, as well as outline the rights of refugees (Bemma, 2018; Stange et al., 2019). Rights outlined across these documents include the right to non-refoulement (i.e., the forcible return of asylum seekers or refugees to their home countries despite the genuine presence and risk of persecution), the right to work, the right to housing, the right not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory, the right to education, as well as the right to public relief and assistance.

Importantly, despite Malaysia not being a party to the convention or protocol, the country has yet to establish appropriate laws and legislation that seek to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers while in the country (Prabandari & Adiputera, 2019; Yunus et al., 2021). Within

Malaysia, refugees and asylum seekers are subjected to the *Immigration Act 1959/63*, in which they are not afforded legal status. In fact, within Malaysia, no clear distinction is made between illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Lego; 2018; McConnachie, 2019). As a result, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are not afforded any rights that are traditionally provided to those from refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds – such as those outlined in the *1951 Refugee Convention*. Instead, they are often subjected to the same treatment, penalties, and punishments that are more typically experienced by illegal immigrants (Siah et al., 2015). For example, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are highly susceptible to arrest, harassment, extortion, detention, and deportation (Amnesty International, 2010; Farzana et al., 2020).

6.2.2 Schooling and Education of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Youth in Malaysia

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are unable to access a range of public supports and services. Of importance to this study, refugee and asylum seeking children and youth are denied access to the local public schooling system (O'Neal et al., 2016). This results in these children experiencing significant difficulties with accessing and engaging in long-term formal education and schooling (Letchamanan, 2013; Siah et al., 2019). Despite prohibiting access to the local education system, the government of Malaysia has permitted other organisations (e.g., private sector, NGOs, etc.) to initiate programs dedicated to providing education to young refugees and asylum seekers (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). This has subsequently resulted in the creation of various volunteer and community run schools that cater specifically to this population (Bailey & İnanç, 2018) - the UN Refugee Agency (2021b) recently estimated that there are approximately 130 volunteer and community run schools for asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia.

The creation of these schools has provided many children with the opportunity to access some form of schooling and education. However, due to difficulties with securing funding and resources, there currently exists only a limited number of schools dedicated to providing education to these children. Furthermore, these schools are typically overcrowded, with minimal space/capacity to support the rather large community of refugee children (Siah et al., 2020). As a result, the UN Refugee Agency (2021b) estimates that only 44% of refugee children in Malaysia are currently engaging in primary education, while 16% of refugee youth are engaged in secondary education (this smaller proportion may be attributed to a number of reasons including adolescents choosing to pursue employment as a result of family pressure and financial difficulties, as well as a smaller number of schools dedicated towards providing secondary education; Cowling & Anderson, 2021; UNHCR, n.d).

6.2.3 The Impacts of Schooling and Education for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children

The schooling and educational experiences of refugee children in Malaysia warrant further investigation due to the unique circumstances they face. This is important as research has consistently linked engagement in formal schooling and education to a range of significant benefits. Notably, education has been found to be crucial in promoting intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and cognitive development (Bačáková, 2011; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013). Furthermore, there is a well-established link between educational attainment and socio-economic success, with education known to be a predictor of further education (Sheikh et al., 2019), and stable income and employment in adulthood (Koehler & Schneider, 2019; UNHCR, 2021c). For refugee and asylum seeking children in particular, education has been found to be a facilitator of successful resettlement and integration (Cassity, 2012; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Prior & Niesz, 2013; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Schools have been argued to provide

refugee and asylum seeking children with a safe space to navigate new encounters and interactions, which ultimately assists in the process of socialisation and acculturation (Matthews, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011).

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, research has linked engagement in education and schooling to the development of more positive mental health and wellbeing (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). This is of utmost importance for refugee and asylum seeking children, due to their vulnerability to the development of mental health difficulties and concerns (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Fazel et al., 2012; Frounfelker et al., 2020; Pacione et al., 2013). When compared to children from non-refugee or asylum seeking backgrounds, refugee children present with higher rates of various psychopathologies, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Blackmore et al., 2020; Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Buchmüller et al., 2018; Henkelmann et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2019; Kien et al., 2019; Vervliet et al., 2014). For refugee and asylum seeking children, research suggests that the ability to access education and schooling can mitigate the negative psychological harm they experience as a result of resettlement (Thomas, 2016). It has been argued that schools provide refugee children with a safe environment, as well as reintroduces them to a sense of predictability, normality, routine, and stability (Bačáková, 2011).

6.2.4 The Current Study

A recent study conducted by Cowling and Anderson (2021; Chapter 5) explored the experiences of schooling for refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia through qualitative interviews with teachers who were volunteering in local refugee schools. This study explored the challenges and facilitators of refugee education in Malaysia, with results uncovering a range of barriers that prohibit these children from properly accessing and engaging with

schooling and education. For example, teacher reports indicated that many of these schools are severely under-funded and under-resourced. As a result, many schools encounter significant difficulties with accessing appropriate educational materials, as well as securing and retaining long-term teachers. Volunteer teachers often lack formal training in education, resulting in high staff turnover rates. Furthermore, school grounds are often described as being small, with some schools lacking basic amenities and proper classrooms. This has the potential to result in the creation of uncomfortable learning environments, with overcrowding and excessive heat having been identified as problems.

It is important to recognise that while a growing number of studies have begun to explore the educational experiences of refugee children in their countries of permanent resettlement (Bešić et al., 2020; Correa-velez et al., 2010; Due et al., 2016; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Steiner, 2020; Ziaian et al., 2017), limited studies have been dedicated to exploring the educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children pre-resettlement. Furthermore, limited studies have explored the educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students from their own perspectives (Mosselson, 2007; Prior & Niesz, 2013). While Cowling and Anderson (2021; Chapter 5) provided insight into the educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia, the findings do not take into account the lived experiences and perspectives of the students themselves. Therefore, this study explored the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia, from the perspectives of the students themselves.

As such, through the use of semi-structured interviews, this study endeavours to give these students a voice to share their perspectives concerning the barriers and facilitators faced while engaging in schooling and education in Malaysia. This study is needed given the unique

experiences encountered by the many refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. As many of these children spend a large proportion of their schooling years awaiting resettlement to a third country, it is imperative that research be conducted now in order to gain better insight into these schooling experiences.

6.3 Methodology

6.3.1 Participants

Participants included 10 refugee students who were currently residing in Malaysia (5 male, 5 female). All of the students were Chin refugees, who were born in Myanmar. Their ages ranged from 13-18 years old (M =15), and they had been living in Malaysia for a range of 6 to 11 years (M = 8.8 years). Nine of the students were currently enrolled in a school, while one had recently made the decision to pursue full time employment. Students were enrolled across two schools spanning two states – Selangor (nine participants) and Perak (one participant). While participants originated from two schools, a majority reported having been enrolled in multiple schools throughout their time in Malaysia (ranging from 1 – 4 schools). As such, the students were engaged in conversations that required them to reflect on their experiences across all attended schools. Basic demographic information for each participant can be found in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1

Demographic Information

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Number of years in Malaysia	Number of years schooling in Malaysia	Number of schools enrolled in Malaysia
1	Female	13	7	6	1
2	Male	13	6	6	2
3	Male	13	10	10	2
4	Female	14	11	4	2
5	Female	14	10	8	4
6	Female	15	9	7	3
7	Male	16	6	6	1
8	Male	16	9	8	2
9	Male	18	11	4	2
10	Female	18	9	9	2
Average	-	15	8.8	6.8	2.1

6.3.2 Measures

The research team worked collaboratively to co-create a semi-structured interview schedule that included a series of open-ended questions. These questions were designed to allow for natural conversation-style discussions with the student participants. The questions explored the schooling and educational experiences of these students, with a focus on identifying any barriers and/or facilitators of engagement in school and education within Malaysia. The questions were designed to be age appropriate and basic language was used. Once the interview schedule was developed, it was given to two refugee teachers for feedback in terms of relevance and suitability. No changes were made following these consultations. Finally, the interview schedule was reviewed by an ethics committee (and subsequently approved) to ensure integrity, merit, and scientific rigor (HREC: #2018-250H).

6.3.3 Procedure

Two schools assisted by circulating the participant information letter to both students and their parents. The students were encouraged to make themselves known to their teachers if they were interested in participating. The researcher was subsequently provided with a list of interested students who had self-nominated to be contacted (12 students nominated themselves with 2 of these students unable to participate due to being outside the required range [i.e., under the age of 13). During initial contact, the students were again walked through the study and were given an opportunity to ask any questions or have any concerns clarified. Once their questions were answered, the students and their parents were provided with a consent form. Once consent was received from both the students and their parents, the researcher arranged a time to conduct interviews with the student participants. The interviews were conducted over Zoom (a video conferencing platform). While face-to-face interviews are typically considered to be the "gold standard" for qualitative data collection, there is an emerging body of research to suggest that the use of video conferencing offers a satisfactory and viable method of data collection due to factors such as ease of use, resemblance to in-person interviews, security, as well as cost and time effectiveness (Archibald et al., 2019; Boland et al., 2021)

During the scheduled interviews, the students were once again given an opportunity to ask questions regarding their participation. Consent and confidentiality were highlighted and explained at length. Once this was completed, the student participants were engaged in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. All interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted by the first author (Malaysian born citizen, with no history of holding asylum

seeker or refugee status). The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. At the

conclusion of the interviews, participants were debriefed and thanked.

6.3.4 Data Coding and Analysis

Following transcription of the interviews, the data were imported into the qualitative

analysis software – NVivo12 (2018). The interviews were initially read repeatedly to allow for

familiarisation of the data. To analyse the data, a grounded theoretical approach based in

thematic analysis was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). In this method of

qualitative data analysis, there exists no preconceived ideas or hypotheses. Instead, this method

involves reading the transcribed data repeatedly to allow for the identification of similar

concepts, topics, issues, and themes that were identified across all of the interviews (Mills et al.,

2006).

Initially, all interviews were read separately and line-by-line to identify any significant or

relevant statements. Statements of relevance across all interviews were then assigned a code.

Subsequently, all identified codes were clustered together based on similarity and commonality.

The researchers worked collaboratively to develop meaningful themes based on the clustering of

codes. This process resulted in the identification of seven meaningful themes (described in

further detail below), with these themes having been generated both inductively (i.e., ground-up)

and iteratively.

6.3.5 Trustworthiness

Multiple steps were taken to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and

conformability of the qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017). For example, to ensure credibility,

the development of the interview schedule was guided by an in-depth review of the literature

(Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Diab et al., 2018; Fazel, 2015; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Khawaja et al.,

2017; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Lau et al., 2018; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Pastoor, 2015; Svensson & Eastmod, 2013; Trentacosta et al., 2016; Uptin et al., 2012; Ziaian et al., 2017). Importantly, the interview schedule was developed collaboratively by the researchers and was circulated to a number of refugee teachers in order to obtain feedback about its suitability. The first author was also provided with multiple opportunities to visit the schools and spend time with the children and staff, allowing for prolonged engagement prior to conducting the interviews. During these visits, the first author engaged in conversation with both the staff and children and observed a typical school day for these students. The researcher was offered tours of the facilities and given access to academic materials and resources used by these schools.

Although not always used in qualitative research (see Braun & Clarke, 2021) we employed an *a priori* data stop-collection rule. Specifically, we used a data saturation criterion of X+3. This ensured that interviews were being conducted until no new data was identified (i.e., once this point had been reached, an additional three more interviews were conducted and if no new themes were identified from these subsequent interviews, the interview process was ceased). To ensure that the sample was appropriate and able to provide valid data, the researchers recruited students who had lengthy experience with schooling in Malaysia (a minimum of 4 years). Although the participants were all well-experienced with the schooling system, the sample varied on other factors including their age, number of schools enrolled in Malaysia, and length of time living and schooling in Malaysia. During the interview process, the researchers followed an interview schedule (i.e., all participants received the same set of questions and prompts). Following the data transcription process, all researchers were actively involved in the analysis and interpretation of data to ensure consistency, conformability, and dependability.

6.4 Results

Following analysis of the data, a total of 329 codes were identified. Clustering of the

codes resulted in the formation of seven major themes: *Student-Teacher Relationships* (60 nodes;

18.24%), *Positive Feelings and Perceptions* (56 nodes; 17.02%), *Peer Relationships* (55 nodes;

16.72%), *Challenges posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown* (43 nodes; 13.07%),

Learning and Academic Achievement (41 nodes; 12.46%), *English Fluency* (39 nodes; 11.85%),

and *Engagement in Extracurricular Activities* (35 nodes; 10.64%).

Theme 1: The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships in Facilitating Learning and

Wellbeing

The most prominent theme identified in the data revolved around student perceptions of

the role of positive and supportive student-teacher relationships in fostering the development of

wellbeing. All 10 students reported positive experiences and it became apparent that they viewed

their teachers as being more than just teachers. There was a tendency to describe teachers as

being akin to 'friends', 'mothers', as well as 'role models'. It appeared that the possession of

these strong student-teacher relationships contributed to a sense of security and belonging.

"They are like mothers in school. Even though I'm worried about something, and I just think and
think if I ask my teachers, it will be okay right? And then so I ask my teachers and she explain or
give me some courage like that, so they are very good teachers" – Participant #1

"Teachers are like really important to us. They are like role models for us, so I really enjoy it
because all of them are like really good characters and nice and they have a really good heart"
– Participant #4

"It feels like being loved by all the teachers. They are like my friends too"
– Participant #7

When talking about their teachers, the students identified several ways in which the

teachers contributed towards their happiness and wellbeing. For example, the students described

their teachers as being sensitive, patient, understanding, and in total support of their academic

pursuits. Students discussed that their teachers were willing to tailor their teaching methods to

support the needs of each individual student. Within the classroom environment, teachers

endeavoured to ensure their students felt comfortable, safe, and supported.

"They make their students very comfortable, and they want to. It's like they try to understand their students" – Participant #1

"They make me feel like you know like a good student because they would teach me properly and then that makes me feel like I'm good" – Participant #3

"She (teacher) is really like kind hearted but she never treated anyone like more special. She always treats us equally, so I really like that. She made us feel comfortable and she is really close to us, the kids, their families" – Participant #4

"They move like slowly rather than just everything in one day. They do it slowly and then if we have questions, then we can raise our hands and ask them and then after that even if we still don't understand, they will explain it again" – Participant #6

Besides supporting the children academically, student reports indicated that their teachers

often went 'above and beyond' to support the development of their social and emotional

wellbeing. For example, students described high levels of trust, expressing that they felt

comfortable to approach their teachers when faced with 'life' problems. Specific examples of

this included reports of teachers organising regular donations for the families, as well as being

available after hours to support the children when needed. One student even reported that

experiencing this level of care from her teachers had inspired her to be a 'better person'.

"She (teacher) has done a lot of good things for us until now so yeah actually now she is still organising, still helping our students by giving them supplies so yeah, she is a really kind person" – Participant #4

"They are friendly, and they are very inspiring and as every one of them is different, I learn a lot of things from them as well and they think of us as their own children like their own family and help us with everything we need and yeah, I feel so blessed" – Participant #5

"They are friendly and then they sometimes, when we need something and if we ask them, if they have it, they will share and then sometimes at night around 8:30 or 9:00, we will sit together and talk about our problems together" – Participant #6

While reports of negative student-teacher relationships and interactions were uncommon,

it is important to consider the implications of such relationships. For example, one student made reference to a series of negative experiences at his previous school, which had a significant impact on his overall wellbeing. This student reported past incidents of corporal punishment, which led to the development of fear, as well as a lack of trust within the school environment. Furthermore, this student reported that past teachers often ignored incidences of bullying and would only intervene when a student was physically confronted. Additionally, unequal and unfair treatment was reported as being upsetting to the students, with one participant noting that this could lead to a sense of difference. These incidents appeared to result in the development of a negative perception of school as well as reduced student trust.

"Like my teachers only help me with the bully thing only when they saw it like now they bully me and while they are bullying me, my teacher come and saw that they are bullying me, only then my teacher help us, and then before the class start my teacher is doing a worship in the office so when they bully us, we cannot go to the office and say teacher that guy bully us because when we knock the door while they are doing worship, they would punish us" – Participant #3

"At my old school like you can arrive at school at 9am because 9am we are just having our breakfast at school so it's still okay but when you arrive at school at 9:30, cannot anymore because 9:30 the class start and if you arrive in that time, you will get like beat on your hand" – Participant #3

"Some of my friends, they didn't feel that way because they feel like teachers treat them differently" - Participant #4

Through the interviews, it became apparent that teachers play a significant role in the development of positive wellbeing amongst their students. Teachers were described as playing a big part in facilitating learning and academic achievement. Furthermore, reports indicated that teachers have significant influence in fostering the social and emotional development of these children. Teachers who embodied values such as sensitivity and acceptance enabled their students to flourish and develop a positive sense of self.

Theme 2: The Role of Peer Relationships in Fostering Belonging and Wellbeing

In addition to supportive student-teacher relationships, another consistent theme was student perceptions of the importance of developing positive peer relationships within the school environment. During the interviews, all 10 students spoke fondly of their friends, with students attributing these friendships to a range of positive outcomes, including fostering belonging and wellbeing. The students described their friends as being 'friendly', 'accepting', 'supportive', and 'kind', with these friendships associated with the development of happiness, satisfaction, as well as gratefulness.

"They are very kind and open because for me, I'm very like how to say, a playful girl and a very noisy girl at school but my friends they are just like, they accept me, they didn't care about how I act" – Participant #1

"When they are around, all we do is jumping around, playing around so I am happy to have them, and they make me happy" - Participant #4

"When I'm in school, we have a lot of friends so no more stress" – Participant #10

Besides providing a source of enjoyment and leisure, friendships also appeared to provide the students with a sense of social and emotional support. For example, while students reported enjoyment in playing and spending time with their friends, they also turned to their friends for support whenever problems arose. Students reported feeling accepted by their friends, with high levels of trust shared between peers.

"They are good you know like when I am sad, they would always say what's your problem and try to make me feel happy" – Participant #3

"They are friendly and also like school is more fun with them, like having people who have the same interest as me like laugh with me, study with me, walk home with me like they are always there to help me out if I am having trouble with studies or with life so yeah, they are very helpful as well" – Participant #5

"Since the lockdown started, some of the junior students that we have here, they went home to KL (Kuala Lumpur) but I was one of the seniors so I couldn't, and then I stay at school. So here in the senior group, I am the youngest and to be honest I felt lonely because my oldest sister is not here and my friends since I am the youngest, they are like a big sister to me, they took care of me" – Participant #6

In the absence of these friendships, feelings of loneliness and boredom were commonly reported. One participant described the period before attending school (prior to arriving in Malaysia) as being 'scary' and 'lonely' due to having no opportunities to develop friendships. It appeared that schools provided the students with opportunities to meet other children, therefore allowing them to foster new relationships. It is however important to recognise that due to the nature of being a refugee in Malaysia, students reported having to experience the eventual resettlement of their classmates and peers. After spending many years developing a friendship, watching friends depart Malaysia was a bittersweet moment experienced by these students.

"Being lonely is very scary because like last time I didn't go to school right and I didn't have any friends to talk with, I was so bored and didn't know what to do. I was just sitting at my home doing nothing, so it was that bad" – Participant #1

"They make us feel like we are not alone. If we were together, we would always laugh but when we are alone, there's nobody to joke around with" - Participant #4

"I'm sad when my friends go, I mean when my friends like departed from Malaysia" – Participant #6

"It feels like we're close, and it doesn't feel lonely like last time" – Participant #7

Reports of bullying or negative peer relationships were seldom mentioned. However, two participants reported having witnessed or being the victim of school-based bullying. For example, one student reported that bullying was a common occurrence at one of the previous schools he attended. Furthermore, this student noted that the school did not view this as being overly problematic or concerning, with no school-based policies or procedures having been implemented to target the wide-spread incidences of bullying. When speaking of his experiences, high levels of distress became apparent.

"At my other school there was like five people always bullying all the students before the class starts, they would always come my class and always bully all my friends and me and I don't like that" – Participant #3

In contrast, school environments and values that aim to promote inclusivity were described as necessary in order to facilitate the creation of a safe schooling environment. Practices such as implementing a buddy system as well as intervening with each individual case of bullying were described as being helpful for the students. Furthermore, classroom and teaching practices that encouraged students to develop a range of values, such as kindness and tolerance, were highly appreciated. Students noted that while it could be difficult to make friends initially, students who were welcoming during their initial transition to school greatly assisted with the development of confidence and trust.

"It was hard for me, yeah because I was shy at first meeting them. They came up to me and ask can we be friends?" - Participant #1

"There's no bullies at (this) school and then when I don't know something at (this) school, they would always help me and I like (this) school, I've never seen a bully at (this) school" – Participant #3

"It was in the first school I go to, there are like some bullies but not in (this) school. So they (teachers) are really kind if there is one person bullying another person, they take it very seriously, so there is no bullies" - Participant #4

"Yeah, so if the new students come, they give him like a buddy so one of our friends has to take care of them and teach them how to do the things we do" - Participant #4

The ability to develop and maintain long-term, trusting friendships appeared to be a significant protective factor against poor wellbeing amongst the students. Students indicated the need for schools to assist in fostering an accepting, welcoming, and tolerant environment in order to combat negative peer interactions, such as incidences of bullying.

Theme 3: Positive Feelings and Perceptions Towards Schooling and Education in Spite of The Challenges

Another prominent theme identified in the data was related to student descriptions of overwhelmingly positive feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of their schooling and educational experiences in Malaysia. All 10 students spoke highly of their schools and their tone of voice

indicated enthusiasm, joy, happiness, and excitement. When asked how school made them feel, students were quick to respond with a series of positive feelings, including 'happy', 'good', 'safe', 'excited', 'thankful', 'comfortable', and 'motivated'. Furthermore, all students reported enjoyment in attending school, with one participant describing school as a 'special place'. Responses such as the ones provided below were common amongst the participants.

"When I go back to school, it makes me feel very like happy. I learn new things every day and it's very exciting" – Participant #1

"It (school) makes me feel like good and then like one day, I will be a good boy. It makes me feel like that" – Participant #3

"It (school) feels good. It makes me happy. A lot" – Participant #7

When queried, students were able to attribute the positive feelings about their schooling to various factors. It became apparent that besides being a place of learning, schools represented safety and security, and were seen as providing children with social and emotional support. The children indicated that schools also offered them a place to develop and acquire new skills and knowledge, allowed them to foster meaningful and supportive relationships with their peers and teachers, as well as provided them with increased optimism and hope for the future. Some students reported that they enjoyed attending school as it provided them with opportunities to learn about and strengthen their faith. Schools were also identified as playing a crucial role in supporting not only the students, but their families as well.

"Before I went to school, I was like, I didn't know anything about English or nothing like that but when I go to school, I get so many motivations and like I got so many friends and I can speak English like how I wanted to so yeah it helped me a lot" – Participant #1

"I think going to school will lead us to the right path" – Participant #4

"It (school) builds my character, the school helps me develop my character in a good way more and then also it helps me get ready when I'm entering my adulthood" – Participant #6

All but one of the participants were enrolled in a school. This participant had recently made the decision to stop attending school to pursue full time employment. In an ideal world, this participant reported that he would have continued in regular schooling. However, financial difficulties exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdowns and pandemic ultimately resulted in his decision to pursue employment. While his sadness over this decision was apparent during this discussion, the participant spoke fondly of his experiences. He said that his time spent at school in Malaysia motivated him to pursue tertiary education once resettled in a third country.

"I miss it because I decided to get a job by myself, so my parents did not force me but because I know that our parents are in a really hard situation so I kind of realised that I had to do something so yeah, got a job" – Participant #4

"I like it (school). I really like going to school so I was really, I mean I had plans to go to university, but I don't think I can go to university anymore, but I will try when I reach maybe (the) United States" – Participant #4

Early in the interviews, all participants were asked to reflect on their overall experiences of schooling in Malaysia. Then, the students were asked to share their views about any changes they would like to see within their schools, especially changes that would create a more productive and positive schooling environment. Interestingly, most participants were quick to respond, sharing that they believed there was nothing more their teachers or schools could do to improve their schooling and educational experiences. The students appeared genuine, with many responding that they had largely positive experiences across the schools they had attended. As conversations progressed, students would jokingly report wanting changes such as having school start at a later hour, not having to wake up so early, as well as longer school holidays. Additionally, even when students were able to identify potential areas of improvement, they remained positive about their schools. For example, a number commented that their schools were small and crowded. However, they were able to view these challenges from a positive

perspective, with these challenges not appearing to contribute to any negative feelings or perceptions.

"It's great! I don't need to change anything. I don't think it needs a change because I like how it is now because I'm managing, learning how to do things like that so it doesn't need a change at all" – Participant #1

"I don't want to add anything to school, I just like the way it is" – Participant #3

"*There is nothing I don't like about school*" – Participant #7

"Our school is small, but it has a lot of memories"- Participant #10

Overall, it became apparent throughout the interviews that the students genuinely enjoyed their schooling and educational experiences in Malaysia. Additionally, the students attributed their regular attendance to a range of positive outcomes, including happiness and gratitude. Even when students identified difficulties or challenges, they were optimistic and quick to view their challenges from a positive perspective.

Theme 4: Challenges Associated with the COVID-19 Lockdown

The interviews for this study were conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, Malaysia had been put under a strict lockdown resulting in the closure of all schools. The participants were therefore forced to resort to home-based schooling for several months. As such, and unsurprisingly, challenges posed by the pandemic were often discussed. When talking about the situation, students reported a series of negative emotions, including being 'sad', 'bad', 'bored', 'disappointed', and 'sorrowful'. One participant reported feeling 'like a prisoner in my home'. In terms of their schooling and education, it became clear that the COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges, such as making it more difficult for the students to participate in schooling. Some students reported fears that they would regress academically, noting that

reduced teacher attention could make it difficult to progress. Furthermore, home-based schooling was described as being less engaging than on-site learning.

"I can't learn anything. I can't learn properly" – Participant #2

"We can't go to school, so we have to work at home. It's a bit very difficult to do it like we don't have teachers. Teachers are not here so it's very difficult to study and focus on our studies" - Participant #5

"It's hard to study at home, I couldn't get it. At home studying alone is not kind of fun, it's a bit boring" – Participant #7

"It makes me feel so bad because I worry about my grades" – Participant #9

Worries about regressing academically appeared to be a significant concern amongst the students. One student reported making the decision to move interstate in order to be able to attend a community-run boarding school. This student said that even though this decision has meant she is now separated from her family, she felt it was the right choice in terms of her education. More specifically, the student reported that being at this boarding school has provided her with increased opportunities to progress in her academic studies, which she felt was a challenge when completing home-based learning.

"*Yeah, all we do is just staying home, playing on the phone, wasting our time rather than learning*" – Participant #6

"*Here even though there's MCO (movement control order), I can still learn and before at the other school it's not that I couldn't learn but then when I finish studying like when I finish my work that I am supposed to, there's nothing to do, I just waste my time playing videos*"
– Participant #6

Apart from causing challenges to learning, the lockdown resulted in the students being forced to be separated from key social supports (i.e., teachers and peers) for prolonged periods. As a result, the students reported feeling isolated, lonely, as well as bored. It was clear that peers and teachers played a significant role in providing the students with regular emotional and social support and in the absence of these supports, students reported increased negative emotion.

"It's like, I want to go for now, I want to go to school and hug all my friends like I usually do"
– Participant #1

"We liked to hang out together most of the time but because of Covid, we have to stay away from each other. Very difficult, it feels lonely" – Participant #7

"I miss them like I miss the times when we laugh, having lunch with them, walking home together with them. I miss them" – Participant #10

Importantly, some students reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on their families' financial situation. There were reports of parents being out of work, and students therefore preferencing employment over education so they could earn income and assist their families. For example, one student had decided to stop schooling and pursue full-time employment (as described earlier), while another student reported having less time for schooling as he assisted his parents with their business. Another student stated that he had dropped out of his previous school as his family was out of work and his parents were unable to pay his school fees. In an attempt to address these difficulties, there were multiple reports of schools having gone 'above and beyond' to support their students and families. For example, the students shared that throughout the lockdown period, their teachers worked tirelessly to organise and distribute basic necessities to families in need. The students reported that as a result, they were able to obtain food, drinks, toiletries, and even clothes on a regular basis. They noted that they were grateful for their teachers' efforts.

"They give us some food, veggies yeah like that, they give us so many things. It's like all the things we need" – Participant #1

"Every week they give us like rice, vegetables like anything like fruits and it really helps us and so it's like they think us of us like their own family and help everything we need" – Participant #5

"It makes me very thankful. They give us donations when we are in need. They help us with like food and drinks" – Participant #7

"Right now, with the situation and lockdown, at our school we got a lot of blessings and sponsors. Like very, let's say our school is so blessed and very good and the teachers are very nice and kind, always good" – Participant #9

Unsurprisingly, lockdowns imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the students. Student reports indicated that there were disruptions to their education, increased financial insecurity, as well as reduced access to social supports. While the lockdown brought challenges, stories shared by the students demonstrated the high levels of care and support of their teachers and schools. It became evident that the schools not only endeavoured to support the students academically but were also genuinely concerned about the livelihoods of their students as well as their families.

Theme 5: The Value and Importance of Learning and Academic Achievement

Another important finding related to the students' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of their education. More specifically, all of the students expressed enjoyment in being able to attend school as it provided them with opportunities to learn. In fact, some students described the ability to acquire new knowledge and skills as being their favourite part of school. This desire to learn and achieve academically stemmed from an awareness of the importance of schooling and education, particularly the long-term benefits of education. For example, many students shared their future dreams, expressing a hope that obtaining an education would assist with resettlement as well as allow them to pursue their future goals and ambitions. The students reported a range of ambitions, such as a desire to become a mechanical engineer, teacher, chef, entrepreneur, artist, police officer, fashion designer, as well as CEO.

"If there is no school, how will we study because if we don't study, we will not graduate and then when we don't graduate, we can't get a job and then we will know nothing and then we cannot get a great job" – Participant #3

"Everyone has to learn how to be independent right in life, even the children they have to learn how to be independent and I think school is the right place to learn that" – Participant #6

"It is important because we don't want to work in a mall, earn small little wages. We want to work and do big things" – Participant #10

It is important to recognise that despite enjoying learning, many students reported that their subjects could also cause high levels of stress and worry. They referred to maths and English in particular, with students commenting that these subjects could be challenging. It appeared that difficulties with understanding and mastering subject material could lead to a sense of defeat and so high levels of worry, stress, and sadness. Students compared themselves to their friends and appeared distressed when talking about their difficulties. Failing a subject or failing to progress to the next level was identified as a major source of stress.

"It would be math. Yes, very stressful it's very difficult" – Participant #5

"Sometimes the subjects are very hard so that's stressful" – Participant #6

"I guess it's only like my work. When I don't know how to do it. I'm always like that. I'm scared" – Participant #7

"Like sometimes being so sad because like I can't do it like my friends can do it, but I can't do it so sometimes sad" – Participant #9

Importantly, despite these difficulties the students showed high levels of resilience and persevered. Together with the support of their teachers, friends, and family members, students appeared to be highly motivated and dedicated to overcoming academic difficulties in order to succeed. Sentiments such as 'as long as I try my best' were common amongst the students.

"Sometimes when we study like and then with the subjects, I'm quite bad at math but the teachers always help me, and she explain it very well but sometimes my brain cannot cope with it. That's quite hard for me but I try my best" – Participant #1

"So, math the most difficult thing but I'm used to it, so I always have a teacher to help me, so I always understand. It's always hard but it's always hard the first time but the second time it's always different" – Participant #4

Interestingly, several students discussed the different learning and teaching methods across the various schools they had attended during their time in Malaysia. Some students

reported that their previous schools had not emphasised the importance of learning sufficiently and that the teaching at these schools was ineffective. As a result, three students had decided to transfer schools in the hope that the new schools would provide them with a more suitable learning experience. In contrast, there was one student who felt her current school placed too much emphasis on the academic side of learning, which led to her experiencing high levels of stress. Therefore, it is clear that a healthy balance is needed at school to promote and enhance overall wellbeing.

"Yeah, I like (current school) more because before I go to this school, I didn't know how to spell and things but when I go to this school now, I'm a little better at spelling" - Participant #3

"It's both good but for like if it's for studies, I would like this school yeah, it's very different from other schools and it's really fun" – Participant #5

"For me, I feel like very tired of studying, like every day work, like every day there is like so many subjects to learn yeah feels stressful" – Participant #6

"When doing test, we study here more. At my last school, I didn't study too much"
– Participant #10

A number of the participants attended the same school. These students spoke highly of the school, noting that it had been set up to accommodate their needs. In particular, the students noted that this school had implemented a learning system that was highly beneficial. That is, the students said the school employed a 'self-learning' and 'home-school' based curriculum which involved children completing work that had been tailored to their individual levels. The students would first complete a series of check-ups and tests to help determine their academic levels. Work was subsequently assigned based on their abilities, with children only progressing to the next level once they had achieved mastery of content. Therefore, students were assigned work based on their abilities rather than their age. Furthermore, this curriculum enabled the students to work and progress at a comfortable pace.

"Like here we, it's like home-school, we do everything by ourselves yes, so every subject is different from other students" – Participant #5

"Like our school, we are self-study so when we don't know in our book, we raise our flags and then they come and then yeah they teach us what we don't know yeah, and we have check-ups" – Participant #9

"Here, we study personally – we teach ourselves. In Myanmar, the teachers are sitting in front of us and yeah some of us don't listen to her" – Participant #10

Students indicated a strong desire to learn and progress academically. However, it became apparent that a heavy emphasis on academic learning, partnered with educational material that was not tailored to the needs of the students could lead to high levels of stress and frustration. Classroom material that was in line with the students' academic abilities was more likely to support the development of wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, and motivation.

Theme 6: The Impact of Language Barriers

All 10 of the student participants described their experiences overcoming challenges due to poor English fluency. For example, they reported difficulties upon first arriving in Malaysia as they all had limited or no prior exposure to the English language - Burmese is considered the standard learning language in Myanmar, although Chin refugees are likely to have also been exposed to one of the Chin dialects (e.g., Zomi, Falam). As a result, many students described the initial transition to school in Malaysia as being challenging (the schools involved in this study used English as the primary language of instruction, although some schools integrated a range of other languages depending on the population of students, such as Bahasa Malaysia, Burmese). Students described experiencing a series of negative emotions, including sadness, nervousness, as well as stress.

"When I was first in Malaysia, the first time I reach Malaysia, I did not speak a single word of English" – Participant #4

"It made me feel sad, like I wanted to cry" – Participant #7

"It was scary, it was like living in a different world" – Participant #8

Besides causing negative feelings for the students, poor English fluency also had an impact on their schooling and educational experiences. For example, the students reported that due to difficulties with understanding English, they experienced high levels of stress and worry within the classroom setting. Students reported that it was difficult to make sense of classroom material, as often they could not understand what was being said. This was particularly when students had been assigned classes based on age rather than on ability level.

"Very hard, like I always feel nervous when someone calls my name because I don't know anything, I don't know how to speak English, so it was very hard" – Participant #5

"English class was very difficult, actually my teacher put me into like Grade 1 and then it was so difficult like really difficult, so I ask them to put me one level down and then I always cry about it" – Participant #6

"I'm scared because the teachers are speaking in another language that I did not really understand so it made me feel a bit sad and scared" – Participant #7

Despite the challenges, the students were highly motivated to improve their English fluency skills. This stemmed from an awareness of the importance of learning English, particularly as most children expected to be resettled across English speaking third countries. In addition, the students recognised the long-term impact of learning English, with many reporting a belief that possessing high levels of English fluency would assist in obtaining future employment.

"When we are adults, we have to work for ourselves right? So even if we have to work ourselves and we can't speak English, it's very hard to get a job and so if we learn English from school, when we get older, we can work for ourselves with English and we can get easier job" – Participant # 1

"We want to know how to speak in English and we can use it for the future. For our future and for myself" - Participant #2

I like to learn English so that I will be able to communicate with all people – Participant #6

As a result of understanding the need to develop English fluency, partnered with the motivation to develop their language abilities, the students stated that they persevered despite the difficulty. Through the interviews, it became apparent that the students demonstrated high levels of resilience in order to develop their English fluency.

"It was quite hard to learn English without knowing it but just step by step, I tried to learn it" – Participant #1

"At first of course it was really hard for me but then later I got used to it, so I study English like more than any other subject because I have to speak English better than this but yeah, I think English is the most important thing" - Participant #4

"It's very hard for me but yeah we have to try in order to improve our English" – Participant #5

"I tried my best and then I would like read every day" – Participant #6

Importantly, the students also indicated they needed high levels of support from teachers and parents in order to develop their language skills. One student was pulled out of a school by his mother, so that he could attend another school where he would be able to obtain better instruction in English. Furthermore, there were multiple reports of teachers who were understanding and supportive, willing to utilise a range of techniques to assist with learning English. The students said that these techniques facilitated this process, including having refugee teachers from Myanmar who were able to translate, sitting at the front of the class, relying on friends to translate classroom material, as well as utilising the online translation services. Some students reported that their schools required them to speak only in English (despite everyone being fluent in Burmese), which was initially challenging, but ultimately helpful.

"The first time I was at the school with teacher (name), I didn't even understand English, so she was very soft and then she knows how to treat like the children yeah, so she knows how to talk to them" – Participant #4

"Like at my school, at my old school, my teachers like always ask and teach us to speak in English with my friends even though we have the same language yeah they always show us and ask us to speak in English so that we can improve our English yes like that" – Participant #5

"My brother always used to scold me like 'even if the teachers try to talk to you, don't ever be scared. They are just being nice to you and want to help you' and that is how I did it, with my brothers help" – Participant #7

Overall, it became apparent that language barriers within these schools had the potential to reduce self-esteem and confidence. Many students described the initial transition to school as challenging leading to fear and nervousness. Even so, it is important to recognise that high levels of resilience along with supportive teachers, friends, and family members assisted the students to persevere with their learning.

Theme 7: The Desire to Engage in Extracurricular Activities

Towards the end of the interviews, students were encouraged to reflect on the conversation and were once again prompted to think about any changes they would like to see within their schooling and educational environments. Interestingly, a majority of students (90%) responded with similar answers. In particular, students described wanting opportunities to participate in a range of non-academic subjects and activities. For example, the students wanted to engage in sport, music, as well as art-based activities.

"I like my school to have like other sports because I like activities. We only have crochet, so I want to be very active and energetic like we have table tennis before, but we don't have it anymore and I'm quite sad about that" – Participant # 1

"Yeah, but if they allow me to add something, I would always want like on every like Thursday, I would always like to do like singing"- Participant #3

"Like I would say, like talents, I wish they could teach us some talents like piano, guitar kind of like that and sports" – Participant #9

The students stated that participating in these activities would contribute towards their wellbeing. For example, two students noted that their schools focussed on academics, leading to

high levels of stress and tiredness. These students wanted to engage in other activities such as physical exercise in order to provide a balance as well as to promote physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.

"Every day we learn and learn and if we don't have physical for our body, then the things that we learn, we cannot remember so our body also have to do something physical. When we do the physical work of course we are tired right after but at night when we sleep, we feel very relaxed and then we have a restful night" – Participant #6

"I think sports to be healthier you know, to do some exercise and I like playing volleyball so it would be fun" – Participant #7

Unfortunately, it was not always feasible for the schools to provide their students with opportunities to engage in such activities. Barriers such as Covid lockdowns as well as limited space and facilities within the school settings were discussed. According to some of the students, their schools initiated extracurricular activities such as a crochet business or farming. A student reported that her school had started 'Saturday School', which allowed her to participate in religious and leisurely activities (e.g., games, arts, and crafts). These initiatives allowed children to participate in more unstructured activities, while also providing them with an opportunity to develop their friendships as well as new skills. Importantly, these initiatives also provided students with additional financial and material support. For example, one participant reported that the introduction of farming at her school had allowed her to not only sell her produce, but also to keep the remainder for her own use. Similarly, the teachers assisted the students to sell their crochet creations at markets and online platforms, therefore enabling these children an income.

"Also, we do some activities on Friday but not anymore because of MCO (movement control order). It's like crochet, we do crochet day, that's my favourite part" – Participant #1

"We got back (money from selling crochet), like 20% went to school, and then others we got back" – Participant #5

"We have Saturday school that makes me happy too! We learn about God's word, and then we also do arts and crafts, we play games" - Participant #7

Another favourite amongst the students was school-based excursions and camps. When speaking of their fondest memories of school, many children shared stories about excursions and school-based events, including parties and camps. The students reported being happy and grateful that they could share these experiences with their friends, teachers, and families.

"The best time was I think was going to the cinema. So, there was a lot of students that time, so we go to the cinema, we had all our friends and then after we go to the cinema, I think it's before end of the year, so yeah after that some students fly, and some students go to a different school so yeah I think that was the best moment of school" – Participant #4

"We went on a trip! It was so fun! Like we went to other places with our friends, and we can't even be quiet even when the teachers were saying to be quiet on the bus, and the driver is kind of like you know very a bit angry like we are so loud and very excited" - Participant #7

"Being with friends and partying, gathering around and making fun yeah that's the best" – Participant #9

The students were grateful that they were able to attend school and progress academically, nonetheless they also wanted to participate in non-academic activities. That is, they craved a healthy balance between academics and extracurricular activities. Participating in such activities was associated with a range of benefits, including the promotion of physical and mental health, as well as the development of friendships and social belonging.

6.5 Discussion

This study aimed to develop a better understanding of the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. To achieve this, we qualitatively explored student perceptions of their schooling experiences, with a focus on the perceived barriers and facilitators. To do this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 refugee students living in Malaysia. An analysis of the data identified seven major themes:

Student-Teacher Relationships, Positive Feelings and Perceptions, Peer Relationships, challenges posed by the *-19 Lockdown and Pandemic*, *Learning and Academic Achievement*, *English Fluency*, as well as *Engagement in Extracurricular Activities.*

The findings pertained to a series of school and education related challenges, which are largely consistent with prior research into refugee education. In particular, the initial transition to school, significant educational gaps (e.g., due to prolonged disruptions), and language barriers were commonly identified as contributing to high levels of distress and frustration. Indeed, previous research has indicated that refugee and asylum seeking children are likely to have encountered significant disruptions to their education over the course of resettlement (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Pugh et al., 2012). These disruptions may cause significant gaps in educational knowledge as well as low levels of literacy (Hammond & Miller, 2015). As a result, many children face significant challenges upon starting school due to the need to adapt not only culturally, but linguistically and academically. Past findings indicate that for refugee children who have had minimal exposure to schooling and educational environments, the sudden transition to a highly structured schooling environment can result in alienation as well as high levels of anxiety (Foundation House, 2016).

For refugee and asylum seeking children, significant gaps in educational and schooling knowledge can also negatively impact their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. Children may develop a sense of failure, as many feel pressured to catch up and close these gaps (Cassity, 2012). It is also important to be aware that student progress within the classroom may be hindered by the impact of ongoing trauma, such as difficulties developing a sense of safety, attention/concentration problems, and reduced short-term memory as well as emotional and social challenges (Foundation House, 2016; Tangen, 2009; UNHCR, 2019). For the participants

in this study, the sudden exposure to English in their schools was commonly reported to contribute to their feelings of distress and low self-esteem. This appears to be a common finding, with low levels of English fluency and language barriers often cited as being sources of stress and anxiety for refugee and asylum seeking children in school settings (Cowling & Anderson, 2021; Deslandes et al., 2022; McEachron & Bhatti, 2005). Furthermore, unrealistic demands such as being placed in classes (e.g., English classes) based on age level rather than ability level exacerbated student distress.

It is important to recognise that many refugee and asylum seeking children (such as those who participated in this study) are currently concentrated across low-middle income countries. The educational systems of these countries are often stretched and therefore are unable to provide appropriate levels of education to a large population of refugee children (particularly as many may present with specific educational needs). In the instance of Malaysia, the educational system has not been set up to provide refugee and asylum seeking children with access to school. This in itself may lead to a series of barriers and challenges, such as a lack of appropriate materials, resources, and space across volunteer and community run schools. For example, students in this study commonly requested more facilities that would allow them to engage in play, physical education, and extracurricular activities. Student reports indicated that the ability to participate in more leisurely and social activities would have a positive impact on their overall health and wellbeing. Interestingly, this finding mirrored a recent study by Cseplö and colleagues (2021) that explored refugee student perceptions of physical education (PE) classes. Their findings indicated that participation in PE contributed towards improvements in both physical and mental health, facilitated the development of health literacy, as well as provided a greater sense of social cohesion and inclusion.

Besides restricting access to public education, it is also worth recognising that government policies in Malaysia strictly prohibit refugees and asylum seekers from engaging in legal employment. This, coupled with the stressors typically associated with resettlement as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, appeared to exacerbate already challenging home situations and led to increased financial difficulties (see Baker et al., 2022a, 2022b for a discussion). For some of the participants, these challenges resulted in them being unable to persevere with their education, with some students withdrawing from school to pursue employment. Therefore, there are a series of challenges that need to be addressed that exist outside the immediate schooling environment. Even though these challenges are beyond the control of these schools, they have the potential to negatively impact the schooling and educational experiences of the children.

While a number of challenges and barriers were identified in this study, it is equally important to recognise the protective factors as well as positive experiences that were shared by the participants. Of note, the role of teacher and peer relationships in supporting academic learning as well as the development of wellbeing and belonging was a prominent theme identified across the data. Interestingly, in the previous qualitative study on teacher-reported experiences of education for refugee and asylum seeker students in Malaysia (Cowling & Anderson, 2021; Chapter 5), the role of student-teacher relationships was not mentioned. While it became apparent during those interviews that the teachers strived to support their students academically, socially, and emotionally, the teachers did not highlight this as being a significant influence on their students. The value of these relationships only emerged during the interviews with the students. The students associated these relationships with a range of benefits, including the provision of social and emotional support, as well as the development of self-esteem and academic motivation.

Importantly, what appeared particularly impactful for the students was that the support they received from their teachers extended beyond the classroom. Multiple examples were provided such as reports that teachers organised and distributed basic necessities (e.g., food, clothes) to the students and their families. Past research illustrates that it is imperative that teachers of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are able to reflect on, and recognise the unique challenges and experiences faced by their students. Students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can experience multiple stressors and carry with them the long-term impact of trauma that presents in the classroom (Barrett & Berger, 2021; Szente et al., 2006). As such, it is important for teachers to be aware of these past experiences and show sensitivity and empathy when working with these students. Furthermore, research findings indicate that teacher attitudes and behaviours can assist in the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment, which may subsequently have an impact on student academic achievement as well as overall wellbeing (Barrett & Berger, 2021; Foundation House, 2019).

While there were a number of vital school-based factors identified through the interviews, it is important to highlight that certain personal characteristics also assisted the students with their schooling and educational experiences. In particular, it became apparent that the students were resilient and highly academically motivated. This was surprising given the many barriers that were identified in the teacher interviews (see Cowling & Anderson, 2021 [Chapter 5]). The teacher participants voiced concern about challenges that (for the most part) had a negative impact on the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. While students mentioned some of the same challenges raised by the teachers (e.g., language barriers; limited resources), and dealt with difficult life circumstances, they managed to maintain largely positive attitudes and perceptions towards their

schooling and education. Interestingly, past research indicates that the resettlement process experienced by children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can result in the development of a strong desire to achieve educationally, as well as produce a range of qualities such as resilience, resourcefulness, and adaptability (Cseplö et al., 2021; Spaaij, 2015). Furthermore, it is possible that supportive school environments coupled with strong relationships between the students, their peers as well as the teachers further (as seen in this study) assists in the development of resilience, a positive outlook towards schooling and education, as well as an enhanced ability to cope (Daud et al., 2008; Rutter et al., 2001).

6.5.1 Limitations and Future Directions

This study offers valuable findings with regards to the schooling and educational experiences of refugee children in Malaysia. However, there are some limitations that warrant discussion. For example, the students who participated in this study were enrolled in a small number of schools across Malaysia. While the participants were able to reflect on their experiences across schools, it is possible that other refugee children may have experiences that varied from these participants. For example, (it is widely known) that some refugee schools in Malaysia receive significantly reduced funding and resources, therefore creating particularly challenging educational environments (Farzana et al., 2020; O'Neal et al., 2016). Furthermore, all of the refugee students were of Chin background. While these findings provide insight into the experience of Chin refugees, it is important to recognise that refugees are not a homogenous group, and present with varying backgrounds, cultural values, and experiences. As a result, these findings may not be generalisable to refugees from other cultural backgrounds.

It must also be noted that research with refugee youth can present inherent ethical challenges due to the potential vulnerability of the population. For example, the possibility of a

power imbalance between researchers and participants of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds has been documented (Müller-Funk, 2021). In this study, there were differences in the level of education, refugee status (the researchers have no history of holding asylum seeker or refugee status) and age between the researchers and participants. While steps were taken to ensure ethical reflexivity (e.g., regular supervision and debriefing of experience and findings amongst researchers), it is possible that there may have been subtle impacts on data collection as well as its analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that refugee and asylum seekers in Malaysia face challenges that may pose a risk to their safety and security, including prolonged legal precariousness and vulnerability. This may in turn have led to distrust, suspicion, and fear, which may have hindered the participants willingness to be critical of their schooling experiences.

Given these limitations, it is clear there is a need for further research in this area. Future studies should recruit samples of diverse refugee children that vary in age as well as in cultural background. For example, within Malaysia the UNHCR (2021a) reports that there is a large population of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, as well as refugees from Pakistan, Syria, and Afghanistan amongst other countries. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences and needs of children from these populations. In addition, future studies should recruit children from a larger number of schools across Malaysia as this will not only ensure a more heterogeneous sample, but will also provide a more complete picture of how the schooling and educational experiences of these children differ.

6.5.2 Conclusion

A growing body of research has explored the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children. While progress has been made particularly with regards to

post-resettlement education, researchers have noted a lack of knowledge surrounding pre-resettlement education. Therefore, this study examined the experiences of schooling and education amongst a sample of Chin refugees in Malaysia. Taken together, the results revealed a series of schooling and educational challenges experienced by these children. However, a number of positive experiences and facilitators were also identified. Importantly, these facilitators fostered the development of positive outcomes, including improved academic motivation, wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, as well as a sense of belonging.

The findings also suggested that the provision of optimal refugee education functions as a two-way street. More specifically, it became apparent that schools and educators are in a prime position to support the academic, social, and emotional development of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. To do so, it is important that they recognise the unique educational and emotional needs of these students and implement school-based practices and approaches that specifically cater to these needs. Meanwhile, the personal attributes and characteristics of the students enable them to make full use of such initiatives. That is, their positive attitudes towards schooling coupled with high levels of motivation and perseverance allowed the children to engage with their schooling as well view their challenges from a more positive perspective.

Overall, the findings of this study provide insight into the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia. While certain challenges were identified, it is important to recognise the dedication and motivation of both staff and students in overcoming these difficulties. This dedication led to the delivery of a number of strategies to improve the experiences of these children. Unfortunately, there are external factors (e.g., government policies) outside the control of the schools which influence what they can provide

their students. As such, there is great need for change particularly at the government level to ensure that these children are afforded the opportunity to obtain quality education. With the right support in place, the schools have the ability to significantly enhance the overall wellbeing of these vulnerable children. It is hoped that the findings of this study not only provide a better understanding of the experiences of these children, but also encourage clinicians and educators to reflect on and encourage change within educational environments.

Chapter 7- The School-Based Predictors of Mental Health and Wellbeing for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children: Evidence from Malaysia

Dissemination strategy: This study is currently being reviewed for publication in the *American Educational Research Journal*

Statement of contribution:

Misha Cowling: Study conception and design, data collection and analysis, interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

Joel Anderson: Study conception and design, data analysis supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

Tom Whelan: Study conception and design, data analysis supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

7.1 Abstract

Research has begun to explore the role of schooling and education in promoting mental health and wellbeing for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. To date, most of this research has been conducted in countries of permanent resettlement, and there is a lack of knowledge regarding the experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in first and temporary countries of asylum. Therefore, this study explores the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students within Malaysia (a country of temporary asylum with no channels available for permanent resettlement), with the goal of better understanding the school-based predictors associated with positive mental health and wellbeing. A total of 173 students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia (10 – 20 years old [$M = 14.64$, $SD = 2.17$]; 93 males, 80 females) completed a survey exploring the relationship between several school-based factors and outcomes relating to mental health and wellbeing. Multiple regression analyses revealed that factors such as social support and the provision of a sense of safety within schooling environments were associated with the development of positive wellbeing and satisfaction with life, as well as reduced reports of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Other factors associated with positive mental health and wellbeing included positive physical environments, parental involvement in schooling, and the presence of mental health supports within school environments. Given the dominant role that schools play in the daily lives of children, they represent ideal locations for interventions targeting improved mental health and wellbeing. As such, it is imperative that research continues to explore the impact of schooling and educational environments on the mental health and wellbeing of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Keywords: refugee, asylum seeker, children, education, mental health, wellbeing.

7.2 Introduction

By the end of December 2021, the country of Malaysia had registered approximately 180,440 refugees and asylum seekers with The United Nations Refugee Agency (also commonly referred to as the UNHCR, 2022b). While Malaysia currently hosts a large number of forced migrants, the country is currently one of the few remaining that has yet to become party to either the *1951 Refugee Convention* or its 1967 protocol (Bailey & İnanç, 2019). As a result, Malaysia currently lacks national-level laws and legislation that regulates the status of refugees and does not provide these individuals with any degree of legal protection (Chuah et al., 2019; Hoffstaedter, 2017). According to Malaysian government policy, Malaysia is only to be an intermediate destination for refugees, with no channels available for permanent resettlement (Nungsari et al., 2020). Furthermore, Malaysia does not formally recognise an individual as possessing refugee status, which means that refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are not differentiated from illegal immigrants (Low et al., 2014). As a result, refugees and asylum seekers currently residing in Malaysia often experience the same consequences as those faced by illegal migrants, such as detention, corporal punishment, and deportation (Siah et al., 2015).

7.2.1 Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Malaysia

The number of refugee and asylum seeking children residing in Malaysia has gradually risen over recent years (Kok et al., 2021). The latest figures released by the UN Refugee Agency (2022b) reveal that there are approximately 46,170 refugee and asylum seeking children currently residing in the country. Interestingly, Malaysia has ratified the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC; Siah et al., 2020). This convention serves as the main international human rights treaty dedicated towards promoting children's rights, including children who come into a country as a refugee (UN General Assembly, 1989). Nevertheless, in spite of their age and

vulnerability, refugee and asylum seeking children are often marginalised within Malaysian society, with many of these children deprived of their basic rights (Amnesty International, 2010; O'Neal et al., 2017). For example, due to their illegal status within Malaysia, refugee and asylum seeking children often experience limited physical protection as well as significant barriers to accessing several public resources, such as adequate health care (Shaw et al., 2020).

It is also worth recognising that refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia are currently denied access to the local education system, which hinders their ability to participate in long-term formal education (O'Neal et al., 2016). This is significant given that education has long been identified as a fundamental human right, with access to free and compulsory education at the elementary level affirmed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and reiterated in the CRC (Kok et al., 2021; Loganathan et al., 2022). As a result of being barred from accessing the public education system, refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia become heavily reliant on volunteer and community run learning centres that are often run by non-government organisations, such as faith-based or humanitarian groups (Loganathan et al., 2021). These informal learning centres experience several challenges, including a lack of appropriate funding and resources, shortages of qualified teachers, threats to safety and security, as well as difficulties with obtaining adequate school premises and basic amenities (Cowling & Anderson, 2021; Farzana et al., 2020; Gosnell et al., 2021; Siah et al., 2020). Due to the significant challenges associated with accessing education in Malaysia, the UN Refugee Agency (2022c) estimates that roughly 30% of school-aged refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia are enrolled in one of these community learning centres.

7.2.2 The Role of Education and Schooling

The difficulties with accessing education in Malaysia represents an area of particular concern as these children risk missing out on the significant benefits associated with education and schooling. For example, education has been shown to facilitate several developmental outcomes, such as social, emotional, moral, and cognitive development (UNHCR, 2019; Ziaian et al., 2017). Furthermore, for refugee and asylum seeking children, the provision of education within countries of temporary and first asylum has been shown to assist in providing a sense of stability amidst protracted periods of uncertainty and stress (Letchamanan, 2013). Engagement in schooling and education also facilitates the process of community involvement and social inclusion through providing children with safe spaces to learn, interact, and encounter new experiences (Cassity, 2012; Matthews, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Put together, engagement in stable schooling and education has been shown to play a crucial role in supporting the positive adaptation, mental health, and wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeking children. This is important given that extensive research has documented the vulnerability of refugee and asylum seeking populations to poor mental health and wellbeing resulting from displacement-related stressors (Betancourt et al., 2012; Fazel et al., 2012; Reed et al., 2011). For example, across studies utilising samples of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, high prevalence rates of various psychopathologies including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been documented (Blackmore et al., 2020; Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011).

A small number of Malaysian-based studies have explored the mental health status of refugees and asylum seekers within the country. These studies consistently report mental health concerns and difficulties. For example, elevated levels of emotional distress, as well as high

prevalence rates of mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD have been found in samples of adult refugees residing in Malaysia (Kaur et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2018, 2019; Tay et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Low and colleagues (2018) indicated mild to moderate levels of depression, as well as moderate to extremely severe levels of anxiety amongst refugee children and youth in Malaysia. Finally, in a study by O'Neal and colleagues (2016), refugee teachers from Malaysia reported having experienced high levels of both internalising and externalising behaviours within the classroom environment.

7.2.3 The Current Study

The provision of post-displacement education to children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds represents a particular challenge amongst children residing across various countries of first and temporary resettlement. Due to a lack of government policies, these children can experience significant challenges and barriers to accessing and engaging in long-term formal education and schooling. In the specific case of Malaysia, as children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are denied access to free and public education systems, they become reliant on volunteer and community run schools that may be severely underfunded and under-resourced. As a result, these schools can be extremely limited in what they are able to provide to the children, which is concerning given that many refugee and asylum seeking children spend a significant proportion of their childhoods in Malaysia awaiting resettlement.

Difficulties accessing formal and stable education is of concern given that extensive research has documented the long-term benefits associated with participation in schooling and education. For example, past research indicates that for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, there exists a variety of school-based factors (e.g., provision of stability and routine; development of peer relationships) that act as protective factors in supporting the

development of more positive mental health and wellbeing. It is important to note that much of the research into education and schooling amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds has been conducted across countries of permanent resettlement. There has been a lack of studies exploring educational experiences within countries of first and temporary resettlement (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Sadiq, 2022). Furthermore, there is limited research into the educational experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds from their own perspectives (Prior & Niesz, 2013). As a result, more research is warranted to better understand the educational experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, particularly amongst children residing within countries such as Malaysia.

To contribute to this body of research, this study explored the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia, with a focus on student perceptions of school-based factors that foster positive mental health and wellbeing. Given previous findings, it is hypothesised that:

- H1. The sample will demonstrate below average overall scores on outcomes relating to mental health and wellbeing (i.e., satisfaction with life and wellbeing), as well as above average scores on an outcome assessing emotional and behavioural difficulties.

- H2. Several school-based factors (i.e., experiences of negative peer interactions, negative physical environments) will be associated with poorer student mental health and wellbeing.

- H3. Other school-based factors (i.e., sense of safety and security, positive physical environments, positive peer and teacher relationships, parental involvement in school, and access to mental health supports) will be associated with more positive mental health and wellbeing.

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7.3 Method

7.3.1 Participants

Participants included 173 students of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds ranging in age from 10 – 20 years old (M = 14.64, SD = 2.17; 93 males,80 females). The sample were enrolled in several schools across Malaysia, comprising both primary and secondary classes. It is important to note that within many of these schools, students are assigned to classes based on ability and not age. The participants originated from several countries, although the majority were from Myanmar (n = 154; 89.02%). In addition, 15 participants (8.67%) were born in Malaysia, two (1.16%) in Pakistan, one (0.58%) in Thailand, and one (0.58%) in India. The participants represented a wide range of ethnicities, although Chin refugees accounted for a majority of the sample (n = 88, 50.9%). Other ethnicities reported included: Kachin, Burmese, Karen, Lisu, Mon, Punjabi, Rohingya, and Shan. The participants spoke a wide variety of first and second languages and dialects, including: English, Bahasa Malaysia, Cantonese, Burmese, Mon, Mizo, Hakha Chin, Zomi, Thai, Kachin, Karen, Lai, Lautu, Lisu, Matu, Rawang, Urdu, and Zotung. The participants had been living in Malaysia anywhere between 2 and 17 years (M = 9.01, SD = 3.27) and had engaged in schooling in Malaysia between 1 and 13 years (M = 6.92, SD = 2.65). Of the participants, less than half (n = 79; 45.66%) reported having had prior experience of schooling and education within their countries of origin.

7.3.2 Measures

Demographic Items. At the start of the survey, demographic information was collected. This included questions with regards to age, gender, country of birth, cultural background and ethnicity, length of time schooling in home countries, possible disruptions to education, length of time spent living and schooling in Malaysia, and current grades at school. Finally, the

participants were asked to rank a four-point scale to assess their level of enjoyment at school (i.e., How much do you like school? Would you say you like it *A lot* (4), *A little* (3), *Not Very Much* (2), or *Not at all* (1)).

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – Youth Self Report (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) – The SDQ is a brief emotional and behavioural screening tool that is widely used to assess child adjustment and functioning. The SDQ contains 25-items, with each item rated on a 3-point scale (0 = *Not True,* 1 = *Somewhat True,* 2 = *Certainly True*). Examples of items include: "I worry a lot" and "I am often unhappy, depressed, or tearful". The items can be categorised across five subscales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. As common practice across the literature, a total difficulties score was calculated by adding the scores on the first four subscales, with higher scores representing increased emotional and behavioural difficulties. Scores between 0-15 on the SDQ indicate that clinically significant problems are unlikely, while scores between 16-19 reflect the possibility of clinically significant problems. Lastly, scores between 20-40 indicate substantial risk of clinically significant problems. The SDQ has previously been used with samples of children and youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, with acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability established (Lau et al., 2018). The current sample demonstrated slightly below adequate internal consistency (α = .66).

The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS; Liddle & Carter, 2015). The SCWBS is a brief questionnaire aimed at assessing the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children and adolescents. The SCWBS contains 12 items that student's rate on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never* to 5 = *All the time*). Scores can range from 12 to 60, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of perceived wellbeing. Examples of items include: "I've been feeling relaxed" and "I've

been in a good mood". The SCWBS has previously been used with samples of adolescent refugees, with acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability established (Tozer et al., 2018). The current sample also demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .85).

Satisfaction with Life Scale – Child (SWLS-C; Gadermann et al., 2010). The SWLS-C is a brief questionnaire that was designed to assess children's judgments and perceptions of their overall satisfaction with life. The SWLS-C contains five statements that participants rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Disagree a lot* to 5 = *Agree a lot*). Examples of items include: "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life" and "The things in my life are excellent". The SWLS-C is scored by totalling all five items, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction with life. In a validation study recruiting students from 4th to 7th grade, the SWLS-C was found to be psychometrically sound, with evidence of construct validity (α = .86; Gadermann et al., 2010). The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .81).

Safe & Responsive Schools Safe School Survey – Secondary Student Survey (SRS; Skiba et al., 2004). The SRS Safe School Survey is used to assess student perceptions of their school climate, including their personal sense of safety while at school. For this study, the seven-item personal safety subscale was used to assess participant perceptions of their safety in regard to going to and coming home from school, as well as their perceptions of safety while at school. All items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Examples of items include: "I feel safe before and after school while on school grounds" and "I feel safe in my classrooms". The SRS is scored by totalling all seven items, with higher scores indicating higher perceptions of safety. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .88).

Physical School Environment (Williams et al., 2018). To assess participant perceptions of their physical school environment, items were taken from a study conducted by Williams and colleagues (2018). In the current study, three items were used to assess student perceptions surrounding positive physical school environments (e.g., "My school building is clean and in good condition"), while three items were employed to assess perceptions of negative physical school environments (e.g., "The school is too crowded"). Participants rate each item on a 4-point scale (1 = *Really disagree*, 4 = *Really agree*). The positive physical environment subscale was scored by totalling all three items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of a perceived positive school environment. Similarly, the negative physical environment subscale was scored by totalling all three items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of a perceived negative school environment. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency for both the positive physical environment subscale (α = .71) as well as the negative physical environment subscale (α = .78).

Community and Youth Collaborative Institute School Experience Survey (CAYCI; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2016). The CAYCI School Experience Survey can be used to assess student perceptions of their overall schooling experiences. For the current study, the four-item parent involvement subscale was used to explore student perceptions of parental support towards schooling. All items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Examples of items include: "My parents help me with my schoolwork" and "My parents talk to me about what I do in school". The CAYCI is scored by totalling all four items, with higher scores indicating higher perceived levels of parental support/involvement in schooling. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .70).

Classroom Life Instrument (CLI; Johnson et al., 1983). The CLI assesses student

perceptions of their overall classroom climate. For the current study, four subscales from the CLI

were used, each with 4 items, including: teacher personal support (e.g., "My teacher really cares

about me"), teacher academic support (e.g., "My teacher likes to see my work"), student personal

support (e.g., "In this class, other students like me the way I am"), and student academic support

(e.g., "In this class, other students like to help me learn"). All items are rated on a 5-point scale

(1 = *Very Untrue* to 5 = *Very True*). Each subscale is scored by totalling the four corresponding

items, with higher scores reflecting higher perceived levels of support. The CLI has previously

demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity (Johnson et al., 1983; Klang et al., 2020), with

the current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency across all subscales including

teacher personal support (α = .88), teacher academic support (α = .86), student personal support

(α = .90), and student academic support (α = .87).

California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS; WestEd, 2020). The CHKS was designed to

provide a measure of student perceptions surrounding school climate, safety, wellness, and

resiliency. For this study, the mental health support module from the CHKS was used to obtain

data surrounding student perceptions concerning accessibility to mental health support services

within the school environment. Five items were used (e.g., I have an adult at my school that I can

talk to about my problems), with these items rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4

= *Strongly Agree*). The module is scored by totalling all five items, with higher scores indicating

higher levels of perceived access to mental health support within the school environment. The

current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .72).

Inventory of School Climate (ISC; Brand et al., 2003). The ISC was designed to explore

dimensions of the school climate that have been found to be associated with student adjustment.

For this study, the negative peer interaction subscale of the ISC was used to assess student experiences of negative peer interactions, such as bullying. This subscale contains five items with all items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*). Examples of items include: "Students in this school have trouble getting along with each other" and "Students in this school feel students are too mean to them". The subscale is scored by totalling the five items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived negative peer interactions within the schooling environment. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .78).

7.3.3 Procedure

Initially, the survey was disseminated to a non-profit organisation dedicated towards ensuring the provision of education to refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia. This NGO runs several schools for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, and as such provided an opportunity to obtain feedback of the relevance and suitability of the survey questions from those directly involved in refugee education within the country. Feedback was sought with regards to the need for translation, the length of the survey, the items included, as well as the medium in which the survey was delivered. Following consultation, approval was received to distribute the survey, with the only change requested being to ensure that it was made available in two formats (i.e., online and paper-based) to suit the needs of each student (see Appendix A for all items included in the survey).

Once the survey was ready for distribution (and following ethical approval from the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee), refugee schools across Malaysia were contacted regarding the purpose of this study. Schools that responded and demonstrated an interest in participating were subsequently provided with a participant

information letter that provided in-depth information about the nature of the study. Interested schools assisted in circulating the participant information letter to students and parents, encouraging students to read it and to make themselves known if they were interested in completing the survey. Students who demonstrated an interest were subsequently provided with a parental consent form, as well as an assent form that had to be completed before they could participate. Once students returned both forms, they were provided with the survey to complete.

As indicated, the survey was made available in two formats: paper-based as well as online that could be accessed through Qualtrics. Although one of the criteria for participating was adequate English fluency, several teachers made themselves available to assist the students with the comprehension of items if required. Students were provided with the opportunity to complete the surveys in their own time or to approach teachers who could assist them to better understand the items. Teachers allocated dedicated classroom time to go through the survey items for students who requested additional help and assistance. Once students had completed the surveys, teachers collected (paper-based) forms and returned them to the researcher.

7.3.4 Data Analysis

Once data collection was complete, the data were manually entered into an SPSS file. Data were first examined (to explore participant demographics such as age, gender distribution, as well as country of birth) to assist with characterizing the sample. Initially, data screening was conducted (e.g., range, skewness, kurtosis) and potential outliers were located (no excessive cases identified). Following this, study outcomes such as scores from the SDQ, SWLS-C, and SCWBS were also examined through several descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis) to test the first hypothesis.

The next phase of data analysis included testing the remaining hypotheses. To do so, a series of bivariate correlation analyses as well as hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to examine the relationship between several school-based factors and outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing. The predictor variables were first examined and subsequently grouped into two distinct categories – (1) *social support variables* (i.e., peer support [academic and personal], teacher support [academic and personal], and parent involvement) and (2) *environmental variables* (i.e., perception of physical environment, experiences of negative peer interactions, sense of personal safety, as well as access to mental health supports). The aim of the analyses was to determine relationships between these predictor variables and the outcome variables (i.e., wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and emotional and behavioural difficulties). As such, six regression models were subsequently performed and analysed. Across regression models, it was decided that demographic factors that significantly correlated ($p < .05$) with the outcome variables in the bivariate analyses would be included as control variables.)

7.4 Results

7.4.1 Descriptive and correlation findings

Descriptive statistics for wellbeing (SCWBS), satisfaction with life (SWLS-C), and emotional and behavioural difficulties (as measured by the SDQ) are presented in Table 7.1 along with correlation coefficients (presented at the end of this chapter). Overall, scores from the SCWBS indicate that the sample demonstrated average levels of wellbeing ($M = 42.32$, $SD = 11.50$). In general, the average score on the SCWBS is 44 with 50% of all scores falling between 39 and 48 (Liddle & Carter, 2015). Furthermore, scores from the SWLS-C indicate that the sample demonstrated average levels of satisfaction with life ($M = 15.72$; $SD = 4.56$). The SWLS-

C has a maximum total score of 25 with higher scores indicating higher levels of satisfaction. Lastly, participants tended to receive average scores on the SDQ ($M = 14.92$, $SD = 4.44$) with the majority scoring within the average range (45.7%) and a smaller proportion (23.1%) obtaining slightly raised scores which may reflect clinically significant problems. A small proportion (12.1%) obtained high scores which indicate a substantial risk of clinically significant problems (Goodman, 1997). While not an outcome measure, on an item exploring enjoyment in school, participants tended to endorse high levels of enjoyment ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .75$).

Initially, correlation analyses were conducted between the outcome and demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, length of time living in Malaysia, length of time schooling in Malaysia, as well as disruptions to education; Table 7.1). The outcome variables of wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and emotional and behavioural difficulties were all found to significantly correlate with one another. However, there were minimal correlations between the demographic variables and the outcome variables with the exception of gender. Gender was negatively correlated with wellbeing and satisfaction with life, as well as positively correlated with emotional and behavioural difficulties. On the SDQ, females were found to have slightly higher average total difficulty scores ($M = 16.33$, $SD = 4.61$) compared to males ($M = 13.70$, $SD = 3.92$). Similarly, females had slightly lower average levels of wellbeing ($M = 37.97$, $SD = 11.23$) compared to males ($M = 46.27$, $SD = 10.31$) and slightly lower average levels of satisfaction with life ($M = 14.05$, $SD = 4.76$) compared to males ($M = 17.10$, $SD = 3.91$).

Correlation analyses between the outcome and predictor variables were also conducted and are presented in Table 7.2 (Social Support factors) and Table 7.3 (Environmental factors). All social support factors (i.e., peer support [academic and personal], teacher support [academic and personal], and parent involvement) were significantly correlated with the outcome variables

– positively with wellbeing and satisfaction with life, and negatively with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In terms of environmental factors, perceptions of positive school environments, access to mental health supports within schools, as well as a sense of personal safety were found to both correlate positively with wellbeing and satisfaction with life and correlate negatively with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Experiences of negative peer interactions were only found to correlate negatively with wellbeing, while perceptions of a negative school environment were not correlated with any of the outcome variables.

7.4.2 Regression Analyses

To test the influence of the predictor variables on the outcomes of wellbeing, satisfaction with life, as well as behavioural and emotional difficulties, a series of multiple regression analyses based on ordinary least square regression models were conducted. Preliminary analyses were first performed to ensure no violations to the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, independence of errors, and homoscedasticity. No issues were identified when testing assumptions for multivariate regression. As a result of grouping the predictor variables (i.e., social support or environmental factors), a total of six regression analyses were conducted. Furthermore, it was decided that demographic factors that significantly correlated ($p < .05$) with the outcome variables in the bivariate analyses would be included as control variables across the regression models. In this study, gender was the only demographic variable that was found to significantly correlate with all three outcome variables. As a result, for each regression model, Step 1 included demographic variables (i.e., gender) and Step 2 included the addition of either the social support factors or the environmental factors. The relevant coefficients for all regression models can be found in Table 7.4 (social support factors) and Table 7.5 (environmental factors).

Predicting Wellbeing

Step 1 of the first regression model predicting wellbeing indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 14.4% of the variance in wellbeing, $F(1, 169) = 28.43$, $p < .001$. Adding the four social support predictor variables in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 22.2% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .24$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 13.08$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 36.6% of (adjusted) variance in wellbeing, $R^2 = .39$, $F(6, 164) = 17.33$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^{2\,1} = .39$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor. In addition, parent involvement, peer support (personal) as well as teacher support (academic) were found to be significant and positive predictors of wellbeing.

Step 1 of the second regression model indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 14.4% of the variance in wellbeing, $F(1, 169) = 28.43$, $p < .001$. The addition of the five environmental predictor variables alongside gender in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 24.6% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .27$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 14.92$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 39% of (adjusted) variance in wellbeing, $R^2 = .41$, $F(6, 164) = 19.12$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .69$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor. Furthermore, perceptions of a positive physical environment, access to appropriate mental health supports, as well as a sense of personal safety within school were found to be significant and positive predictors of wellbeing.

Predicting Satisfaction with Life

Step 1 of the first regression model predicting satisfaction with life indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 11% of the variance, $F(1, 169) = 20.95$, $p < .001$. Furthermore,

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[1] Effect sizes were calculated based on the works of Cohen (1988) whereby values of 0.10, 0.25, and 0.40 represent small, medium, and large effect sizes respectively.

the addition of the four social support predictor variables in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 9.5% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .12$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 5.25$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 20.5% of (adjusted) variance in satisfaction with life, $R^2 = .23$, $F(6, 164) = 8.30$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .30$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor. In addition, parent involvement as well as peer support (personal) were found to be significant and positive predictors of increased satisfaction with life.

Step 1 of the second regression model predicting satisfaction with life indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 11.0% of the variance, $F(1, 169) = 20.85$, $p < .001$. Adding the five environmental predictor variables alongside gender in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 16.8% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .19$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 9.08$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 27.8% of (adjusted) variance in satisfaction with life, $R^2 = .30$, $F(6, 164) = 11.89$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .43$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor while the presence of mental health supports within schools was also found to be a significant and positive predictor of increased satisfaction with life.

Predicting Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Step 1 of the first regression model predicting emotional and behavioural difficulties indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 12.9% of the variance, $F(1, 169) = 25.02$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the addition of the four social support predictor variables in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 6.2% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .09$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 3.82$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 19.1% of (adjusted) variance in emotional and behavioural difficulties, $R^2 = .22$, $F(6, 164) = 7.70$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .28$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor and personal peer support was also found to be a significant and negative predictor of increased emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Step 1 of the second regression model indicated that gender alone accounted for a significant 12.9% of the variance in emotional and behavioural difficulties, $F(1, 169) = 25.02$, $p < .001$. Adding the five environmental predictor variables alongside gender in Step 2 improved the model and accounted for an additional 7% of variance ($R^2_{change} = .10$, $F_{change}(5, 164) = 4.18$, $p < .001$). The final model accounted for 19.9% of (adjusted) variance in emotional and behavioural difficulties, $R^2 = .23$, $F(6, 164) = 8.04$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .30$. In this step, gender remained a significant predictor and a sense of personal safety within school was also found to be a significant and negative predictor of increased emotional and behavioural difficulties.

7.5 Discussion

Gaining an understanding of the school-based predictors of mental health and wellbeing is vital in allowing for the tailoring of appropriate support services and accommodations. Therefore, this study explored the school-based predictors of mental health and wellbeing amongst a sample of refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia. Contrary to the first hypothesis (H1), the results indicated that the sample tended to score in the average range on all outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing. While there were no school-based factors found to be negatively related to perceived levels of overall wellbeing and mental health as hypothesised (H2), there were several factors (i.e., parent involvement in school, positive peer and teacher relationships, positive physical environment, access to mental health supports and services, as well as a sense of safety) that were associated with the development of more positive mental health and wellbeing (H3).

Results of the SDQ indicated that 35% of the participants received scores indicating that they were at some risk of clinically significant problems. Promisingly however, and contrary to

expectations, the majority of participants typically demonstrated average levels of wellbeing, satisfaction with life, as well as emotional and behavioural difficulties. This contrasts previous research which suggests that youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are typically more vulnerable to the development of poor mental health and wellbeing (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Lustig et al., 2004). It is also despite the complex situation faced by individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia, where these individuals can experience prolonged periods of stress and uncertainty. While not an aim of the study, it is worth noting that gender differences were found, with females tending to endorse lower levels of wellbeing and satisfaction with life, as well as increased emotional and behavioural difficulties. Existing research is mixed, with findings tending to suggest that adult females are more likely to endorse higher satisfaction with life (Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020), but lower wellbeing and increased internalising difficulties (e.g., anxiety; Becchetti & Gonzo, 2022). Given these findings, research investigating gender differences, particularly amongst children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds is warranted.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a relatively new and emerging body of research documenting the potential for the development of more positive outcomes amongst this population (Kohli & Mather, 2003; Speidel et al., 2021). For example, while it is plausible that the school-based factors directly assisted with the development of positive mental health and wellbeing, these factors may have also assisted in the development of other protective factors such as resilience and post-traumatic growth, which may have subsequently acted as a buffer against the development of poor mental health and wellbeing. Of interest, in a recent study conducted by Cowling et al. (2022; Chapter 6), qualitative interviews were conducted amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in Malaysia. In this study, high levels of

resilience were observed amongst the participants, with this resilience in turn allowed students to develop largely positive attitudes and perceptions towards their schooling experiences. Further research is warranted to better understand the mechanisms that underlie these relationships.

While it was hypothesised (H2) that several school-based factors would be associated with decreases in overall wellbeing and mental health (i.e., negative peer interactions, negative physical environment), this was not found to be the case. This could be driven by unexpected levels of resilience in refugee and asylum seeking students, as evidenced by findings in the previous chapter. More specifically, Chapter 6 presented data from interviews with students from a volunteer-run refugee school in Malaysia, who described their experiences in a way that suggested they had high levels of both resilience and gratefulness (particularly towards participation in schooling). Even though participants were aware that their school environments posed challenges (e.g., overcrowding), their gratefulness and resilience seemed to overpower this and mitigate any potential negative feelings and perceptions.

In contrast to H2, findings only identified school-based predictors that were associated with positive mental health and wellbeing (H3). Specifically, the presence of social supports such as parental involvement in schooling and education predicted wellbeing and satisfaction with life, while the presence of academic support from teachers predicted wellbeing. Of note, the presence of personal support from peers was found to predict all three outcomes. Past research has also established a link between the presence of social supports and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst youth (Hussong, 2000; Newman et al., 2007; Watson et al., 2019). Past findings indicate that social supports (e.g., family, friends, partners, communities, work colleagues) represent a social capital that provides individuals with a sense of belonging and security (Harandi et al., 2017). Amongst individuals with increased risk of poor

mental health, social supports may act as a psychosocial buffer through enhancing resilience to stress as well as decreasing the functional consequences that may arise due to psychopathology (Cheng et al., 2014; Dangmann et al., 2021).

Our findings ratify the previous research that has also found the role of social support in being particularly impactful amongst adolescents, who are often undergoing several stressors as a result of developmental changes (Patel et al., 2007). Amongst samples of adolescents, the perception of social support has been found to be linked to fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties (Holt & Espelage, 2007), improved academic outcomes (Song et al., 2015), reduced risk of psychopathology (Coyle et al., 2017), as well as increased life satisfaction (Danielsen et al., 2009) which appears to be consistent with the findings of this study. In terms of peer support being the most influential (i.e., significantly predicting all three outcomes), this finding was somewhat expected given that past research has noted a tendency for peer support to increase during the adolescent period while perceived support from teachers and parental figures decreases (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2021). This is possibly due to adolescents beginning to seek independence away from parents, while becoming increasingly reliant on peers for emotional and informal support (Scholte & Van Aken, 2006). Interestingly, Correa-Velez and colleagues (2015) conducted a longitudinal study spanning eight years with the aim of identifying the predictors of wellbeing amongst refugee youth resettled in Australia. In this study, previous experience of schooling as well as supportive social environments were found to positively influence wellbeing even after the eighth year, highlighting the long-standing value of these supportive relationships. Therefore, interventions that focus on the development of positive social supports within schooling environments are vital in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

The analysis of the data revealed several environmental factors that were associated with improved mental health and wellbeing. For example, positive school environments such as having clean and comfortable classrooms were found to be associated with the development of wellbeing. Furthermore, school environments that encouraged students to take care of their mental health through the provision of mental health supports, as well as environments that provided students with a sense of personal safety were found to be predictors of more positive mental health and wellbeing. This is unsurprising given that many children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds endure perilous journeys that may involve disrupted feelings of personal safety. Furthermore, given the complex situation faced by refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia (including on-going risks to personal safety), it is unsurprising that having an environment that provided stability and feelings of safety and security assisted with wellbeing and mental health.

Safety has previously been found to be a key social determinant of health, as well as a vital facilitator of integration amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (McDonald-Wilmsen et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2021). In a study by Mohamed and Thomas (2017), schools were identified as being the most stable factor that provided a sense of safety amongst a sample of students from refugee backgrounds resettled in the United Kingdom. This perception of safety was subsequently identified as being a protective factor against the development of poor mental health and wellbeing. The findings of the current study support the role of schools in providing a sense of security and safety, especially within countries of first asylum. More specifically, despite the protracted, complex, and stressful situation endured by refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, the ability to engage with and attend school appeared to mitigate the risk of negative psychological harm amongst these children. This highlights the

need to ensure easy access and engagement to stable schooling and education for children awaiting permanent resettlement.

Put together, the results of this study highlighted the value of schools in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, particularly within countries of first and temporary asylum. Interestingly, in a previous study aimed at exploring teacher perceptions surrounding the schooling experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia, several barriers to education and schooling were reported, and these barriers were largely driven by Malaysia's legal stance towards refugees (Cowling & Anderson, 2021; Chapter 5). The barriers included limited financial and academic resources, concerns surrounding safety, language barriers, as well as inadequate schooling facilities. Importantly, these barriers hindered the ability of schools and teachers to provide a safe and adequate schooling experience in which students could thrive not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. However, findings from this study as well as a recent qualitative study (Cowling et al., 2022; Chapter 5) that explored student perceptions surrounding their schooling and educational experiences in Malaysia provide a more optimistic picture. In the qualitative study, students were found to be resilient and were also found to hold a positive mindset regarding their schooling experiences in Malaysia. The students pointed towards several factors that facilitated this positive outlook, including high levels of teacher and peer support, as well as being grateful for the opportunity to engage in schooling with its potential for a positive influence on their futures. The findings of the qualitative study were reaffirmed by the findings of the current investigation, which indicated that amidst the complex situation faced by refugee and asylum seeking children in Malaysia, schools play a vital role in providing safe and supportive spaces in which the children's mental health and wellbeing can be supported.

7.5.1 Limitations

This study contributes valuable findings concerning the school-based predictors of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia. However, there are some limitations pertaining to the measurements adopted and other study processes that warrant acknowledgement. For example, several of the scales that were used had not previously been used with samples of refugee and asylum seeking youth (i.e., no data existed on the validity of these measures for this population). As such, each of the measures were screened and examined thoroughly to ensure relevancy, with all but one subsequently returning acceptable internal consistency for the sample. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha for the SDQ was .66 (i.e., below .70 as recommended by Cronbach, 1990), and as such, findings directly related to this measurement should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

In terms of the participants, it must be noted that while a relatively large sample was recruited, it was necessary to adopt restrictions to participant eligibility which may have hindered the generalisability of the results. More specifically, although teachers were on hand to provide assistance (with comprehension), participants were required to be competent in English. Therefore, non-English speaking students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are not represented with a need for further research that includes broader inclusion criteria. Furthermore, it is worth noting that (while not a criterion for participation in this study) a large proportion of participants originated from Myanmar. While this is representative of the refugee and asylum seeking population in Malaysia (i.e., 85% of asylum seekers and refugees currently in Malaysia originate from Myanmar, UNHCR, 2022b), these results cannot be generalised to other related populations as refugees do not represent a homogenous group.

7.5.2 Conclusions

This study endeavoured to gain a better understanding of the schooling and educational experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia, with a focus on identifying the school-based factors that assist in the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst this population. This was important given the limited research in this area, partnered with the unique circumstances and schooling experiences of refugee and asylum seeking students within the country. More specifically, as these children often find themselves in prolonged states of limbo in Malaysia while awaiting permanent resettlement, it is important that research be conducted to understand their experiences, the impact that these experiences have on mental health and wellbeing, as well as to identify methods of intervention that may assist with mental health promotion.

Importantly, the findings provided evidence that the ability to engage in schooling and education appeared to assist with the development of positive mental health and wellbeing despite the difficulties faced by both schools and the refugee/ asylum seeking community in Malaysia. Several factors, such as social support and the provision of a sense of safety, were found to be associated with higher wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and reduced emotional and behavioural difficulties. It became apparent that schools play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of these children, particularly within a country of first asylum where refugees and asylum seekers often endure prolonged stress, uncertainty, and insecurity. While this study has provided greater insight into the relationship between schooling and the development of mental health and wellbeing, there is a need for further research to better understand the processes and mechanisms that may underlie these relationships.

Unexpectedly, it was found that the sample on average demonstrated positive levels of wellbeing and satisfaction with life, as well as relatively low levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties. This was surprising given previous research highlighting vulnerabilities to poor mental health amongst this population. It is worth noting that this reflects a focus on psychological distress amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, with scholars typically acknowledging the significant mental health needs of this population. While this research has been invaluable, less attention has been paid to positive outcomes as well as psychological constructs (e.g., resilience, adaptability, post-traumatic growth) that may aid in recovery and the fostering of long-term mental health and wellbeing. As such, it is hoped that this study encourages further research through a lens of resilience and recovery, which may help to uncover the factors associated with the positive adaptation of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Table 7.1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses for Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, Strengths and Difficulties, and Demographic Factors (N = 173).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	*M*	*SD*
Outcome variables										
1. Wellbeing	-								42.32	11.50
2. Satisfaction with Life	**.62****	-							15.72	4.56
3. Strengths and Difficulties	**-.50****	**-.39****	-						14.92	4.44
Demographic factors										
4. Age	-.08	-.10	-.02	-					14.64	2.17
5. Gender	**-.38****	**-.33****	**.36****	-.03	-				-	-
6. Living in Malaysia (years)	-.14	-.08	.06	**-.25****	**.20****	-			9.01	3.22
7. Schooling in Malaysia (years)	-.10	-.09	-.01	-.09	**.20***	**.75****	-		6.92	2.65
8. Disruption to education	.02	.10	-.06	**.26****	-.01	**-.16***	-.07	-	-	-

Notes: *p <. 05, **p < .001. Significant correlation coefficients are presented in boldface. Effect sizes are suggested by Cohen (1988). Relationships with dichotomous variables (i.e., gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; disruption to education: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) were analysed using Spearman correlations. Relationships with continuous variables were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlations.

Table 7.2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses for Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, Strengths and Difficulties and Social Support Factors (N = 173).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M*	*SD*
1. Wellbeing	-								42.32	11.50
2. Satisfaction with Life	**.62****	-							15.72	4.56
3. Strengths and Difficulties	**-.50****	**-.39****	-						14.92	4.44
4. Peer Support (personal)	**.52****	**.39****	**-.39****	-					16.97	4.90
5. Peer Support (academic)	**.48****	**.32****	**-.35****	**.74****	-				13.67	4.09
6. Teacher Support (personal)	**.46****	**.27****	**-.31****	**.62****	**.62****	-			14.36	3.97
7. Teacher Support (academic)	**.40****	**.20****	**-.20****	**.38****	**.43****	**.59****	-		17.11	2.89
8. Parent Involvement	**.37****	**.33****	**-.24****	**.31****	**.35****	**.29****	**.26****	-	13.83	3.29

Notes: *p <. 05, **p < .001 (significant correlation coefficients are presented in boldface).

Table 7.3

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses for Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, Strengths and Difficulties and Environmental Factors (N = 173).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	*M*	*SD*
1. Wellbeing	-								42.32	11.50
2. Satisfaction with Life	**.62****	-							15.72	4.56
3. Strengths and Difficulties	**-.50****	**-.39****	-						14.92	4.44
4. School Environment (positive)	**.49****	**.36****	**-.31****	-					8.41	2.1
5. School Environment (negative)	-.01	-.09	.00	-.12	-				6.69	2.14
6. Personal Safety	**.50****	**.23****	**-.35****	**.44****	-.08	-			26.84	4.99
7. Negative Peer Interaction	**-.18***	.02	.10	**-.15***	**.21****	**-.29****	-		11.17	3.50
8. Mental Health Support	**.40****	**.47****	**-.26****	**.47****	.06	**.43****	-.01	-	13.76	2.61

Note: *p <. 05, **p < .001 (significant correlation coefficients are presented in boldface).

Table 7.4

Unstandardised (B) and Standardised (β) Regression Coefficients and Semi-Partial Correlations for Social Support Predictors in Regression Models Predicting Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, and Strengths and Difficulties (n = 173).

	Wellbeing					Satisfaction with Life					Strengths and Difficulties				
	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2
Step 1															
Gender	**-0.49**	**0.09**	**-0.38**	**.001**	**-.14**	**-0.60**	**0.13**	**-0.33**	**.001**	**-.11**	**0.19**	**0.04**	**0.36**	**.001**	**.13**
Step 2															
Gender	**-0.24**	**0.09**	**-0.19**	**.006**	**-.03**	**-0.35**	**0.14**	**-0.19**	**.011**	**-.03**	**0.12**	**0.04**	**0.23**	**.002**	**.04**
Peer Support (personal)	**0.18**	**0.06**	**0.26**	**.007**	**.03**	**0.27**	**0.10**	**0.29**	**.009**	**.03**	**-0.06**	**0.03**	**-0.22**	**.046**	**-.02**
Peer Support (academic)	0.03	0.06	0.05	.649	.00	-0.04	0.10	-0.04	.691	-.00	-0.01	0.03	-0.04	.706	-.00
Teacher Support (personal)	0.04	0.06	0.06	.491	.00	-0.02	0.09	-0.02	.860	-.00	-0.01	0.03	-0.05	.652	-.00
Teacher Support (academic)	**0.16**	**0.07**	**0.18**	**.021**	**.02**	0.05	0.11	0.04	.630	.00	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	.087	-.00
Parent Involvement	**0.13**	**0.05**	**0.16**	**.017**	**.02**	**0.22**	**0.08**	**0.20**	**.008**	**.04**	-0.03	0.02	-0.08	.305	-.00

Notes: Significant coefficients ($p < .05$) are presented in boldface. Gender variable was dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female).

Table 7.5

Unstandardised (B) and Standardised (β) Regression Coefficients and Semi-Partial Correlations for Environmental Predictors in Regression Models Predicting Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, and Strengths and Difficulties (n = 173).

	Wellbeing					Satisfaction with Life					Strengths and Difficulties				
	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2	B	SE_B	$β$	p	sr^2
Step 1															
Gender	**-0.49**	**0.09**	**-0.38**	**.001**	**-.14**	**-0.60**	**0.13**	**-0.33**	**.001**	**-.11**	**0.19**	**0.04**	**0.36**	**.001**	**.13**
Step 2															
Gender	**-0.31**	**0.08**	**-0.25**	**.001**	**-.05**	**-0.41**	**0.13**	**-0.23**	**.001**	**-.04**	**0.15**	**0.04**	**0.28**	**.001**	**.07**
School Environment (positive)	**0.24**	**0.07**	**0.27**	**.001**	**.05**	0.18	0.10	0.14	.077	.01	-0.05	0.03	-0.14	.101	-.01
School Environment (negative)	0.05	0.06	0.06	.358	.00	-0.14	0.09	-0.11	.110	-.01	-0.01	0.03	-0.03	.644	-.00
Personal Safety	**0.22**	**0.07**	**0.24**	**.001**	**.04**	-0.06	0.10	-0.05	.557	-.00	**-0.07**	**0.03**	**-0.18**	**.031**	**-.02**
Negative Peer Interactions	-0.10	0.06	-0.11	.109	-.01	0.04	0.09	0.03	.677	.00	0.02	0.03	0.06	.415	.00
Mental Health Support	**0.13**	**0.05**	**0.16**	**.017**	**.02**	**0.57**	**0.12**	**0.38**	**.001**	**.10**	-0.02	0.04	-0.06	.502	-.00

Notes: Significant coefficients ($p < .05$) are presented in boldface. Gender variable was dummy coded (0 = male, 1 = female).

Chapter 8 - An Exploration of the School-Based Factors Associated with Positive Wellbeing Amongst Students of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Backgrounds: The Mediating Role of Post-Traumatic Growth

Dissemination strategy: This study is currently being reviewed for publication in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*

Statement of contribution:

Misha Cowling: Study conception and design, data collection and analysis, interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

Joel Anderson: Study conception and design, data analysis supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

Tom Whelan: Study conception and design, data analysis supervision, reviewing and editing of manuscript.

8.1 Abstract

The negative impacts on wellbeing following experiences of displacement have been well-documented amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. In contrast, research into the possibility for post-traumatic growth (PTG) following such events has garnered less attention. Of particular significance, existing research suggests that PTG may buffer against the development of adverse wellbeing and mental health conditions. To add to this body of research, this study explored the presence, contributors, and role of PTG amongst a sample of youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. More specifically, this study sought to explore the role of schools in supporting the development of positive wellbeing, while also examining the mediating role PTG may have in this relationship. To do this, 173 participants from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds ($M = 14.64$, $SD = 2.17$; 93 males, 80 females) were recruited to complete a series of measures relating to aspects of the schooling environment, PTG, and wellbeing. Results from a mediation analysis indicated that PTG partially (and in the case of negative peer interactions – fully) mediated the relationship between several school-related factors and the development of positive wellbeing. The results provided evidence regarding the relationship between engagement in schooling and education and the development of more positive wellbeing amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, and the role of PTG in supporting this. Overall, the findings suggest that schools are a protective factor in the lives of these children and represent ideal locations in which interventions targeting the development of PTG and positive wellbeing can be delivered.

Keywords: refugee, asylum seeker, children, education, wellbeing, posttraumatic growth.

8.2 Introduction

Recent figures released by the UN Refugee Agency (2022) suggest that while children account for 30% of the world's population, they account for 41% of all forcibly displaced people. Of significance, many of these children will spend their entire childhoods in displacement, subjected to increased risks of abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect (The UN Refugee Agency, 2012). During displacement, children can be subjected to a range of negative experiences. These experiences may include being victim or witness to upsetting and disturbing atrocities, such as death, abuse, violence, and torture (Steel et al., 2009; Turrini et al., 2017). Refugee and asylum seeking children may also experience a deprivation of their basic human needs (e.g., food, shelter, medical care), are vulnerable to being separated from their family members and caregivers and can also experience extended disruptions to their schooling and education. There is evidence that the stressors endured by children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can severely threaten critical developmental processes and result in long-term and adverse outcomes such as regression in socioemotional and cognitive development (Eruyar et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2012).

An extensive body of research has obtained findings to suggest that children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds constitute a particularly vulnerable group that are at risk for the development of mental health difficulties, as they often experience an accumulation of stressors over a prolonged period that also often coincides with critical periods of development (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Nielsen et al., 2019). As a result of these prolonged stressors, research findings have consistently indicated an increased risk of psychopathology, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Fazel et al., 2005; Fazel et al., 2012; Frounfelker et al., 2020; Turrini al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2018). Taken

together, there is clear evidence that children and youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are highly vulnerable to compromised psychological wellbeing (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Frounfelker et al., 2020; Lustig et al., 2004). These experiences can have profound and negative impacts throughout the lifespan, indicating a need for practical and sustainable methods of intervention. Given this knowledge, this paper presents a quantitative exploration of the role of school environments and climates in being able to promote the development of post-traumatic growth and wellbeing in a sample of forcibly displaced students in Malaysia.

8.2.1 Post-Traumatic Growth Amongst Trauma Survivors

Given the risk of increased vulnerability to compromised mental health and wellbeing, it is unsurprising that most of the research into the experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds has focused on the negative sequelae associated with the resettlement process. More specifically, much research within the field has explored the relationship between adversity and the development of psychological distress and mental health challenges amongst this population (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Jordans et al., 2016; Mattelin, 2022). It is important to recognise that while there is substantial evidence of the negative psychological impacts experienced by individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, it is equally important to recognise that a significant proportion of refugees do not develop severe mental health conditions (Dehnel et al., 2022; Hynie, 2018). In fact, many individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds demonstrate profound resilience, strength, growth, and adaptation in the face of significant adversity (American Psychological Association, 2010; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Speidel et al., 2021). Despite this knowledge, there is currently limited research into the development of positive change and growth following traumatic experiences amongst this population (Kim et al., 2020). As such, there has been recent

calls for further studies employing strength-based approaches to assist in better understanding the mechanisms that may better support the development of positive outcomes amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Chan et al., 2016; Dehnel et al., 2022; Sleijpen et al., 2013).

In response to the lack of research into positive psychological adjustment following resettlement, there has been a growing (albeit very limited) number of studies exploring this in more recent years. The phenomenon of post-traumatic growth (PTG), for example, represents an area of interest although there has been limited investigations in relation to youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Sleijpen et al., 2017). PTG has been defined as a "positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life events" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, p.1). PTG does not arise solely from the experience of a traumatic event but more so as a result of the meaning-making process that occurs in the aftermath of trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, following a traumatic event, processes such as reflection, re-evaluation, and re-assessment of one's goals and values can assist individuals in reframing their trauma experience in a way that allows them to perceive more benefits as they seek to actively adapt following challenging circumstances (Jin et al., 2014). PTG has been argued to manifest in several ways, including demonstrating a greater appreciation for life, improved interpersonal relationships, a greater sense of personal strength, altered life priorities, as well as a richer existential and spiritual life (Sumalla et al., 2009; Tamiolaki & Kalaitzaki, 2020; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi et al., 2018; Van der Hallen & Godor, 2022).

Over the past years, studies have begun to document the presence of PTG amongst individuals exposed to a range of traumas, including life-threatening illnesses and injuries (Belizzi & Blank, 2006; Chun & Lee, 2008; Leong Abdullah et al., 2015), natural disasters (Taku

et al., 2015), death and bereavement (Michael & Cooper, 2013), as well as motor vehicle accidents (Nishi et al., 2010). Furthermore, a small number of studies have documented the presence of PTG amongst both adults (Hussain & Brushan, 2011; Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Powell et al., 2003) and youth (Sleijpen et al., 2016) from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Studies exploring PTG amongst samples of trauma survivors indicate that PTG appears to have the ability to buffer against the development of negative adverse effects typically caused by exposure to trauma (Silva et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2017). For example, PTG appears to be strongly associated with several psychological outcomes (Lancee et al., 2008), such as being negatively associated with the presence of anxiety and depression (Bernard et al., 2022; Casellas-Grau et al., 2017; Park & Im, 2021; Rzeszutek & Gruszczyńska, 2018; Willie et al., 2016). Furthermore, PTG has been found to correlate with the development of more effective coping strategies (Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2015), reduced emotional distress (Urcuyo et al., 2005), as well as a higher perceived quality of life (Martz et al., 2018).

Given the potential role of PTGS in buffering against the development of adverse mental health and wellbeing, it is unsurprising that research has begun to explore factors that may facilitate the development of PTG amongst individuals affected by trauma. For example, several demographic variables have been found to predict the development of greater PTG. Across studies, findings typically indicate that younger victims of trauma are likely to experience greater levels of PTG compared to older survivors (Collazo-Castiñeira et al., 2022; Helgeson et al., 2006; Wen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019), as are women survivors of trauma compared to male survivors (Kalaitzaki, 2021; Vishnevsky et al., 2010). Furthermore, higher levels of education have been found to predict greater PTG (Salo et al., 2005; Weiss, 2004). By having a better understanding of what predicts PTG, it is hoped that interventions can be tailored to support

more positive change and adjustment following trauma. While research is still in its early stages, these preliminary predictors of PTSD are promising for continued research into this space.

8.2.2 Schools as an Ideal Environment for the Promotion of Post-Traumatic Growth

Understanding the facilitators that may assist in the development of PTG is particularly vital when it comes to children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds given the extensive research that has documented the increased risk of mental health concerns in this population. While an emerging body of research has begun to explore the phenomenon of PTG and its predictors, there are few studies that have recruited samples of children and youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Therefore, this study explores PTG in a sample of refugee and asylum seeking children, focussing on the potential for school climates and environments to support the development of PTG. Furthermore, as previous findings have suggested that PTG buffers against negative psychological outcomes, this study will investigate whether PTG may play a mediating role in the relationship between engagement in schooling and education, and the development of more positive wellbeing. Schools play an essential role in the lives of many students, with countless studies highlighting the substantial influence schools can have on various aspects of child development (Arvisais et al., 2022). Given that many children spend a significant proportion of their time at school, they represent ideal locations for the promotion of resilience, growth, and positive mental health (Block et al., 2014; Matthews, 2008).

It is also important to note that schools represent a vital protective factor against the development of poor mental health and wellbeing for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). A number of school-based factors have previously been argued to help address the particular social and emotional needs faced by children from

refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Fazel et al., 2012). For example, not only do schools provide these children with a space to learn, but they are also able to provide a sense of routine and stability, which is vital given that many of these children have already endured prolonged periods of uncertainty. In addition, schools provide children with opportunities to foster supportive social relationships, which in turn contributes to a greater sense of connectedness and belonging (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Schools also provide these children with a sense of physical and emotional safety and security, which is again essential given that many children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds have endured genuine threats to their safety and wellbeing (Sobitan, 2022).

To our knowledge, very few studies have explored the role of the school environment in fostering the development of PTG. While extremely limited, there does currently exist some promising finds. For example, three studies exploring the ability for schools to contribute to the development of PTG have previously been conducted across samples of children (1) residing in armed conflict zones (Yablon, 2015), (2) who have experienced the sudden death of a parental figure (Asgari & Naghavi, 2020), as well as (3) those who have been exposed to terror-related homicide (Yablon & Itzhaky, 2021). Across these three studies, there were several specific school-related factors that were found to be associated with the development of higher perceived PTG. For example, across all studies, a sense of school connectedness as well as supportive relationships with peers and teachers emerged as being particularly impactful. In the study by Asgari and Naghavi (2020), qualitative findings indicated that the possession of academic motivation and self-esteem also assisted in the development of PTG.

8.2.3 The Current Study

A recent study by Cowling et al. (2022, Chapter 7) explored the role of the school environment in predicting positive wellbeing and mental health amongst a sample of refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia. Results of this study identified several school-based factors that were associated with the development of positive wellbeing and mental health. For example, the presence of social supports, the provision of a sense of safety, positive physical environments, as well as access to mental health supports were found to be linked to higher levels of reported wellbeing and satisfaction with life, as well as lower levels of reported emotional and behavioural difficulties. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Fazel, 2015; Khawaja et al., 2017; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Sleijpen et al., 2017; Weine et al., 2014; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008; Ziaian et al., 2017) that report a direct association between engagement in schooling and the development of more positive overall wellbeing and mental health.

While research has consistently demonstrated an association between the school environment, and the development of more positive mental health and wellbeing, this study sought to further explore this relationship, in hopes of better understanding the mechanisms that may underlie this relationship. To do so, the current study presents a secondary analysis of the data collected by Cowling et al. (2022). In this study, the possible mediating role of PTG in relation to engagement in schooling and education and the development of positive wellbeing will be explored.

At present, there is no known research exploring the mediating role of PTG in the relationship between engagement in schooling and education, and the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Therefore, this study aims to explore these relationships in a sample of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds currently residing in Malaysia. Based on prior findings, it is hypothesised that the sample will, on average, report a degree of PTG. Furthermore, it is hypothesised that several school-based factors will be predictive of the development of PTG. Lastly, it is hypothesised that PTG will enhance the relationship between several school-based factors (e.g., social supports) and the development of mental health and wellbeing amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

8.3 Method

8.3.1 Participants

To be eligible for participation, participants were required to be a) from a refugee or asylum seeking background, b) currently residing in Malaysia, c) be competent in written English, and d) enrolled within a primary or secondary school setting in the country. After collection of consent and assent forms, the final sample consisted of 173 students. The students ranged in age from 10 – 20 years old (M = 14.64, SD = 2.17), with just over half being male (n = 93; 53.77%). The participants had been living in Malaysia anywhere between two and 17 years (M = 9.01, SD = 3.27) and had engaged in schooling in Malaysia between one and 13 years (M = 6.92, SD = 2.65). The students were enrolled within both primary and secondary schools, although it is important to note that many refugee schools in Malaysia tend to assign children to classes based on ability level rather than age given significant discrepancies in past educational experiences.

A majority of the participants (n = 154; 89.02%) were found to have been born in Myanmar. In addition, 15 (8.67%) participants were born in Malaysia (to refugee parents), two (1.16%) were born in Pakistan, one (.58%) was born in Thailand, and one (.58%) was born in

India. A wide range of ethnicities were represented in the sample, although Chin refugees accounted for the majority (*n* = 88; 50.9%). Other cultural backgrounds and/ or ethnicities included: Kachin, Burmese, Karen, Lisu, Mon, Punjabi, Rohingya, and Shan. The participants spoke a wide variety of first and second languages and dialects, including: English, Bahasa Malaysia, Cantonese, Burmese, Mon, Mizo, Hakha Chin, Zomi, Thai, Kachin, Karen, Lai, Lautu, Lisu, Matu, Rawang, Urdu, and Zotung.

8.3.2 Measures

Demographics. Open-ended questions were provided at the start of the survey to collect participant demographic information (i.e., age, gender, country of birth, as well as cultural background and ethnicity). Additional questions were provided that prompted participants to identify their experiences with education in their home countries (i.e., length of schooling in home country, disruptions). Information regarding participants' experiences of living and schooling in Malaysia was also collected (i.e., length of time living/schooling in the country, current grade at school). To conclude the demographic section, participants were provided an item that assessed enjoyment at school (i.e., How much do you like school? Would you say you like it 1= *a lot*, 2= *a little*, 3= *not very much*, or 4= *not at all*?)**.**

The Revised Posttraumatic Growth Inventory for Children (PTGI-C-R; Kilmer et al., 2009). The PTGI-C-R was used to assess participant perceptions of psychological growth. The PTGI-C-R was originally developed for adults (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) but has since been adapted for use with younger populations. The PTGI-C-R consists of 10 items, which participants are prompted to rate on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *no change* to 3 = *a lot of change*). Higher scores indicate higher perceived posttraumatic growth (ranges from 0 – 30), with scores of 20 or higher on the PTGI-C-R indicating some perceived change (Kilmer et al., 2009). While

there are no subscales, the items reflect five domains – new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. Examples of items include: "I know what is important to me better than I used to" and "I can now handle big problems better than I used to". The PTGI-C-R has been used with samples of adolescent refugees, with acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability found (Sleijpen et al., 2016). Similarly, the current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$).

The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS; Liddle & Carter, 2015). The SCWBS is a brief questionnaire that measures subjective and psychological wellbeing. The SCWBS contains 12 positively worded items that children are required to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *all the time*). It is scored by totalling the 12 items, with total scores ranging from 12 to 60 (higher scores reflect higher levels of perceived wellbeing). In general, the mean average score on the SCWBS is 44 with 50% of all scores falling between 30 and 48. Example of items are: "I've been getting on well with people", "I think good things will happen in my life". The SCWBS has previously been used with samples of adolescent refugees and has been found to have acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Tozer et al., 2018). Similarly, the current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$).

Safe & Responsive Schools Safe School Survey – Secondary Student Survey (SRS; Skiba et al., 2004). The SRS Safe School Survey assesses student perceptions of school safety and climate. For this study, the 7-item personal safety subscale was employed to assess participant perceptions of their safety regarding going to and coming from school, as well as their perceptions of safety while at school. All items are rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with scores ranging from 7 to 35. The SRS is scored by totalling all seven items, with higher scores indicating higher perceived levels of safety. Examples of

items include: "I feel safe going to and coming from school", "Overall, I feel this school is a safe school". The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α = .88).

Physical School Environment (Williams et al., 2018). To assess participant perceptions of their physical schooling environment, a series of items were taken from a study conducted by Williams and colleagues (2018). Three items were created (based on existing climate surveys) to assess student perceptions surrounding both positive (e.g., "I like how my school looks and would be proud to show it off") and negative physical school environments (e.g., "The amount of noise if the school makes it difficult to learn"). Participants are prompted to rate each item on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *really disagree* to 4 = *really agree*), with scores ranging from 3 to 12. The positive physical environment subscale is scored by totalling all three items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of a perceived positive school environment. Similarly, the negative physical environment subscale is scored by totalling all three items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of a perceived negative school environment. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency for both the positive (α = .71) as well as the negative physical environment subscale (α = .78).

Community and Youth Collaborative Institute School Experience Survey (CAYCI; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2016). The CAYCI School Experience Survey assesses student perceptions of their overall schooling experiences. The student version of this survey consists of items relating to student perceptions surrounding available supports for academic learning, youth development as well as overall wellbeing. For this study, the 4-item parent involvement subscale was used to explore student perceptions of parental support towards schooling. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with scores ranging from 4 to 20. Examples of items include: "My parents ask me about my schoolwork", "My

parents push me to work hard at school". The CAYCI is scored by totalling all four items, with higher scores indicating higher perceived levels of parental support/involvement in schooling. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency for the CAYCI parent involvement subscale ($\alpha = .70$).

Classroom Life Instrument (CLI; Johnson et al., 1983). The CLI assesses student perceptions of their learning environments. For this study, four subscales from the CLI were employed, including: teacher personal support (4-item, e.g., "My teacher cares about my feelings"; $\alpha = .88$), teacher academic support (4-item, e.g., "My teacher cares about how much I learn"; $\alpha = .86$), student personal support (4-item, e.g., "In this class, other students like me as much as they like others"; $\alpha = .90$), and student academic support (four-item, e.g., "In this class, other students want me to do my best schoolwork"; $\alpha = .87$). All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very untrue* to 5 = *very true*), with scores ranging from 4 to 20. Each subscale is scored by totalling the four corresponding items, with higher scores reflecting higher perceived levels of support. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency across all subscales.

California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS; WestEd,2020). The CHKS was designed to provide a measure of student perceptions surrounding a number of school-related aspects, including: student connectedness, school climate and culture, school safety, student supports, as well as physical and mental wellbeing. For this study, the mental health support module from the CHKS was used to obtain data surrounding student perceptions surrounding accessibility to mental health support services within the school environment. Five items from this module were used (e.g., "My school encourages students to take care of their mental health"). These items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*), with scores ranging

from 5 to 20. The module is scored by totalling all five items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived access to mental health support within the school environment. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency for the CHKS mental health supports module (α = .72).

Inventory of School Climate (ISC; Brand et al., 2003). The ISC assesses student perceptions surrounding the social climate of their schooling environments. For this study, the negative peer interaction subscale of the ISC was employed to assess student experiences of negative peer interactions (e.g., bullying). This subscale contains five items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), with scores ranging from 5 to 25. Examples of items include: "There are students in this school who pick on other students" and "Students in this school feel students are too mean to them". The subscale is scored by totalling all five items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived negative peer interactions within the schooling environment. The current sample demonstrated adequate internal consistency for the ISC negative peer interaction subscale (α = .78).

8.3.3 Study Procedure

Initially, this study was approved by the Australian Catholic University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC: 2021-124H). Subsequently, the survey was distributed to a non-profit organisation dedicated towards ensuring the provision of education to refugee and asylum seeking students in Malaysia. This NGO runs several schools for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in the country. Additional schools were contacted through word of mouth and snowballing. During initial contact, school leaders and representatives were provided with information regarding the purpose and nature of the study. Interested schools nominated a representative who then assisted with circulating participant information letters to

students and their parents. Students were encouraged to make themselves known if they were interested in participating. Interested students were subsequently provided with an assent form as well as a consent form for their parents. Once forms were completed, students gave them to their teachers. Only once both assent and consent forms had been collected, were students provided with the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made available in two formats to accommodate personal needs – a paper or an online based survey that could be accessed through Qualtrics. Teachers made themselves available to students in case assistance with comprehension was required. The students were able to complete the questionnaire in their own time or during dedicated time at school.

8.3.5 Data Analysis

Data were first manually entered into and analysed using IBM SPSS (Version 28.0). The data was then screened to identify missing data. Following this, an in-depth exploration of the data was conducted to examine participant demographic variables, such as age, gender distribution, country of birth, as well as length of time living/schooling in Malaysia. Descriptive statistics were explored (e.g., range, skewness, kurtosis), and potential outliers were identified (no excessive cases identified).

In the original study by Cowling et al. (2022; Chapter 7), a series of hierarchical multiple regressions were first conducted to explore the relationship between the predictor variables and the outcome variables. Prior to this analysis, the predictor variables were grouped into two distinct categories – (1) social support variables and (2) environmental variables – this grouping was also applied in this current study.

The hypothesis testing phase of data analysis for this study included performing a series of bivariate correlation and mediation analyses. Bivariate correlation analyses between all

variables were conducted through SPSS, while the mediation analyses were conducted through

Jamovi (Version 2.2.5.0; The Jamovi Project, 2021), which calculated the direct and indirect

effects of the predictor variables on the outcome variables, while also examining the relationship

between the predictor variables and the mediator, and the subsequent relationship between the

mediator and the outcome variables. As no violations to normality were found, the mediation

analyses were conducted using default settings as well as the standard Delta method to calculate

standard errors and confidence intervals.

8.4 Results

8.4.1 Descriptive and Correlation Findings

Descriptive statistics as well as correlation coefficients for the mediator variable (i.e.,

posttraumatic growth), the outcome variable (i.e., wellbeing), predictor variables (i.e., peer

support, teacher support, parent involvement, school environment, personal safety, negative peer

interactions, and mental health support), as well as demographic variables are presented in Table

8.1. Scores from the PTGI-C-R indicated that the sample on average demonstrated some

perceived change, therefore confirming the first hypothesis. Furthermore, the sample was found

to demonstrate average levels of wellbeing.

In terms of correlational findings, PTG was positively correlated with wellbeing. Neither

PTG nor wellbeing were related to the demographic variables (i.e., age, length of time living/

schooling in Malaysia, experiences of disruption to education, $p > .05$). The exception to this was

that gender was related to wellbeing (being male was associated with higher levels of wellbeing).

These variables were each related to all the predictor variables. Specifically, PTG and wellbeing

were significantly and positively correlated with all social support factors. In terms of

environmental factors, possessing a positive perception of the physical school environment,

having access to appropriate mental health supports within schools, as well as possessing a sense of personal safety were found to correlate positively with wellbeing and PTG. Furthermore, experiences of negative peer interactions within the schooling environment were found to negatively correlate with PTG, as well as with overall wellbeing. While possessing a positive perception of the physical school environment correlated with the outcome and mediator variables, negative school environments were not found to correlate with wellbeing or PTG.

8.4.2 Mediation Analyses

A series of mediation analyses were conducted to examine the mediating effect of PTG on the relationship(s) between ten school-based factors and wellbeing. Mediation path estimates for all variables included can be found in Table 8.2.

Predicting Wellbeing

Full Mediation. The total and indirect effect was found to be significant ($p < .05$), while the direct effect was found to be statistically non-significant for the model predicting negative peer interactions. These results suggest that PTG fully mediated the relationship between experiences of negative peer interactions at school and reduced wellbeing.

Partial Mediation. The total, direct, and indirect effects were statistically significant ($p < .05$) for models predicting parent involvement, teacher support (personal and academic), peer support (personal and academic), mental health support, positive physical environments, and safety. This suggests that these models were all partially mediated.

No Mediation. Neither the total, direct nor indirect effects were significant for the model predicting negative physical environments. These results suggest that PTG did not mediate the relationship between perceptions of a negative physical environment and wellbeing.

8.5 Discussion

This study sought to explore the contribution of factors related to school climates and environments associated with the development of more positive wellbeing amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. More specifically, this study explored the role of schools in promoting the development of growth following trauma, and the role that this growth can play in buffering against the development of adverse wellbeing amongst a population that has been historically understood to be vulnerable to poor mental health and overall wellbeing. As hypothesised, the results indicated that children and youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds reported a sense of PTG following displacement related experiences. Furthermore, several school-based factors were found to facilitate the development of this growth, with this having subsequent benefits on overall wellbeing. As many children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds will enter educational systems within countries of temporary or permanent resettlement, this study seeks to provide future educators and clinicians with guidance in tailoring and developing school-based environments and interventions that foster the development of growth amongst this population.

This study contributed to a small but growing body of research that confirms the ability for individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds to develop and perceive PTG in response to the stressors and challenges associated with displacement (Gökalp & Haktanir, 2021; Hussain & Bhushan, 2011; Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Powell et al., 2003; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2006; Wen et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study was the first to document the presence of PTG in a sample of youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds currently residing in Malaysia – a country of first and temporary asylum for many individuals from refugee backgrounds. This is a promising finding, given the complexity of the refugee situation in

Malaysia. Briefly, Malaysia is not currently a signatory to the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its 1967 Protocol (Stange, et al., 2019), which has resulted in a precarious situation whereby refugees and asylum seekers are not differentiated from illegal immigrants (McConnachie, 2019). Given their status in Malaysian society, individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds often face significant discrimination as well as hardships such as accessing their basic needs including healthcare, employment, and education (i.e., refugees and asylum seekers are barred access to the local labour and education systems, therefore they are reliant on informal methods of employment as well as volunteer run community schools; Nungsari et al., 2020; Smith, 2012). Therefore, the presence of PTG amongst a sample of refugee and asylum seekers in Malaysia supports the theoretical assertion that trauma-survivors can develop positive growth and adaptation in the midst of adversity and stress. This finding reinforces the need for further research into the potential drivers and facilitators of this growth, such that specific interventions can be tailored in ways that best supports the development of PTG amongst this population.

To add to this body of research, one such possible facilitator was hypothesised as being the ability to engage within schooling and educational environments. Indeed, the findings of this study provide evidence that school environments can promote the development of PTG amongst a sample of refugee and asylum seeking students. Furthermore, findings supported the role of this growth in partially buffering against the development of adverse wellbeing. The main finding from this study is that school settings can be an important protective factor for children and youth experiencing ongoing displacement-related stressors. More specifically, factors such as the development of supportive teacher and peer relationships, the ability to develop a sense of personal safety, being in a positive physical environment, having access to mental health

supports, as well as parental involvement in schooling were all found to be associated with the

development of PTG and the subsequent development of positive wellbeing.

A number of these factors have previously been found to facilitate PTG. For example, the

presence of perceived social supports (e.g., from family, friends) has been found to be one of the

most robust predictors of PTG across various populations affected by trauma (Jia et al., 2015;

Matos et al., 2021; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Shand et al., 2014), including refugees (Kroo &

Nagy, 2011). It is important to note that this study also found that experiences of negative peer

interactions within schools were highly impactful, with a full mediation effect found. More

specifically, experiences of negative peer interactions (e.g., bullying) were found to significantly

predict lower levels of PTG and subsequent wellbeing. This is unsurprising given an established

body of research already documenting the particularly impactful consequences that can be

caused as a result of exposure to bullying, such as being a risk factor for the development of

compromised mental health (Ford et al., 2017; Brunstein Klomek et al., 2017; Ttofi et al., 2011).

Promisingly however, research does suggest that the possession of strong and supportive social

friendships can buffer against the negative emotional consequences that tend to result from

bullying (Bayer et al., 2019), with schools appearing to be an ideal location in which these

supportive social relationships can be fostered.

It has been theorised that social supports are essential in the promotion of PTG as they

assist in directly mitigating stressors as well as creating a sense of belonging and safety

following a traumatic event (Nenova et al., 2013). Furthermore, it has been suggested that these

social supports may facilitate the use of more effective coping strategies, such as actively

reaching out and talking about the traumatic experience to trusted supports (Calhoun & Tedeschi,

2006; Tedeschi & Calhou, 2004). By reaching out, individuals are able to subsequently gather

varying perspectives as well as receive supportive responses such as empathetic listening, validation, and acceptance of feelings (Lepore, 2001). These responses are believed to stimulate cognitive processes that empower, assist in the processing of trauma, as well as facilitate the process of finding meaning in the face of adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004; Žukauskienė et al., 2021).

Findings from this study also highlighted the importance of schools in providing a space in which children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can develop a sense of personal safety, as well as access appropriate mental health supports. It has been suggested that a safe environment is needed before PTG can have any significant influence on reducing distress (Sleijpen et al., 2016), with results from this study appearing to be consistent with this assertion. This is somewhat unsurprising, particularly in the case of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds as traumatic experiences such as those encountered during displacement usually involve genuine threats to personal safety that may disrupt a child's ability to develop a sense of security and predictability (Bürgin et al., 2022). Furthermore, for many of these children (including those residing in Malaysia), the displacement process can be lengthy and involve prolonged periods of uncertainty, stress, and a loss of personal control and agency (Fazel, 2002). As such, it becomes evident that schools act as a stabilising feature in the lives of these children who are typically subjected to experiences of instability (Sheikh et al., 2018). It has been suggested that not only do schools represent a place of physical safety and protection, but factors associated with schooling can also contribute to the development of socio-emotional safety (Yablon, 2015). For example, the provision of routine and predictability through daily structured activities, partnered with the ability to engage in supportive social interactions have all been

shown to promote a sense of overall safety as well as assist in healing (Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005).

8.5.1 Limitations

This study had several limitations that warrant discussion. First, a number of the measures employed had not previously been used or validated with samples of youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. While care was taken to ensure relevancy and suitability of items, it would be beneficial for future research to explore the validity of these scales. Second, it must be noted that all measures used in this study relied solely on self-report measures. With regards to PTG in particular, there has been discussion surrounding the possibility of cognitive biases influencing self-reported perceptions of perceived PTG (Gower et al., 2022). For example, it has been argued that individuals who have experienced a traumatic event may misattribute their growth over time to be a direct result of their experiences (Boals et al., 2019; Coyne & Tennen, 2010). Furthermore, it has been suggested that when provided with measurements that require self-reports, individuals have a tendency to perceive positive improvement over time and may over-inflate their scores (Humberg et al., 2018). Therefore, results may not reflect actual transformation and growth, but rather the ability for the participants to find a bright side amidst their circumstances (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000). It would be useful for future research to integrate other forms of data such as teacher and parent reports partnered with longitudinal methods of data collection to provide a more integrated, fuller picture and understanding of PTG amongst these children. Lastly, while not a criterion for participation in this study, a majority of the participants recruited were Chin refugees who had been born in Myanmar. The findings therefore relate to the experiences of Chin refugees and as a result are representative of Malaysia's current refugee population (i.e., 85% of refugees in Malaysia are

from Myanmar; UNHCR, 2022). However, there are refugees from several cultural and ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia that warrant further investigation. It is important to recognise that refugees and asylum seekers are not a homogenous group – rather, they represent a wide range of cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, and have differing needs and experiences. As such, the results from this study might have limited generalisability, and future research is needed that recruits more diverse samples.

8.5.2 Conclusion

This study explored the role of schools in promoting the development of PTG amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Furthermore, this study explored the role of this growth in buffering against the development of adverse wellbeing amongst these students. The findings were promising regarding the potential of these students- and provide evidence of the protective role schools can play in promoting overall social and emotional wellbeing amongst children who are vulnerable to compromised wellbeing and increased psychological distress. Further, this study highlighted the importance of employing a strength-based approach to research, as findings obtained allowed for a better understanding of the factors that appeared to aid in the development of growth and wellbeing amongst these children.

This study was the first to document the presence of PTG amongst a sample of refugee and asylum seeking students residing in Malaysia. These findings challenge narratives perpetuated through the media and literature that tend to represent refugees and asylum seekers only in terms of them being "traumatised" and "vulnerable", greatly neglecting the strengths that these individuals demonstrate (Hughes, 2014; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). This finding is significant given the current refugee situation in the country. That is, Malaysia is a country of first and temporary asylum, where refugees are conceptually similar to illegal immigrants. As a

result, children are barred access to the local schooling system and are forced to rely on volunteer-run, under-resourced and underfunded schools. Over recent years, there has been debates about whether children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds should be afforded access to the local education system, or at the very least, how to facilitate engagement in education amongst this population. Findings from this study provide evidence that engaging in schooling can lead to substantial benefits for these children. Therefore, further discussions about how to enable children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds to obtain the full benefits associated with this engagement within countries of temporary asylum is needed.

Beyond Malaysia, schools globally will continue to experience an influx of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds due to growing incidences of forced displacement. Many of these children will have encountered experiences that leave them vulnerable to poor mental health and wellbeing. However, as findings from this study indicate, it is also possible for these students to develop growth and positive change in the face of adversity. Schools represent an ideal location in which recovery and healing can be promoted, through the delivery of interventions and accommodations that focus not only on academic achievement, but also on social and emotional wellbeing. As such, it is imperative that educators and school leaders be aware of the factors that may assist in promoting this positive change amongst students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. It is hoped that the findings of this study contribute knowledge and understanding, but also encourages future researchers to further this invaluable body of research.

Table 8.1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analyses for Post-Traumatic Growth, Wellbeing, Satisfaction with Life, Strengths and Difficulties, Demographic Factors, Social Support Factors, and Environmental Factors (N= 173).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	M	SD
Mediation variable																		
1. Posttraumatic Growth	-																20.81	5.24
Outcome variables																		
2. Wellbeing	.67**	-															42.32	11.50
Demographic variables																		
3. Age	-.00	-.08	-														14.64	2.17
4. Gender	-.10	-.39**	-.06	-													-	-
5. Living in Malaysia (years)	-.04	-.14	-.25**	.20**	-												9.01	3.22
6. Schooling in Malaysia (years)	.03	-.10	-.09	.20*	.75**	-											6.92	2.65
7. Disruption to education	.03	.02	.28**	-.01	-.16*	-.06	-										-	-
Social Support Factors																		
8. Peer Support (personal)	.37**	.52**	.02	-.34**	-.14	-.12	.09	-									16.97	4.90
9. Peer Support (academic)	.29**	.48**	-.04	-.35**	-.10	-.06	.03	.74**	-								13.67	4.09
10. Teacher Support (personal)	.35**	.46**	.05	-.27**	.05	-.02	.01	.62**	.62**	-							14.36	3.97
11. Teacher Support (academic)	.45**	.40**	-.11	-.18*	.13	.10	.01	.38**	.43**	.59**	-						17.11	2.89

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.	M	SD
12. Parent Involvement	.29**	.37**	-.29**	-.25**	-.08	-.03	.14	.31**	.35**	.29**	.26**	-					13.83	3.29
Environmental Factors																		
13. School Environment (positive)	.38**	.49**	-.10	-.22**	.02	.03	.04	.42**	.48**	.59**	.48**	.23**	-				8.41	2.1
14. School Environment (negative)	-.11	-.01	.25**	-.03	-.09	-.11	.19*	-.13	-.13	-.02	-.16*	-.11	-.12	-			6.69	2.14
15. Personal Safety	.48**	.50**	.09	-.23**	-.09	-.07	.20**	.48**	.43**	.55**	.53**	.28**	.44**	-.08	-		26.84	4.99
16. Negative Peer Interaction	-.27**	-.18*	-.17*	-.12	-.05	-.13	-.02	-.19*	-.19*	-.26**	-.21**	.06	-.15*	.21**	-.29**	-	11.17	3.50
17. Mental Health Support	.36**	.40**	.01	-.23**	-.15*	-.13	.14	.42**	.50**	.45**	.25**	.34**	.47**	.06	.43**	-.01	13.76	2.61

Notes: *p <. 05, **p < .001. Significant correlation coefficients are presented in boldface. Relationships with dichotomous variables (i.e., gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; disruption to education: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) were analysed using Spearman correlations. Relationships with continuous variables were analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlations.

Table 8.2

Mediation Path Estimates (n = 173).

	a				b				c				c'			
	B	SE	95% CI	p	B	SE	95% CI	p	B	SE	95% CI	p	B	SE	95% CI	p
Social Support Factors																
Parent Involvement	.19	.05	[.10, .28]	<.001	.76	.07	[.62, .90]	<.001	.29	.06	[.18, .40]	<.001	.15	.05	[.06, .24]	<.001
Teacher Support (personal)	.18	.04	[.11, .26]	<.001	.71	.07	[.57, .85]	<.001	.30	.04	[.21, .38]	<.001	.17	.04	[.09, .24]	<.001
Teacher Support (academic)	.32	.05	[.23, .42]	<.001	.75	.08	[.59, .90]	<.001	.36	.06	[.24, .48]	<.001	.11	.06	[.00, .23]	.042
Peer Support (personal)	.20	.04	[.12, .27]	<.001	.67	.07	[.54, .81]	<.001	.34	.04	[.26, .42]	<.001	.21	.04	[.14, .28]	<.001
Peer Support (academic)	.15	.04	[.08, .22]	<.001	.71	.07	[.57, .84]	<.001	.30	.04	[.22, .38]	<.001	.20	.03	[.13, .26]	<.001
Environmental Factors																
Negative Peer Interactions	-.21	.05	[-.31, -.10]	<.001	.83	.07	[.68, .97]	<.001	-.17	.07	[-.31, -.04]	.014	-.00	.05	[-.11, .11]	.983
Mental Health Support	.31	.06	[.19, .43]	<.001	.75	.07	[.60, .89]	<.001	.43	.07	[.29, .58]	<.001	.20	.06	[.08, .33]	.001
Physical Environment (positive)	.28	.05	[.18, .38]	<.001	.70	.07	[.56, .84]	<.001	.45	.06	[.33, .56]	<.001	.25	.05	[.15, .35]	<.001
Physical Environment (negative)	-.08	.06	[-.19, .03]	.166	.84	.07	[.70, .97]	<.001	-.01	.07	[-.14, .13]	.939	.06	.05	[-.04, .16]	.252
Safety	.35	.05	[.26, .45]	<.001	.69	.08	[.10, .32]	<.001	.45	.06	[.34, .57]	<.001	.21	.06	[.10, .32]	<.001

Chapter 9 - Discussion and Conclusion

9.1 Summary of Findings

Due to experiences of displacement and resettlement, children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are likely to present with unique social and emotional needs. Research findings consistently indicate that these children are at a health disadvantage as they tend to be vulnerable to compromised mental health and wellbeing, in addition to having an increased prevalence of psychopathology (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011; Fazel et al., 2005; Kien et al., 2019; Scherer et al., 2020). Even so, it is important to recognise that in the face of adversity, these children also have the ability to demonstrate profound resilience, growth, and strength. Understanding the factors associated with such growth is essential, as this brings opportunities to inform future interventions and policies that may support these children to flourish and thrive.

A focus of this mixed-methods thesis was on the role of schooling and education in promoting mental health and wellbeing. Findings across a systematic literature review and four empirical studies demonstrated that participation in schooling and education can have a substantial positive influence. More specifically, the systematic review (Chapter 2) identified several school and education relevant factors that were associated with mental health and wellbeing amongst students (thus addressing RQ1). A key finding of the synthesised research was that most existing studies had been conducted in high-income countries of permanent resettlement. Therefore, the empirical studies (Chapters 5 through 8) were designed to shed light on the experiences of education within a country of first asylum. These investigations provided compelling evidence for the value of education for children within a country of first asylum - Malaysia (thus addressing RQ2). Overall, with the right support and accommodations in place,

the evidence suggested that the overall mental health and wellbeing of these children benefited substantially as a result of their participation in schooling.

The findings of this thesis evidenced the complex role of schooling and education in mental health promotion. That is, a school environment involves multiple layers of influence. To ensure the creation of a mentally healthy school, collaboration and support is needed between all involved in the provision of education (e.g., students, parents, teachers, leadership board). Further, factors beyond the control of schools themselves (e.g., government laws and legislations) have the ability to indirectly exert influence on student mental health and wellbeing. All of these layers of influence need to be taken into account when developing interventions to support mental health and wellbeing.

A study conducted by Pastoor (2017) explored the educational experiences of unaccompanied young refugees in Norway. Their qualitative findings suggested that the needs of youth from refugee backgrounds are complex and as such, cannot be fulfilled by a single group. Children are clearly influenced by the various environments they are exposed to, and it is of utmost importance that these environments are geared towards supporting healthy child development. There is an established body of research linking the development of mental health and wellbeing to the various environments in which children grow (Bandura, 1977; Piaget, 1971; Skinner, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). Perhaps the most comprehensive is Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) *ecological systems theory*. It posits that children do not live in isolation but are reliant on relationships and interactions with others across a range of concentric environments. The multiple contexts in which a child dwells can have a significant impact on their development and subsequent psychosocial adjustment.

Ecological models such as that of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) provide a useful framework to understand the influence that experiences and environments can have in shaping development, including the development of mental health and wellbeing (McDiarmid et al., 2022). Retrospectively, the culmination of findings from this thesis appear to support this and align nicely with the tenets of this theory. Briefly, these models posit that individuals are influenced by (and have influence on) all levels of the system in which they live, with these levels being interconnected. In Bronfenbrenner's model, an individual's environment is represented by five distinct systems, with children at the centre of these multiple layers of influence (illustrated in Figure 9.1). The five systems include the microsystem (i.e., the child's immediate environment, such as the family, school, and neighbourhood), mesosystem (i.e., how the different parts of the child's environment work together to support the child, such as relationships between two microsystems), exosystem (i.e., people and places that have an impact on the child's life but in which the child is not directly involved), macrosystem (i.e., overarching beliefs, values, and practices from the wider community), and the chronosystem (i.e., influence of time and change).

Figure 9.1

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-ecological Model (Grace et al., 2017)
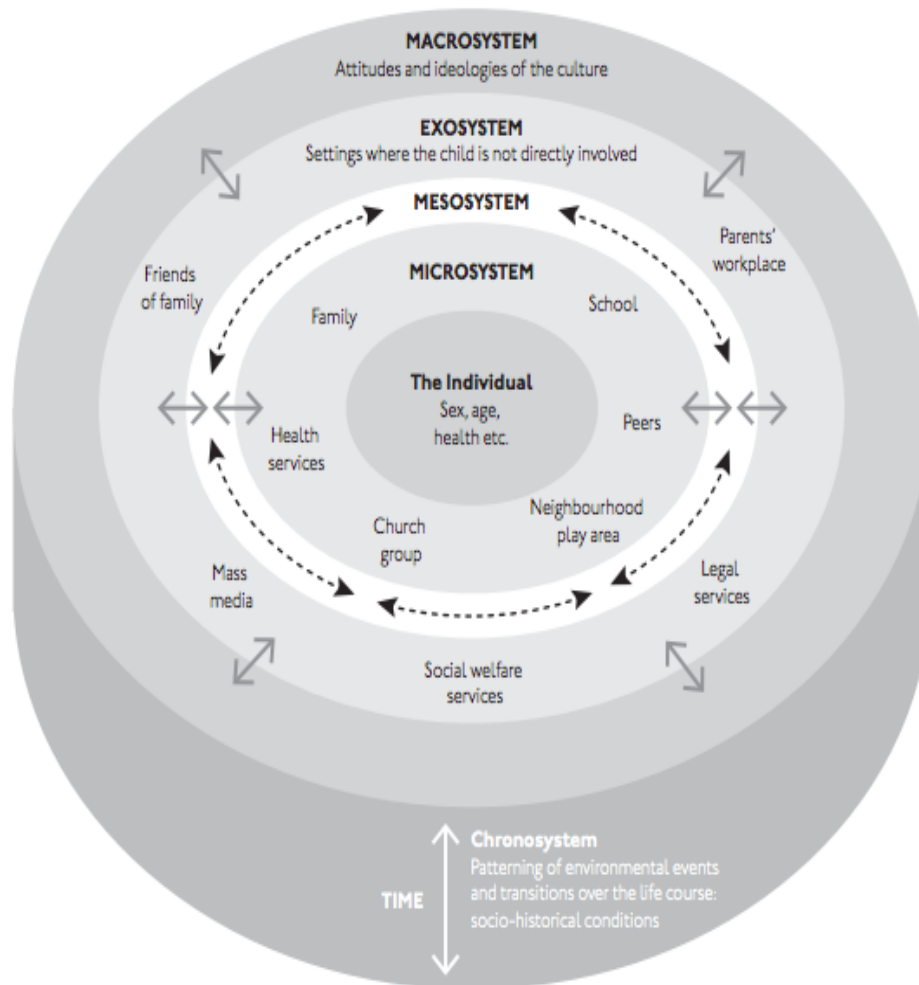
Bronfenbrenner argued that a child's immediate environment is the most influential

setting in which development occurs (Lee & Yoo, 2015). This includes family and school

settings, and takes into consideration factors such as physical environments, as well as peer and

teacher relationships. Given that they play a significant role in supporting child development, it

is crucial that health promoting interventions be embedded into such environments. Interestingly,

past research into schooling experiences suggest that schools themselves represent distinct

multilayered social systems that can have significant impacts on the overall development of a

child, including the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2016; Aston,

2014). Children within schools appear to be influenced by several individual, relational, as well as organisational factors that exist within a broader school environment (Allen et al., 2016). Furthermore, children within schools are indirectly impacted by several political and cultural factors that are unique to schools depending on geographical location.

Many approaches to targeting student wellbeing within schools tend to problematise the student at the centre of the difficulties (Hanley et al., 2019; e.g., difficulties being explained by individual characteristics such as personality or temperament). As a result, such strategies tend to be more individual focussed (e.g., individual therapy) with few, if any changes made within the broader environment. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model provides an alternative view, encouraging a more systematic perspective in which not only the individual, but the broader ecology is considered. Based on this framework, interventions must ensure that change is not just made at the individual level, but also within society, communities, as well as families.

Findings across the studies presented in this dissertation align with this assertion. For example, they consistently indicated a need for the presence of supportive peer and teacher relationships (i.e., microsystem - immediate relationships with which students interact). Outside the family context, schools represent an essential location for children, as they provide opportunities to develop relationships with peers and teachers, fostering connection and a sense of belonging (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Thommessen & Todd, 2018). Positive and supportive relationships with both peers and teachers have consistently been found to influence mental health promotion (Fazel, 2015; McDiarmid et al., 2022), whereas negative interactions (e.g., bullying, discrimination, prejudice) have consistently been found to be harmful to youth mental health and wellbeing (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Hek, 2005). While research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of early relationships in supporting healthy attachments (Ainsworth

& Bell, 1970), supportive teacher and peer friendships in childhood also have the ability to mitigate the potential negative consequences of early life experiences (Luthar et al., 2015). Luthar and colleagues (2015) posit that school-based relationships can be vital for refugee and asylum seeker children in circumstances where these children are unable to obtain emotional support from their immediate families (e.g., due to separation, poor parental mental health).

Findings across the studies also highlighted the importance of relationships between schools and the families of the students (i.e., mesosystem - interactions between a child's immediate influences). Supporting parental involvement in schooling was identified as essential in encouraging attendance and participation in schooling. A large body of research has documented the benefits of parental involvement in school, with this engagement found to be associated with increased student motivation, positive student learning behaviour, and overall academic achievement (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Kuperminic et al., 2008). Despite the well-documented benefits, research suggests that parental involvement in schooling can be complex for parents from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds for several reasons, including: language barriers, limited literacy, poor parental mental health, as well as having to navigate new and unfamiliar educational systems (Cranston et al., 2021; Foundation House, 2015a). As such, practical methods of engaging parents in the schooling of their children are warranted. For example, within the Malaysian context (as demonstrated in Chapters 5 & 6), school-based initiatives and interactions that provided material, emotional, and/or financial assistance to families were vital in supporting the relationships between schools and families, and therefore indirectly influenced engagement and overall wellbeing.

In addition to the findings described above, the studies also provided evidence regarding the importance of broader school values and policies (i.e., exosystem - external factors that the

child is not directly involved in) in supporting the creation of mentally healthy school climates. For children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds in particular, school values and policies that foster psychologically safe and welcoming environments are crucial (Fazel et al., 2012; Hek, 2005; Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). The literature review conducted in Chapter 2 offered evidence to support this claim, with students recognising the need for non-discriminatory and inclusive school environments to encourage confidence, a sense of belonging, as well as positive mental health and wellbeing. Given the stressors and traumas likely to be endured by children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (Turrini et al., 2017), whole-school approaches that utilise trauma sensitive responses are necessary to support mental health. Therefore, it would be of benefit for schools to provide their staff with personal development and training in trauma-sensitive classroom management (e.g., recognition/understanding of trauma, building relationships; Foundation House, 2016).

Finally, government driven legislations as well as societal attitudes towards individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (i.e., macrosystems; influence most distal to the child but has impacts on all other systems) were found to be influential despite these factors being out of a school's direct control (particularly within the Malaysian context). Globally, children attending schools are impacted by educational policies and systems that have been put into place by governing bodies. Some of these policies enhance the schooling experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. For example, in Sweden children at the elementary level undergo screening to determine whether they would be better suited to being placed in dedicated reception classes (rather than in a mainstream school class) to ensure their unique educational needs are met (Bunar & Juvonen, 2021). Within Australia, the Refugee Education Support Program (funded by the Department of Education and Training; Foundation

House, 2015b) has been trialled across schools since 2012 with the aim of supporting academic achievement, engagement, and wellbeing amongst students.

In some countries, however, policies and procedures at the macrosystem level are set up in a way that significantly hinders participation in schooling for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. In Malaysia, despite the best efforts of teachers and all involved in the provision of schooling to these children, schools are limited in what they can provide due to the absence of government support. Findings across Chapters 5 and 6 reflected the dedication and passion of teachers in their attempt to provide education to children in Malaysia, however, their efforts were significantly hindered due to limited funding, resources, and societal support.

As can be seen, the provision of adequate schooling and education to children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, particularly within countries of first asylum, is challenging. Children, families, and those involved in the provision of education endure significant barriers, which is concerning given the reported benefits of education. It becomes clear that the provision of education requires intervention at various levels. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model highlights that children are not separate from their environments, with interactions between environments also having an influence on children. To illustrate this, and to provide a framework in regard to mental health promotion within schooling environments, I have mapped all of the factors identified through the literature review and four empirical studies onto a model based on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (presented in Figure 9.2). Using this framework, the following section will provide a list of recommendations for the creation of mentally healthy educational environments, particularly for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Figure 9.2

Socio-ecological framework of mentally healthy school environments for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds
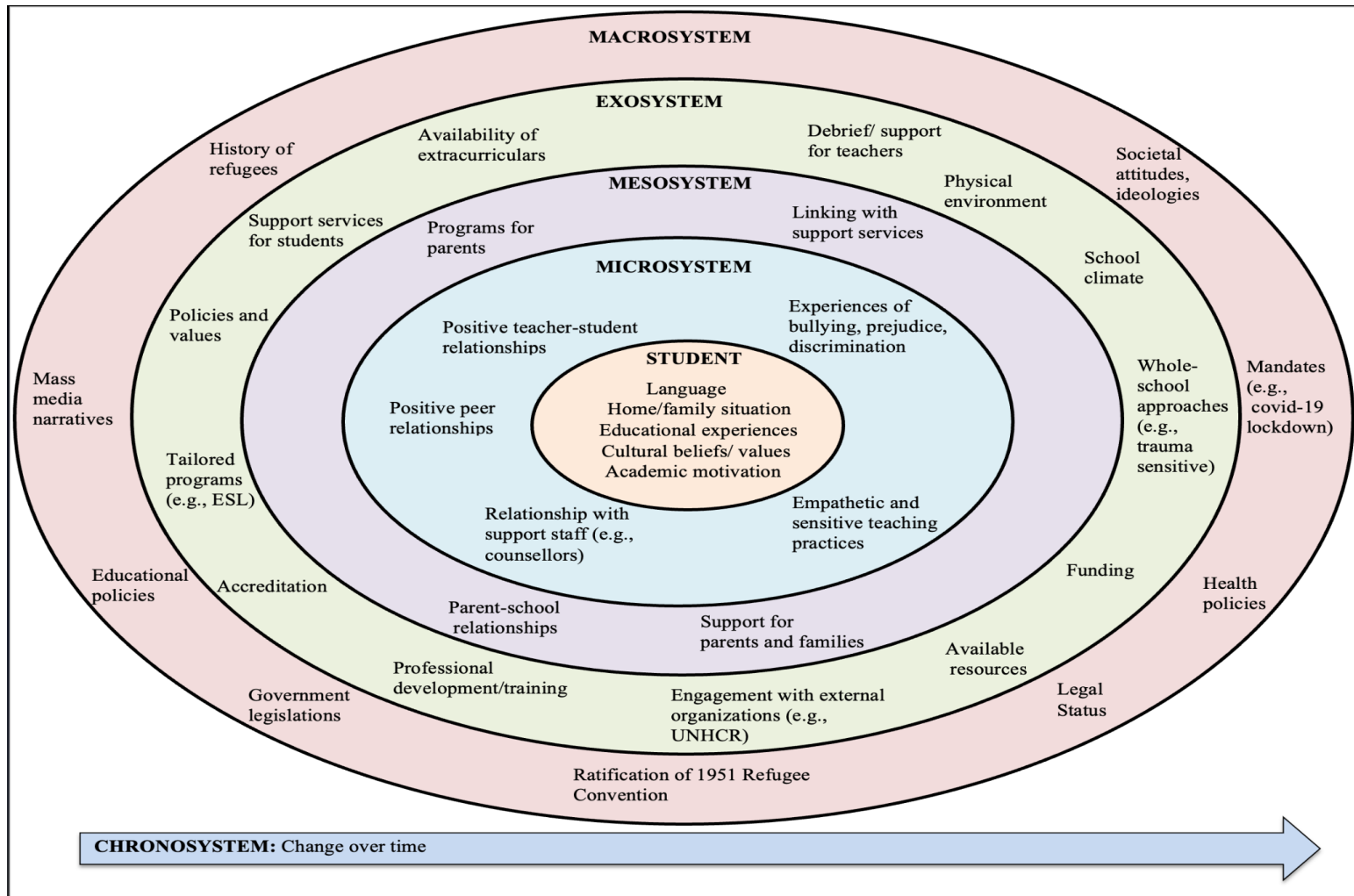
9.2 Recommendations (Macrosystem):

This dissertation has documented the significant challenges and barriers faced by refugees and asylum seekers, with a focus on the context of Malaysia (where these challenges appear to be aggravated by the country's *ad hoc* approach to hosting and managing refugees). In the absence of change and additional support, these already vulnerable individuals will remain at risk for the development of poor mental health and wellbeing. As the number of individuals seeking asylum will increase over coming years, the following recommendations are made:

Globally:

1. All countries involved in the hosting and management of refugees and asylum seekers should ratify and uphold the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its 1967 protocol to ensure that the rights of these individuals are recognised and met.

2. Given the time that will be required to consider and ratify the convention (across countries who have not yet formally become parties), these countries should ensure the creation of national level laws and legislation that recognises and protects the rights of individuals seeking asylum and refuge.

   ○ Appropriate systems and mechanisms must be in place to ensure fair and timely processes in the identification and registration of refugees and asylum seekers.

   ○ To ensure the protection and safety of those awaiting decisions on their claims for asylum, governments are urged to end harmful practices such as offshore processing and detention. The harm that these processes have on the overall health and wellbeing of individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds has been well documented (von Werthern et al., 2018).

3. Educational, employment, and healthcare policies should be implemented that recognise the unique social and emotional needs of individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds and encourage engagement in these sectors due to the documented benefits on wellbeing, livelihood, satisfaction with life, as well as mental health.

   ○ Individuals waiting on decisions for their claims should be afforded access to adequate healthcare, shelter, and food, with access to these services comparable to that of citizens of hosting countries.

   ○ Refugees and asylum seekers also need access to specialised services due to experiences of displacement. Services such as trauma counselling, legal/migration advice, assistance with family tracing, as well as translation services should be made accessible to these individuals.

4. Continued support and collaboration with relevant communities and organisations (e.g., The UN Refugee Agency) is recommended to ensure the voices of those directly involved within the refugee community are heard and represented.

5. The promotion of outreach and advocacy efforts would be beneficial in order to raise awareness and understanding regarding the plight of asylum seekers and refugees amongst the greater population. Continued advocacy is required to challenge negative societal attitudes and stereotypes, as well as negative media rhetoric surrounding refugees and asylum seekers within countries of both first and permanent resettlement.

Within Malaysia:

1. Based on the weight of evidence obtained through the empirical studies, the Malaysian government should reconsider its stance on the ratification of the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its 1967 protocol in order to alleviate the significant challenges faced by individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds within the country.

2. In the meantime, the Malaysian government should develop appropriate domestic mechanisms and legal frameworks in regard to receiving, processing, and recognising refugees and asylum seekers in the country. For example, the amendment of the Immigration Act is needed to legalise the status of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia such that these individuals are provided with the protection they require.

3. A recent report released by the United Nations Children Fund (2022) indicated that the main barrier to education for refugees and asylum seekers within Malaysia is poverty. Children are often forced to withdraw from school due to an inability to fund school fees, or the need to prioritise employment over education. As such, the Malaysian government should (where possible) provide displaced individuals with access to the local labour market as well as the healthcare system. These rights should be afforded until definite arrangements have been made with regards to future settlement (e.g., resettlement to a third country).

   - Refugees and asylum seekers entering Malaysia bring with them a wide variety of skills and knowledge that can be used to serve the wider Malaysian community. Strategies such as training programs, partnerships with companies within private sectors, as well as integration programs will not only benefit refugees and asylum seekers, but also the wider Malaysian community and economic system. A recent

report released by the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (2019) estimates that granting refugees and asylum seekers with the right to work would positively and significantly contribute to Malaysia's annual GDP (estimated increase to over RM3 billion (~676 million USD) by 2024).

- Barriers with accessing adequate healthcare can lead to deterioration in physical and mental health, as well as reduced overall wellbeing. Inclusive national level policies are required to support engagement with healthcare amongst individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. For example, financial aid in supporting NGOs and community-run clinics dedicated towards the provision of healthcare to these individuals (e.g., availability of language interpreters, reduced fees) are warranted. Increased efforts such as dedicated programs and initiatives targeting health literacy and the promotion of health-seeking behaviours would also be of substantial benefit.

4. The Malaysian government is encouraged to uphold the rights of children (including refugee and asylum seeking children) as outlined in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN General Assembly, 1989). These rights include the right to education. However, children within the country currently face significant barriers accessing long-term formal education. In lieu of access to the local education system, the Malaysian government is urged to create alternative pathways that allow for academic or vocational accreditation. For example:

- The creation of criteria that allow community and volunteer run learning centres to register with the Ministry of Education such that these children would receive recognition and accreditation of their education.

- To allow children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds to participate in the Malaysia Certificate of Education examinations to ensure certification of education following completion of primary and/or secondary schooling.

- Partnerships with local NGO's and communities to raise awareness and ensure adequate support (e.g., financial/ material) in the running of schools dedicated towards refugees and asylum seekers in the country.

- The creation of professional development and training programs that aim to equip teachers engaged in refugee education with specialist skills, knowledge, and confidence in working with their students.

- Supports to be put into place to enhance engagement in schooling and education amongst youth from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds (e.g., scholarships, stipends, internships).

9.3 Recommendations (Exosystem):

Extensive research has identified schools as an ideal location in which mental health promotion can be implemented. However, as demonstrated above, the creation of mentally healthy school environments is complex, with many factors needing to be taken into account. Schools must be cautious in developing policies, cultures, and an ethos that embraces inclusivity and diversity, embedding trauma-sensitive approaches where possible. Given the important role that schools can play in the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, the following recommendations are made:

1. Schools involved in the care and provision of education to children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds should employ whole-school trauma sensitive approaches to

teaching and behaviour management to support the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing.

- ○ Professional development and training should be provided to equip staff with the confidence and knowledge to recognise and understand the effects of trauma in the classroom, and to react using trauma sensitive responses and approaches. Initiatives such as consultation with relevant agencies and professionals to deliver programs are essential.
- ○ It is important to ensure consistency and predictability across the school, ensuring all staff are aware of and on board with the utilisation of these approaches through regular monitoring and debriefing.

2. Professional development should prioritise and provide teachers and relevant staff with education in regard to self-care and coping strategies to minimise the risk of professional burnout. Teachers working with children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds can experience a range of emotions, including guilt, helplessness, and fear (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007). As such, it is necessary to ensure that systems are established to monitor and respond to the emotional needs of staff involved in the care of students.

3. Engagement and regular consultation with relevant organisations and community leaders to ensure the experiences and needs of students are accurately represented would be beneficial. Engagement with relevant members from the refugee community would allow for the acquisition of cross-cultural knowledge and advice, crucial not only for the students but also their families.

4. It is crucial that school policies and protocols ensure the creation of a physically and psychologically safe environment. Programs targeting prejudice and improving inclusivity amongst students are warranted and necessary. Systems need to be set up to properly address reports of prejudice, discrimination, and bullying within the school environment. Creating an environment that celebrates diversity as well as promotes a sense of belonging and connection is imperative in mental health promotion.

5. A commitment to an accessible curriculum is recommended. It is important to recognise that due to experiences of displacement, children are likely to have experienced disruptions to their education, resulting in educational gaps. Children may also experience challenges in the form of language barriers. These students will require specialist support and assessment (e.g., remediation, language support) to help them close these gaps.

    ○ Depending on student needs, schools should employ mixed models of education to support transition, integration, and achievement amongst students. For example, students could spend time in dedicated newcomer classes (e.g., provide opportunities for dedicated language development) alongside regular classes (e.g., provide opportunities to develop relationships with peers from the host country; Pagel & Eale, 2021) to maximise academic achievement as well as social and emotional development.

    ○ An emphasis on engagement in extracurricular activities and subjects that are not language heavy (e.g., physical education) would be beneficial for students as they improve their English language skills.

- Students should be encouraged to continue education in their first language to support the maintenance of their culture through community-based language groups.

6. It is also important to ensure that health literacy be embedded into the wider school curriculum, ensuring that students are provided education in physical and psychological health and wellbeing.

7. Appropriate support services or relevant referrals (e.g., grief and trauma assistance; support groups) should be identified and made available to address the complex social and emotional needs of students and their families.

8. Structures should be established that allow for regular review of policies with regards to the management of student mental health and wellbeing within the school environment.

9.4 Recommendations (Mesosystem):

Research has also consistently demonstrated the importance of parent (and carer) involvement in schooling and education. This has been shown to be especially important for students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, with parental/carer involvement in schooling and education found to be a predictor of improved educational and social outcomes. Given this knowledge, the following recommendations are made:

1. It is important for all involved in communication and engagement with parents and carers to be aware of, and sensitive to the stressors that are likely to be endured by these individuals. Parents are likely to be experiencing their own stress and possible trauma as a result of the resettlement process, such as having to navigate unfamiliar cultural and educational systems, language barriers, as well as securing housing and employment.

- Cross-cultural professional development and training opportunities for school staff members would assist staff to better understand and communicate with parents and carers of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

2. Where possible, identify and engage the use of teachers or staff who have expertise (e.g., bilingual), or who are part of the community themselves to be key contacts between the school and families.

3. Due to differing cultural norms and values, parents may lack understanding regarding education and schooling systems within host countries. Educational programs, orientation programs, and information sessions that aim to increase awareness of the importance of education would be beneficial to help them to navigate through educational settings.

4. Engage relevant community members or cultural liaisons to assist with establishing relationships with parents. The creation of a "one-stop" center dedicated towards parents within school environments would be beneficial in providing parents with reliable sources of information when required.

5. Language interpreters or relevant community members will be beneficial in establishing clear communication with parents. The provision of translated information with regards to school policies, processes, and expectations will assist parents in developing confidence and the knowledge required to navigate unfamiliar educational environments.

6. It is important to be aware of appropriate referrals, organisations and external services that can support families' welfare. Given the often complex needs that families present with, it is unlikely that a school on its own will be able to address the range of issues that impact a student's ability to engage in schooling (e.g., financial barriers). As such,

collaborative engagement with external services would support the welfare of families, providing greater capacity for them to engage with the child's schooling and education.

7. Open communication with parents and carers should be maintained. This involves seeking feedback concerning possible gaps in knowledge so that concerns and misunderstandings can be quickly addressed.

8. Where possible, flexible, low-pressure opportunities should be provided for parents and carers to partake in school-based events with the aim of fostering connection, community, and a sense of belonging. Examples may include: morning/afternoon tea, volunteer opportunities, parent groups, invitation to school events, and training programs

9.5 Recommendations (Microsystem):

The development and maintenance of relationships between students with their teachers and peers within the school environment have been shown to be significant predictors of improved mental health and wellbeing amongst those of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. Such healthy and supportive peer and teacher relationships are vital in fostering a sense of belonging, connection, and support amongst students who have typically faced extended periods of instability. As such, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers and staff directly involved in teaching and caring of students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds are encouraged to participate in professional development aimed at understanding refugee experiences, the impacts of trauma on learning, as well as trauma-sensitive approaches to teaching and behaviour management. It is important that teachers feel confident in their ability to identify students that may be in distress such that appropriate referrals can be made in a timely manner.

2. Teachers should seek opportunities to engage in training programs that prioritise the recognition and management of their own responses. Teachers should be mindful of, and recognise their responses and feelings that indicate emotional distress and burnout. It is encouraged that teachers be aware of support services available to them either within their school settings, or externally.

3. In classrooms, emphasis should be placed on fostering an environment that promotes empathy, safety, as well as relationship building. Children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds have typically undergone experiences resulting in genuine threats to safety and stability, and as such, will benefit from safe, and predictable classroom environments. Consistency of rules, schedules, and routines are of utmost importance.

4. In classroom settings, a strength-based or "can-do" approach should be employed to identify and encourage students' use of personal skills, interests, and strengths to develop confidence and self-esteem. It is important to recognise and highlight their achievements.

5. Teachers are encouraged to demonstrate a desire to learn about and understand students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. It would be beneficial where possible, to have elements of a student's cultural background be integrated in classroom teaching (e.g., visuals, greetings, show and tell, lead discussions to combat stereotypes and prejudice) to promote an environment of acceptance, tolerance, and diversity. Explicit teaching of cultural diversity to promote cross-cultural harmony would also be beneficial.

6. It is important to be wary of gaps in educational knowledge due to disrupted education. Timely identification and referral of students who may require additional specialist assistance is important in fostering academic self-esteem, achievement, and confidence.

7. Ample opportunities should be provided for social interactions (e.g., group-based programs, group projects, peer support groups, buddy systems) to enable the development and maintenance of social relationships. Modelling of healthy relationships partnered with clear boundaries regarding inappropriate conduct (e.g., bullying) assists in fostering connection and relationships between students.

8. Teachers should maintain communication with fellow teachers and staff, encouraging an environment that allows for support, debriefing, sharing of strategies, as well as collaboration (e.g., dedicated supervision).

The recommendations listed above aim to provide those involved in the provision of education to children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds a reference when creating environments that support mental health and wellbeing. While it is intended that these recommendations be practical and sustainable, it is recognised that some may not be achievable in the short-term (particularly those directed toward the government). Even so, it is hoped that these recommendations shed insight into the complexity of providing adequate and accessible education to vulnerable children, as well as incite a desire to advocate for change.

9.6 Limitations and Future Directions

While this dissertation offers detailed information about the educational experiences of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, there are a number of limitations that must be addressed. The specific limitations for each study have been discussed in the relevant chapters (2, 5, 6, 7, and 8), but will be briefly reiterated here. First, the systematic literature review (Chapter 2) excluded grey literature such as conference proceedings and reports. As a result, it is possible that relevant findings have been missed. Therefore, this literature review (while valuable), should be interpreted with caution due to the possibility of publication bias.

Second, pertaining to the empirical studies (Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8), there were limitations regarding the methodology and samples. While unintended, the samples across the empirical studies consisted of participants who were largely of Chin background. While this is rather representative of the current refugee and asylum seeking population in Malaysia (85% of asylum seekers and refugees currently in Malaysia originate from Myanmar, UNHCR, 2022b), and provide insight into the unique experiences of this population, these experiences may not be representative of refugees and asylum seekers from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds who are in Malaysia. For example, the UNHCR (2022b) in Malaysia has recorded individuals from countries ranging from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia. As such, further research is needed that includes samples of refugees and asylum seekers from diverse backgrounds.

In terms of methodology, it must also be noted that a criterion for participating in all studies (qualitative and quantitative) was English proficiency. While many refugee schools in Malaysia provide instruction in the English language, it is likely that there were potential participants whose English was not sufficient and so their experiences would have been missed. More importantly, it is these very participants who might be struggling the most in their re-settlement education experiences. Future researchers are encouraged to use translators and interpretive services to broaden their sample. It is also important to acknowledge that as research into the educational and schooling experiences of refugee and asylum seeking children is in its infancy, there were challenges with sourcing culturally appropriate measures that had been validated with related samples. While extensive care was taken to ensure the suitability of all measures, there is much scope for further investigation into the cross-cultural validity of the scales utilised in this dissertation.

Third, there were several challenges with the recruitment of participants, particularly as three (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) of the four empirical studies in this dissertation were undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, during lockdowns or the initial easing of restrictions in Malaysia. Initially, there were plans to travel to Malaysia to conduct the student interviews (Chapter 6), however, prolonged travel restrictions hindered this opportunity, resulting in all remaining data collection being conducted online. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that students who did not have access to the internet in their homes were unable to participate. In terms of the quantitative studies (Chapters 7 and 8), the survey was disseminated at the same time that Malaysia was undergoing a gradual easing of covid restrictions. At the time, children were starting to slowly transition back to full-time schooling. Besides causing significant delays in data collection, there were likely some students who were not accounted for as consultations with community members revealed that many families were wary of sending their children back to school. This was likely due to fears of accessing vaccinations through the public healthcare systems (due to fears of potential repercussions), and subsequent fears of contracting the covid-19 virus within the school environment.

9.7 Concluding Words

Most children spend a significant proportion of their time within schooling environments. In fact, it is estimated that t children spend approximately 7,475 hours in school throughout their primary and secondary education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, 2014). Schools represent ideal access points in which interventions and services targeting positive mental health and wellbeing can, and should, be implemented. This is important, particularly for groups of children who are known to be at risk for the development of poor mental health and wellbeing such as those of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds.

Over recent years, there has been greater recognition of the importance of schooling and education in promoting mental health and wellbeing (Seligman et al., 2009). Along with teaching more traditional cognitive and academic skills, schools are becoming environments in which skills in social and emotional learning can be imparted. The World Health Organization (2003) reports that focusing on and supporting the emotional wellbeing of students should be one of the key responsibilities and priorities of schools globally. It is therefore essential that research be conducted in order to expand the knowledge base, increase awareness, as well as assist in the creation of practical solutions to support mental health.

While research into refugee mental health and wellbeing has tended to utilise individualised trauma-focused approaches, emerging research is beginning to employ strength-based approaches to mental health research and promotion. This is important as the majority of refugees and asylum seekers do not develop severe psychopathology. Instead, research is beginning to document the strength and resilience that these individuals demonstrate (Dehnel et al., 2022). Employing strength-based approaches to research shifts attention away from pathologising, and instead encourages researchers, educators, and clinicians to support individuals in recognising their strengths, and drawing on these strengths to promote growth and resilience. Additionally, research is now prioritising a broader ecological frameworks, with the call to better explore and understand the risk and protective factors that exist at different levels that can have direct and indirect influence on individual development and functioning (Dangmann et al., 2022).

As findings across the studies presented in this dissertation have shown, the positive influence that engaging with schooling and education can have on the psychological wellbeing of children from refugee and asylum seeking children is undeniable. Whether within countries of

permanent resettlement or first asylum, these children stand to gain substantial benefits. Unfortunately, while education tends to be compulsory within high-income countries of permanent resettlement, access to education within countries of first asylum remains a significant issue. This is despite these children missing the many benefits research has consistently demonstrated that engagement with school provides.

Within Malaysia in particular, despite many calls for change and action to support access to education for these children, the government continues to deny children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds access to the local education system, with no other viable alternatives. Regardless of their refugee or asylum seeker status, they are first and foremost children. As children, they deserve to have their basic human rights met regardless of where they have come from, particularly by the people who are in positions of power and control. Within Malaysia (and likely across other countries of first and temporary asylum), media narratives often paint the plight of refugees as being "hopeless" and a "lost cause". However, the findings from this thesis challenge these common narratives, providing evidence that these children can thrive despite the challenges and hardships they are forced to endure, particularly when they are provided with the appropriate support. For example, even though the children involved in this thesis were not afforded the opportunity to engage with traditional education, the efforts of a group of dedicated and passionate individuals demonstrated that the ability to do so would have a profound impact.

Within Malaysia, refugee and asylum seeking children are unable to access state-funded education, and as such, become reliant on community and volunteer-run schools. Of importance to recognise, these schools are dealt a bad hand, often attempting to achieve the impossible with minimum support. Nevertheless, it is clear that these individuals make a difference and have a

profound and positive impact on the lives of many children. While there is no doubt that those involved in the provision of education to refugee and asylum seeker children in Malaysia are willing to go above and beyond to support the children - these schools, teachers, families, and children deserve recognition and appropriate support. If a positive impact is possible with the limited support already in place, with the appropriate support from the Malaysian government, the schools would have capacity to be part of even greater change.

It is hoped that the findings of this dissertation sheds light on the experiences of education for children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds globally and within countries of first asylum. In doing so, it is also anticipated that it highlights the effort, dedication, and resilience of all involved - the schools, teachers, children, and refugee community. By sharing these remarkable stories, it is hoped that these findings inspire continued research, debate, and advocacy within Malaysia and globally, leading to positive change in the hosting, management, and provision of education.

While this dissertation contributed to an ever-expanding research base, further research recruiting diverse samples of refugees and asylum seekers is needed, particularly research employing longitudinal approaches. Furthermore, although much of the research within this field has previously associated refugees and asylum seekers with trauma, pathology, and loss, there is a gradual shift towards employing strength-based approaches to research and intervention. It will be important to continue this shift, encouraging researchers and health care professionals to prioritise and ensure they draw on the strengths, attributes, and resources individuals from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds bring with them. While there is still much research to be done, it is hoped that these findings equip educators and clinicians with increased

understanding of these experiences, as well as increased confidence and empathy when working with these children within schooling and educational environments.

To conclude, it has become clear that the ability to participate in schooling has potential to enhance the social and emotional development of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. However, to do so, it is imperative that all involved work collaboratively to ensure the creation of environments that cater to the unique social and emotional needs of children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds. In the absence of collaboration and governmental support, schools such as those in Malaysia will continue to be restricted in what they can offer.

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Note: An asterisk indicates that the study was included in the systematic literature review presented in Chapter 2.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire (Chapters 7 & 8)

Demographic Items

1) How old are you?

2) What is your gender?

3) What country were you born in?

4) How would you define your cultural background and/ or ethnicity?

5) What is your first language?

6) Do you speak any other languages?

7) How long have you been living in Malaysia?

8) How long have you been studying at school in Malaysia?

9) How much do you like school? Would you say you like it a lot, a little, not very much, or not at all?

10) What is the lowest/ highest grade you have at school? What grade are you in?

11) How many years of schooling did you complete in your home country before coming to Malaysia?

12) Before arriving in Malaysia, did you experience a period of time where you were unable to go to school? If so, for how long?

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

For each item, please mark the box for Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain. Please give your answers on the basis of how things have been for you over the last six months

	Not True	Somewhat True	Certainly True
I try to be nice to other people. I care about their feelings			
I am restless, I cannot stay still for long			
I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches, or sickness			
I usually share with others, for example CD's, games, food			
I get very angry and often lose my temper			
I would rather be alone than with people my age			
I worry a lot			
I usually do as I am told			
I am helpful if someone is hurt, upset, or feeling ill			
I am constantly fidgeting or squirming			
I have one good friend or more			
I fight a lot, I can make other people do what I want			
I often unhappy, depressed or tearful			
Other people my age generally like me			
I am easily distracted, I find it difficult to concentrate			
I am nervous in new situations. I easily lose confidence			
I am kind to younger children			
I am often accused of lying or cheating			
Other children or young people pick on me or bully me			
I often volunteer to help others (parents, teachers, children)			
I think before I do things			
I take things that are not mine from home, school, or elsewhere			
I get along better with adults than with people my own age			
I have many fears, I am easily scared			
I finish the work I'm doing. My attention is good.			

The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale

Here are some statements or descriptions about how you might have been feeling or thinking about things over the past couple of weeks. For each one please put a tick in the box which best describes your thoughts and feelings; there are not right or wrong answers

	Never (1)	Not much of the time (2)	Some of the time (3)	Quite a lot of the time (4)	All of the time (5)
I think good things will happen in my life					
I have always told the truth					
I've been able to make choices easily					
I can find lots of fun things to do					
I feel that I am good at some things					
I think lots of people care about me					
I like everyone I have met					
I think there are many things I can be proud of					
I've been feeling calm					
I've been in a good mood					
I enjoy what each new day brings					
I've been getting on well with people					
I always share my sweets					
I've been cheerful about things					
I've been feeling relaxed					

Satisfaction With Life Scale-Child

For each of the following statements, please tick the box that describes you the best. Please read each sentence carefully and answer honestly. Thank you

	Disagree a lot (1)	Disagree a little (2)	Don't agree or disagree (3)	Agree a little (4)	Agree a lot (5)
In most ways my life is close to the way I would want it to be					
The things in my life are excellent					
I am happy with my life					
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life					
If I could live my life over, I would have it the same way					

English Fluency

For each statement, please circle the number that is more true for you

1. 'What is your present level of English fluency?'

(not at all fluent) 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 (very fluent)

2. 'How comfortable are you communicating in written English?

(not at all comfortable) 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 (very comfortable)

3.. 'How comfortable are you communicating in spoken English?

(not at all comfortable) 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 (very comfortable)

4. 'How often do you communicate in English?'

(not at all often) 1----2----3----4----5----6----7 (very often)

Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

For each statement, tick the box that is most true for you

	Not at all true (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Completely True (5)
I feel like a part of my school					
People at my school notice when I am good at something					
It is hard for people like me to be accepted at my school					
Other students in my school take my opinions seriously					
Most teachers at my school are interested in me					
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school					
There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem					
People at my school are friendly to me					
Teachers here are not interested in people like me					
I am included in lots of activities at my school					
I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school					
I feel very different from most other students at my school					
I can really be myself at my school					
Teachers at my school respect me					
People at my school know that I can do good work					
I wish I were in a different school					
I feel proud to belong to my school					
Other students at my school like me the way I am					

Safe & Responsive Schools Secondary Student Survey

Please read each statement carefully. Then please tick the box that best represents your answer.
Answer questions based on the current school year

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel safe before and after school while on school grounds					
I feel safe in the lunchroom					
I feel safe going to and coming from school					
I feel safe in my classrooms					
Overall, I feel that this school is a safe school					
I feel safe in the bathrooms at this school					
I feel safe in the school hallways					

School Physical Environment

Please read each statement carefully. Then please tick the box that best represents your answer

	Really Disagree (1)	(2)	(3)	Really Agree (4)
My school building is clean and in good condition				
My school had enough space to accommodate all of the students that are enrolled				
I like how my school looks and would be proud to show it of				

	Really Disagree (1)	(2)	(3)	Really Agree (4)
The amount of noise in the school makes it difficult to learn				
The classrooms are too crowded				
The school is too crowded				

Inventory of School Climate

Please read each statement carefully. Then, please tick the box that best represents your answer

	Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
Students in this school have trouble getting along with each other					
Students in this school are mean to each other					
In classes, students find it hard to get along with each other					
There are students in this school who pick on other students					
Students in this school feel students are too mean to them					

Classroom Life Instrument

Please read each statement carefully. Then please tick the box that best represents your answer

	Very untrue (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very true (5)
I am not doing as well in school as I would like to be					
School work is fairly easy for me					
Whenever I take a test, I am afraid I will fail					
I am doing a good job of learning in class					
I am a good student					

My teacher…

	Very untrue (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very true (5)
Care about how much I learn					
Likes to see my work					
Likes to help me learn					
Wants me to do my best in schoolwork					

My teacher…

	Very untrue (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very true (5)
Really cares about me					
Thinks it is important to be my friend					
Likes me as much as he/she likes other students					
Cares about my feelings					

In my class, other students…

	Very untrue (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very true (5)
Think it is important to be my friend					
Like me the way I am					
Care about my feelings					
Like me as much as they like others					
Really care about me					

In my class, other students…

	Very untrue (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Very true (5)
Want me to do my best schoolwork					
Like to help me learn					
Care about how much I learn					
Want me to come to class every day					

California Healthy Kids Survey
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)
I have an adult at my school that I can talk to about my problems				
I know where to go or who to contact at school for help when I am very sad, stressed, lonely, or depressed				
Mental health is an important issue for people my age				
People at my school talk openly about mental health				
My school encourages students to take care of their mental health				

The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory for Children - Revised

For each of these, I want you to let me know how much you have changed since first coming to Malaysia – No change, a little, some, or a lot.

	No change (0)	A Little (1)	Some (2)	A lot (3)
I learned how nice and helpful some people can be				
I can now handle big problems better than I used to				
I know what is important to me better than I used to				
I understand how God works better than I used to				
I feel close to other people (friends or family) than I used to				
I appreciate (enjoy) each day more than I used to				
I now have a chance to do some things that I couldn't before				
My faith (belief) in God is stronger than it was before				
I have learned that I can deal with more things that I thought I could before				
I have new ideas about how I want things to be when I grow up				

Appendix B

Ethical Clearance

Dear Applicant,

Principal Investigator:	Joel Anderson
Student Researcher:	Misha Mei Cowling (Masters Student)
Ethics Register Number:	2018-250H
Project Title:	MPSYCH: The Educational Experiences of Asylum Seeker Students: A Qualitative Analysis
Date Approved:	05/03/2019
End Date:	31/12/2019

This is to certify that the above application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACU HREC). The application has been approved for the period given above.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that all conditions of approval are adhered to, that prior approval is obtained for all modifications and that HREC is notified of any reportable matters, incidents or unexpected issues impacting on participants that arise in the course of the research.

Researchers must ensure compliance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the University's Code of Conduct. Any queries relating to this application should be directed to the Ethics Secretariat (res.ethics@acu.edu.au). Please quote your ethics approval number in all communications with us.

We wish you every success with your research.

Kind regards,

Kylie Pashley

on behalf of ACU HREC Chair, Assoc Prof. Michael Baker

Senior Research Ethics Officer | Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)

Australian Catholic University

T: +61 2 9739 2646 E: res.ethics@acu.edu.au

Dear Applicant,

Chief Investigator:	Dr Joel Anderson, Dr Tom Whelan
Student Researcher:	Misha Mei Cowling,
Research Team Member:	Miss Heidy Quah
Ethics Register Number:	2021-124H
Project Title:	The School-based Predictors of Mental Health and Wellbeing Amongst Refugee Students in Malaysia
Date Approved:	30/09/2021
End Date:	30/09/2022

This is to certify that the above human ethics <u>application</u> has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACU HREC). The application has been approved for the period given above. Continued approval of this research project is contingent upon the submission of an annual progress report which is due on/before each anniversary of the project approval. A final report is due upon completion of the project.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that all conditions of approval are adhered to and that any modifications to the protocol, including changes to personnel, are approved prior to implementation. In addition, the ACU HREC must be notified of any reportable matters including, but not limited to, incidents, complaints and unexpected issues. Researchers are also responsible for ensuring that they adhere to the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the University's Research Code of Conduct.

Any queries relating to this application should be directed to the Ethics Secretariat (res.ethics@acu.edu.au). Please quote your ethics approval number in all communications with us. We wish you every success with your research.

Kind regards,

Kylie Pashley - on behalf of ACU HREC Chair, Assoc Prof. Michael Baker

Senior Research Ethics Officer | Research Services | Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)

Australian Catholic University

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Appendix C

Research Portfolio

Accepted for publication:

- Cowling, M. M., & Anderson, J. R. (2021). Teacher perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of education amongst Chin refugees in Malaysia: A qualitative analysis. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 12*(3), 161–175. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000224

Statement of Contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 80 percent.

  Signed ██████████

  Date: 02/03/2023

- **Dr Joel Anderson:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 20 percent.

  Signed: ██████████

  Date: 02.03.023

Under review:

- Chapter 2: Factors Relating to Schooling and Education that are associated with Psychosocial Wellbeing in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Students: A Systematic Literature Review

  - *Review of Educational Research*

Statement of Contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 70 percent.
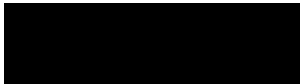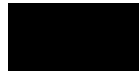
  Signed: ███████████

  Date: 02/03/2023

- **Dr Joel Anderson:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed: ██████

  Date: 03.03.2023

- **Dr Tom Whelan:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed: ██████

  Date: 02/03/23

Statement of Contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 70 percent.

  Signed: ████████████████

  Date: 02/03/2023

- **Dr Joel Anderson:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15

  percent.

  Signed: ██████

  Date: 02.03.2023

- **Dr Tom Whelan:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15

  percent.

  Signed: ███████

  Date: 02/03/23

Statement of Contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 70 percent.

  Signed:

  Date: 02/03/2023

- **Dr Joel Anderson:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed:

  Date: 02.03.2023

- **Dr Tom Whelan:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed:

  Date: 02/03/23

Under review:

- Chapter 8 - An Exploration of the School-Based Factors Associated with Positive Wellbeing Amongst Students of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Backgrounds: The Mediating Role of Post-Traumatic Growth
  - *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*

Statement of Contribution:

- **Misha Cowling:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 70 percent.

  Signed: ███████████

  Date: 02/03/2023

- **Dr Joel Anderson:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed: ███████

  Date: 02.03.2023

- **Dr Tom Whelan:** I acknowledge that my contribution to the above paper is 15 percent.

  Signed: ███████

  Date: 02/03/23