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Removal of Refugee Protections: Impact on Refugee Education, Mental Health, Coping, and Advocacy

Colleen R. O'Neal[a], Su Chen Tan[b], Jasmine E. Parrott[c], and Shannon W. Martin[a]

[a]University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA; [b]Monash University, Malaysia; [c]HELP University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the removal of refugee protections on refugee education and mental health, in addition to the protective roles of advocacy, community, and religion. We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Chin refugees from Myanmar who were refugee school leaders in Malaysia (mean age = 23; 57% female); we also interviewed four Malaysian citizens, with expertise in refugee education (mean age = 35; 100% female). We conducted follow-up interviews with five of the Chin participants. We found that (a) Chin refugees were deeply concerned about how removal of protections impacted refugee education, fears of refoulement, and the well-being of their refugee education community; (b) Logistical, community, and emotional support played a protective role; and (c) An unprecedented multi-step advocacy process by the Chin community contributed to successful reinstatement of their refugee protections, including protections for their refugee schools. Discussion addresses the importance of pre-consultation school research on policy impacts and advocacy with marginalized school communities prior to starting consultation, with a focus on how refugee community protective factors and advocacy can act as forms of resilience in the face of negative policy impacts on education and mental health.

School consultation research rarely examines the impact of policies on consultees before initiating consultation, despite persistent calls for formative policy research prior to school consultation with marginalized and international populations (e.g., Nastasi, 2017). It is important that participatory policy research is conducted when students and teachers are refugees[1] and consultees, given that refugees are directly impacted by policies from national and local governments in addition to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2017). Informal refugee schools and teachers do not exist in a vacuum, but, instead, their experiences are embedded within a larger context of refugee policy which has an impact on refugee schools and teachers

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[1]Refugees are defined as people who fled their home country across an international border due to conflict or persecution (UNHCR, 2021).

(O'Neal et al., 2016, 2017). Over half of refugee children worldwide do not attend school, and most who are not resettled and live in transit countries attend informal refugee schools (UNHCR, 2019a, 2021). Informal refugee schools are operationalized as unregulated, temporary education centers outside of the national education system; staffed by volunteer, typically-untrained refugee teachers, who are often refugees, themselves; often have limited quality instruction; are under-resourced; have little guarantee of an accepted secondary school completion certificate; and have limited access to the few informal secondary refugee schools. UNHCR has, over the years, advocated for inclusion of refugees in formal, institutionalized national education systems, rather than temporary schools (UNHCR, 2019b). It is, therefore, imperative to identify refugee strengths and resilience in navigating and coping with policy impacts, given the clear negative impacts of such policies on education (Anderson et al., 2003; Nastasi, 2017). Indeed, the Participatory Culture-Specific Consultation model (PCSC; Nastasi et al., 2000) posits that it is important to first investigate the influence of multi-level, policy, chronosystem changes, and strengths on one's school consultees and clients prior to consultation development.

Similar to a Consultee-Centered Consultation (CCC) definition, we operationalize consultation as an indirect service in which a consultant and consultee have a nonhierarchical collaboration impacting the client and, sometimes, impacting the consultee's skills, knowledge, and conceptualization of the client (e.g., Newman & Ingraham, 2017). School consultation typically involves a consultant (e.g., school psychologist) who works with a consultee (e.g., teacher) to promote academic or socioemotional growth in the teacher's student, class, or growth in the teacher, themselves, and, often, in both the consultant's and consultee's conceptualization of the student.

School, religious, and community supports in informal refugee schools, with the ultimate goal of informing future refugee school consultation research and practice. This paper focused on refugee policy, education, and mental health in Malaysia, a transit country hostile to refugees and refugee education. Neither a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951) nor the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 1967), Malaysia regards refugees as "illegals" without basic human rights; and therefore denied access to education, even though there are thousands of hidden refugees who remain in Malaysia until they can be resettled in a third country, often waiting for resettlement for years, if not decades (Nathan, 2012; U.S. Embassy-Malaysia, 2019), if they get resettled at all (Anderson et al., 2003).

On the whole, Malaysia was selected in this study as the focal country due to its being a transit hub for refugees; having hostile policies toward refugees; and a long-standing history of informal refugee-run schools, which have had to remain hidden-in-plain-sight due to the hostile refugee policies in Malaysia. The Chin minority ethnic group from Myanmar have been considered

refugees by UNHCR for decades, but in 2018, their refugee status was revoked and protections removed by UNHCR over 2018–19. In selecting Chin refugees for this study, we were interested in the impact of policy, specifically, the removal of UNHCR Chin refugee protection on refugee education and mental health. In Malaysia, there are about 30,000 Chin refugees registered with UNHCR, however, Chin organizations estimated a total of about 50,000 Chin refugees living in Malaysia (R.AGE, 2019). At the start of this study, the cessation of UNHCR refugee protections for Chin refugees worldwide had just been announced in 2018, with a planned final refugee protection cessation date of December 31, 2019 (Figure 1). Refugee protections from UNHCR include the right to not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom; the right to potentially be resettled in a third country that welcomes refugees; and to work and access education. None of these rights and protections are upheld in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2019b). Following the 2018 announcement, UNHCR-Malaysia stopped issuing and renewing refugee cards for the Chin in 2018 and 2019. UNHCR claimed that it was safe for the Chin to return to Myanmar, despite continued flight from Myanmar due to on-going violent conflict, severe oppression, persecution, religious restrictions as Christians, and forced military conscription in the Chin state of Myanmar (APRRN, 2019; Lee, 2019).

This two-time-point, qualitative study makes the unique contribution of eliciting informal refugee school leaders' experiences of the impact of the 2018 UNHCR policy decision to remove Chin refugee protections, in addition to exploring the resilience processes that enabled the Chin refugee education community to cope and advocate for policy change (APRRN, 2019; R.AGE, 2019). Given that there is no school psychology and pre-consultation formative research, to our knowledge, on informal refugee schools in refugee transit countries, this paper makes a novel contribution. Notably, this paper's research on refugee policy and informal education in Malaysia holds implications for transcultural, international refugee informal school consultation and related advocacy consultation, in addition to consultation in formal education settings for resettled refugees in Western countries.
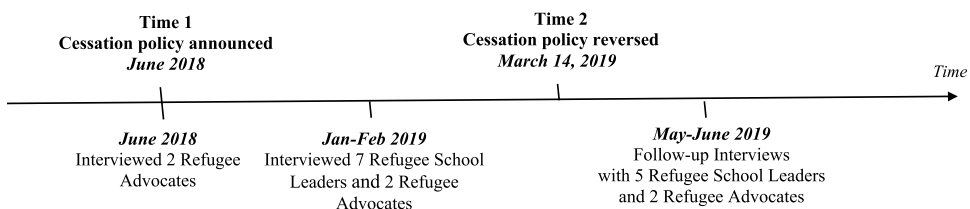

Figure 1. Cessation Policy and Interview Timeline.

Impact of Refugee Policies

International, national, and local policies clearly impact the political status of refugees. Policies, however, also impact refugee access to and quality of education, mental health, and engagement in the workforce (Hess et al., 2019).

Refugee Policy Impact on Education

Refugee children and adults face a number of hurdles after relocating to transit countries (e.g., Malaysia) during their trans-migration phase (i.e., experiences in transit countries between country-of-origin and a potential resettlement country; Anderson et al., 2003; Esses et al., 2017). These hurdles are further complicated when mapped onto access and delivery of educational services. Although traditional refugee education systems are typically based on refugee education in camps, the reality is that most refugees across the globe live in urban areas, not in a refugee camp (Park, 2016). Refugees in urban settings are arguably more impacted by local, state, and national policies and systems compared to those in UNHCR camps (Kobia & Cranfield, 2009). Often, written policies are one challenge to refugee education, while implementation of those policies is another. Nonexistent or unclear policies are joined by other barriers to refugee education including lack of funding, regulation, legal status, data, and coordination among entities (Mendenhall et al., 2017).

Malaysian Refugee Policies and Refugee Education

In Malaysia, the government has stigmatized refugee adults and children; committed human rights violations against refugees (e.g., human trafficking of refugees by government officials; Nathan, 2012); prohibited legal employment and access to health care; and barred refugee students from attending Malaysian schools (U.S. Embassy-Malaysia, 2019). Despite the protections for refugees stipulated by The 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the Malaysian government criminalizes refugees as illegal immigrants (Immigration Act 1959/63; Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia, 2006).

UNHCR is concerned about refugee transit countries not providing formal education to refugees, especially given their protracted nature of being stuck in transit countries as long as 20 years, and sometimes more (UNHCR, 2019a). Although the Malaysian government has signed and ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child agreement, it denies refugee children's access to the formal education system. To combat the lack of education access, refugees in Malaysia created informal learning centers which are hidden-in-plain-sight (O'Neal et al., 2016). In Malaysia, only 56% of refugee children ages 6–13 attend refugee primary schools, and 28% of secondary school-aged refugees attend school (UNHCR, 2016). For this study, we selected informal refugee schools since such schools are the only place refugee students can

obtain an, albeit limited, education in Malaysia. We were especially interested in the experience of policy effects on informal refugee school communities given their under-the-radar status. They are under-the-radar because refugee children, families, and teachers fear being put in detention; punishment by caning for being a refugee; extortion for bribes from immigration police to avoid detention; or deportation back to their home countries, despite international laws against refoulement. Funding for informal refugee schools is limited (O'Neal et al., 2017), with only 25 out of the 128 schools receiving some, but limited, financial support from UNHCR-Malaysia. In addition to limited financial support, UNHCR also provides most informal refugee schools in Malaysia a much-coveted UNHCR letter of protection that gives refugee education communities some sense of safety from immigration officials. Even though, reportedly, no informal refugee school leader has been asked by an immigration police officer to see their school's letter of protection, informal refugee school leaders tend to hold a strong belief that they would have to close their school without the letter (UNHCR personal communication, 2019c). In sum, refugee policies at both national and international levels, like UNHCR policies, impact refugee education, globally and in Malaysia.

Refugee Policy Impact on Mental Health

Being a refugee has an undeniable effect on mental health. Silove et al. (2017) argued that changing public views of refugees in host countries, along with changes in refugee policies, have an indirect impact on the mental health of refugees. Although the UN refugee conventions sought to establish international protections for people displaced by war and persecution, the context of these protections has largely changed since then. Countries have been more likely to scrutinize and dilute policies meant to protect refugees given the increase in the number of refugees worldwide, changing ethnic demographics of refugee populations compared to the demographics of host countries, xenophobia, and societal concerns about terrorism. Displaced people, their stability, and their mental health are, therefore, more susceptible to the climate of their host and/or transit countries (Silove et al., 2017).

Although many studies have tried to approximate the prevalence of mental health disorders among refugees, estimates vary widely (Priebe et al., 2016; Silove et al., 2017). Disorders related to trauma and stress, like PTSD, among refugees outpace the rate of PTSD in the general population; refugee PTSD rates range from 9 (Fazel et al., 2005) to 15% (Priebe et al., 2016), and even up to 33% (Alpak et al., 2015). The wide range in reported variability of mental health concerns and disorders among refugees is likely tied both to variability in pre-migration exposures to trauma and stressors, and to trans- and post-

migration experiences influenced by host country policies, including policies regarding access to social and mental health supports, education, and socio-economic opportunities (Priebe et al., 2016).

Community-Level Protective Factors

Despite the downstream effects of restrictive refugee policies, refugee education communities exhibit strengths and resilience; with protective factors extending beyond individual coping to involve the broader community (Posselt et al., 2018). For instance, research suggests that schools can serve as protective factors for children in refugee situations, especially against mental health issues and peer victimization (Starkey et al., 2019). The negative impact and potential disruption of refugee policies on mental health and education can affect the local refugee community. These shared experiences reinforce a shared identity and understanding among refugees (Frounfelker et al., 2020), along with a sense of collective well-being (Nastasi, 2017) and collective ways of coping (Mollica, 2018). In our previous research with Chin and other Myanmar refugee education communities in Malaysia, we found that religious/spiritual and community support was particularly salient (Gosnell et al., 2021); therefore, we chose to focus on the community-level protective factors of religious/spiritual and community support, of all potential protective factors; however, we remained open to other protective factors if the refugee participants raised them.

Religious and Spiritual Support

Religion can be both an individual coping strategy, in addition to a collective, communal coping strategy. Many studies suggest that refugees place a heavy emphasis on religion when dealing with stressful situations; indeed, many refugees fled their home countries due to religious persecution (Gladden, 2012; Keshavarzi, 2018). To some, religion helps them make sense of and create meaning from their lives, especially with regard to suffering they experienced. In Canada, Syrian refugees expressed that religion was an opportunity for growth spiritually, emotionally, and mentally (Keshavarzi, 2018). Some research suggests that religion is also an anchor of hope for refugees given that they are living in uncertainty (Keshavarzi, 2018). For instance, Sudanese refugee women living in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya said they felt reassured knowing that God has better plans for them (Gladden, 2012).

Community Support

Apart from religious beliefs, another common protective factor is social support (e.g., Mollica, 2018). Many refugees rely on each other to meet physical needs such as shelter, food, and financial support, as well as emotional needs.

Having a supportive community creates a space for refugees to express themselves, and refugees who hold similar values and history may share a sense of belonging and group identity (Keshavarzi, 2018). A survey of Somalian refugees in Canada suggested that the combination of emotional expression, social support seeking, and shared belief systems, such as religious and political beliefs, helped refugees feel comfortable expressing their experiences and derive a shared understanding of their lives (Matheson et al., 2008). Community also acts as a source of information and advice on job opportunities, refugee status, shelter, and accessible healthcare, which are crucial for refugee survival (Hanley et al., 2018).

Participatory Culture-Specific Consultation Model

PCSC and its subsequent iterations evolved to capture the challenge of providing culturally-relevant school consultation in complex systems (Nastasi, 2017). Rooted in ecological (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), ethnographic (Schensul et al., 1999), resilience (Masten, 2021), and participatory action models (Greenwood et al., 1993), PCSC conceptualizes consultation as context- and culture-specific (Nastasi et al., 2000). Understanding resilience factors at each ecological level will translate into strengths-focused and culture-specific consultation (Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009). Therefore, it is important to first use formative qualitative or quantitative methods to identify macro-level factors which impact one's consultees prior to starting consultation, especially in a transcultural consultation context. Such formative research is part of a pre-consultation process that has the steps of partnership-building, preliminary goal identification, understanding of your own and your partners' theory and research background, and then formative research prior to developing a culture-specific consultation intervention (Nastasi, 2017; Nastasi & Jayasena, 2014).

The current study was also informed by a decolonization approach, interrogating current and historical implications of imperialism, taking a critical inventory of assumptions and motivations, and meaningfully connecting to the lives and concerns of the communities involved (Clare, 2009; Smith, 2012), in addition to this study's reliance on advocacy consultation (i.e., advocacy for policy change using a social justice approach; Conoley, 1981). Our critical understanding of our consultation approach involved taking an inventory of consultation's history as a practice with Western roots and methodologies; considering the power, privilege, and colonial dynamics of our university-based research team; and the power and colonial dynamics facing our participants, as refugees in a country unwelcoming to refugees and refugee education. According to Clare (2009), "when the people at the margins of any system describe that system, what they see of its functional and dysfunctional aspects is qualitatively different from the descriptions emerging from the people most

privileged by, and therefore in many ways blind to, the system" (p. 12). In the current study, we aimed to amplify the experiences of educators living as refugees in an ever-changing political landscape. Our phenomenological approach valued narratives from the minoritized refugee community's perspective, consistent with recommended qualitative methods for capturing storytelling and the cultural context prior to consultation (e.g., Newman, 2021). In theory, a phenomenological approach might mitigate, somewhat, the power imbalance and colonial influences we bring as academics from university institutions. As described in the positionality section below, we conducted a consultation intervention in the refugee education community in Malaysia after this study, and two of the school leaders interviewed in this study were heads of schools in which their teachers were consultees in the subsequent consultation intervention. It is possible that such knowledge of our potentially conducting consultation interventions might have also led to a power imbalance with this study's refugee school leader participants. We strived to adopt a stance of awareness of the power imbalance we bring to this research, informed by anti-colonial approaches to consultation UNHCR (2019c).

In sum, policy impacts on refugee education and mental health merit exploration given multilevel effects on refugees. Indeed, research needs to explicate how policy may adversely impact refugee education communities, in addition to protective factors that may buffer refugees against such impacts. In particular, protective factors like religious and community support have yet to be explored in a refugee education context.

Research Questions

(1) How did the 2019 UNHCR Chin refugee protection cessation policy impact Chin refugee education and mental health in Malaysia, as informed by the lived experience of Chin informal refugee school directors?
(2) How do Chin refugee education communities cope with the possible adverse effects of the 2019 UNHCR Chin refugee protection cessation policy?

Methods

Research Design

Guided by the Participatory Culture-Specific Consultation framework (Nastasi et al., 2000), this study was designed as formative research to inform future informal refugee school consultation interventions in Malaysia. The study explored the lived experience of Chin refugee education community

within the context of the 2019 UNHCR cessation policy in Malaysia. We began interviewing informal refugee school directors in January of 2019 (Time 1; 6 months after the UNHCR cessation policy was announced), with follow-up interviews in May and June of 2019 with available participants (Time 2; two months after the cessation policy was reversed). The UNHCR cessation policy was announced on June 13, 2018 and reversed on March 14, 2019. See Figure 1 for the timeline of the interviews and policy changes. At Time 1, we inter- viewed seven informal refugee school directors, who were Chin refugees, themselves, and the primary focus of our study (see interview questions in Appendix A).

At that time, we also interviewed four Malaysian citizen participants (who we labeled "refugee advocates"), who were the secondary focus of our study. The rationale for including them in the study is that they were known in the refugee advocacy community as having expertise in refugee policies, educa- tion, and mental health. We thought that they could give some insight into the unique Malaysian refugee policies and details on the UNHCR policy, in addition to impacts and progress made on advocacy against such policies. We also hoped that they could give some context not only on refugee policies but also on the real on-the-ground restrictions as a result of the policies and informal ways refugees can get around the restrictions, in addition to Malaysian citizen support for the refugee community. We asked the secondary participants – the advocates – different questions than we asked the primary participants – they were asked about the refugee policies, especially the cessa- tion refugee policy, in addition to impacts on education and mental health, advocacy around refugee policies, and supports that exist in Malaysia for refugee education. All materials and procedures used in this research were approved by a U.S. university Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participants

Refugee participants included seven informal refugee school directors residing in the Malaysian states of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (Table 1). All were originally from Myanmar, and their experience teaching or directing refugee community-run schools spanned between two and a half to nine years. All participants were conversant in English and did not require English transla- tion. The number of students in the participants' schools ranged from 35 to 215 students; in this sample, the number of teachers often ranged from about three to five per school, except for one school that had 20 teachers.

Refugee advocates were secondary participants in this study and were Malaysian citizens, female, and with 16 to 23 years of experience promoting social justice and access to education for refugees living in Malaysia (see, Table 2); most worked in non-governmental and nonprofit organizations. Both refugee and advocate interviewees were convenience samples, accessed

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Chin Refugee School Directors.

Pseudonym	Role	Estimated Student Enrollment	Refugee/ Citizen	Ethnicity	Age	Gender
Htun	Chin Mizo Refugee Community Leader and School Director	40 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	32	Male
Lwin	Chin Refugee School Director	61 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	27	Female
Maung	Chin Community Leader and School Director	100 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	25	Male
Nu	Kachin Refugee School Director	215 students	Myanmar Refugee	Kachin	43	Female
Ploy	Chin Refugee School Director	35 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	Est. 30–35	Male
Sein	Chin Refugee School Director	100 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	Est. 20–25	Male
Thein	Chin Refugee School Director	35 students	Myanmar Refugee	Chin	21	Male

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Refugee Advocates.

Pseudonym	Refugee/Citizen	Age	Gender	Years Working with Refugees
Amy	Malaysian Citizen	52	Female	16 years
Christy	Malaysian Citizen	33	Female	11 years
Praveena	Malaysian Citizen	50	Female	13 years
Sara	Malaysian Citizen	43	Female	23 years

via relationships built with contacts and collaborators from our past consultation research projects. Over 12 years ago, we had built these relationships with refugee advocates and refugee workers in Malaysia via the first author's contacts at the Malaysian university in which she was based. The Malaysian university contacts then introduced the first author to refugee advocates and workers who, in turn, introduced the first author to refugee school leaders.

At the time of the study, the school leaders who were participants in this study were not consultees, and they were never consultees in our later consultation studies. Some of the participants' schools, however, were among a larger set of informal refugee schools which were recruited and then some of the teachers participated in a large consultation intervention study; recruitment for the consultation study happened a month after the interviews were completed for this study; follow-up interviews with the present paper's participants occurred during the consultation intervention.

Positionality of the Research Team

The researchers consisted of the first author – a white woman, affiliated with a university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.; two Asian women affiliated with universities located in Malaysia; and an African-American woman affiliated with a university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. All four authors have long-term interest in the topic of informal refugee

school consultation and refugee education and mental health. Additionally, the first and second authors were leaders and consultation supervisors in the intervention that followed this formative research. Potential biases among the researchers included the belief that refugees in Malaysia are discriminated against and denied basic human rights to work and education. It is likely that some Chin participants felt mistrust toward us given that we belong to a more socially empowered group, namely Malaysian and American citizens.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in the participants' informal refugee schools by the first and second authors using open-ended questions (see, Appendix A). The interviewers had over 10 years of relationships with informal refugee school leaders and experience providing consultation, assessment, training, and therapy to refugee teachers and students in Malaysia. The interviewers, thus, had "prolonged engagement" with the culture and education setting which enabled them to establish rapport with research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each interview lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours and the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by research assistants.

Theme Development

Data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which facilitates understanding of how participants make sense of their personal and social world by in-depth examination of their lived experiences; hence, studies involving IPA typically have smaller sample sizes to ensure in-depth examination of narratives (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is an approach that is phenomenological, which focuses on exploring an individual's personal perception or account; IPA is also interpretative which involves a process of interpretative activity that requires researchers own conceptions to make sense of the participant's personal world (Smith et al., 2009). To do so, underlying themes across participant accounts were identified by analyzing interview transcripts following a series of steps. First, preliminary themes were identified immediately after Time 1. Then at Time 2, participants were invited to check for accuracy and clarify emerging themes, after the cessation policy had been reversed by UNHCR. In addition to member checking, they were also asked about the consequences of the cessation policy reversal on Chin refugees, with a focus on advocacy efforts made by the Chin to successfully recover their refugee protections.

Two independent coders, namely the second and third authors, systematically analyzed all transcripts using the principles and methods of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Two coders were included in the coding process to

strengthen coding reliability, whereby multiple coders achieve coding consistency (Kurasaki, 2000). Each coder began by reading interview transcripts carefully to immerse themselves in the data set. In the process of identifying and constructing emerging codes, coders carefully examined each transcript line-by-line, extracting key words and phrases relevant to answering the research questions, and giving labels to encapsulate their meaning (e.g., "fearful of police"). Because the process of coding was conducted in multiple sessions over a period of weeks, coders had ample time to reflect on various themes that arose and to make connections within and across transcripts.

Gradually, converging and diverging points from multiple transcripts became more apparent, through which the emerging themes and their interconnections were then organized into a hierarchy of sub-themes and master themes (Merriam, 2009). To achieve inter-coder agreement, we used consensus coding (Bradley et al., 2007). Over several weekly peer debriefing sessions, the two coders met together with the first author, who served as a peer reviewer of the entire process, to compare, discuss, and resolve discrepancies until agreement was reached. As a result, four overarching and non-overlapping master themes were developed (See, Table 3).

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes.

Themes	Example Interview Quote
Theme 1: Concerns about recent policy changes	
UNHCR protection cessation	"We depend on UNHCR protection . . . If they start rejecting people [for UNHCR refugee status] then, many people are . . . not peaceful anymore."
Refoulement to Myanmar is not safe	"It's still in the war zone, so I, I don't think that I'm be safe, I will [not] be safe in my country."
Theme 2: Impact on Chin refugee education and mental health	
Policy impact on education	"Without the [refugee] card, it's no guarantee at all. They [the students] . . . can be arrested at any time."
Policy impact on mental health	"UNHCR cut off all our support . . . They persuade [the sponsors] to stop their funding."
	"It was like so sad, because after the announcement it led . . . some [Chin] refugees suicide."
	"They're constantly in a fearful state of whether they'll get detained, and get deported back to their home country."
Theme 3: Protective factors in Chin community	
Spirituality as a protective factor	"I start to . . . seek God, faith . . . We think a lot and we can do . . . very little . . . so . . . we get stressed . . . So the scripture help us also, every day."
Practical, financial, & emotional support	"We have [Chin] community . . . that would look after . . . [Chin refugee] . . . like sickness . . . with bad people, police arrest something. Then, those without the UNHCR card rely like totally on them [the Chin community]."
	"After every day of the school days whenever that we finish, we get back here . . . We pray together."
Theme 4: Chin refugees advocacy as a protective factor	
Chin refugee advocacy for policy reversal	"It was like the first protest Chin refugee[s] have in our life. The whole story, because this is the first time."
Continued concerns for the impact of refugee policy	"The mission [fighting for their rights and future] is incomplete.

Trustworthiness

Four quality indices were employed to ensure the integrity of the qualitative findings: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was conducted to establish credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); via follow-up interviews at Time 2, participant's experiences were summarized and reflected back to the participants to check for accuracy and clarify emerging themes. Transferability included rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences, which offers readers an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. We also described characteristics of the Chin refugee population and the sociopolitical context of refugee policy changes in Malaysia to facilitate transferability of our findings to similar contexts. Dependability was enhanced via investigator reflexivity and triangulation of the research team (i.e., two researchers independently analyzed the same data and compared their findings). Discrepancies and disagreements about emerging themes and meanings were discussed until consensus was reached. To strengthen the confirmability of findings, regular peer debriefing and reflexive discussion were held to challenge researchers' personal biases and assumptions on the subject. Furthermore, as indicated, the first author served as peer reviewer throughout the analytical process and met with both coders over weekly peer debriefing sessions. To obtain other perspectives, two colleagues with informal refugee school experience were also involved in giving feedback on these themes and paper. A senior consultation expert also gave feedback on these themes.

Findings

The following themes emerged from our interviews: (1) At T1, Chin refugees in Malaysia were concerned about the recent removal of Chin refugee protections by UNHCR (i.e., cessation policy); (2) The cessation policy had an impact on Chin refugee education and mental health; (3) Chin community education, emotional, and logistical support played a protective role, with the interaction of their religious, community, and school healing environments helping many cope; and (4) At T2, a theme emerged of remarkable Chin refugee local and global advocacy resulting in UNHCR refugee protections being returned to the Chin community, including Chin informal refugee schools.

Theme 1: At T1, Chin refugees in Malaysia were deeply concerned about the recent removal of Chin refugee protections by UNHCR

UNHCR Protection Cessation
A new UNHCR policy slowly rolled out the cessation of UNHCR refugee protections for Chin refugees worldwide in 2018, with a final date of December 31, 2019 (Figure 1). The Chin refugee education leaders reported

that UNHCR communication about the cessation policy was unidirectional and unclear. They were troubled that UNHCR had stopped issuing and renewing refugee cards to the Chin since 2018. Additionally, UNHCR also withdrew funding support which left the Chin community and their schools to cope with a sudden loss of both protection and financial support.

> [On the 13th of June, 2018] . . . we [Chin refugee leaders] were called for the meeting by the UNHCR at their UN compound. And then they told us, they said no more, no more protections for Chin refugees, beginning from 2019 . . . [UNHCR] they have to talk to refugee first . . . to make decisions . . . But UNHCR did not do like that . . . [UNHCR] said no, don't volunteer [teach] anymore [at the informal refugee schools] . . . UNHCR cut off all our support . . . they said them Chin [are] no refugee anymore. (Nu, T1)

Refoulement to Myanmar Was Not Safe

Our Chin participants felt distressed about the threat of returning to Myanmar given ongoing violence, even though they were told by UNHCR that the Chin state of Myanmar was safe for repatriation according to their independent assessment. Refugee allies and advocates, too, vehemently opposed repatriation of Chin, as highlighted by a refugee advocate interviewed: "If they have to be repatriated, I think it's like sending them back to die, it's crazy." (Praveena, T1). Furthermore, a big concern was that Chin children born in Malaysia are without either Myanmar or Malaysian citizenship. One of the informal refugee school leaders reported that refugee parents were distressed about their children's and students' survival and lack of access to education in Myanmar.

> UNHCR can say that we are safe to go back, but from my point of view, it's still in the war zone, so I don't think that . . . I will be safe in my country . . . If without the [UNHCR refugee] card, then . . . we can be sent to the detention camp [in Malaysia]. After that, then we can be sent back to our country . . . where very dangerous for us. (Nu, T1)

Theme 2: At T1, UNHCR cessation policy impacted Chin refugee education and mental health

At T1, the UNHCR cessation policy for the Chin impacted refugee education (e.g., Chin informal refugee schools shrinking or closing); their physical, emotional, and familial well-being; work opportunities; and higher likelihood of Malaysian police arrests leading to police extortion, detention. Participants reported that Chin schools were shrinking or closing in anticipation of the December 31, 2019 deadline UNHCR set for Chin protections being revoked. Emotional reactions to the policy change were many, shifting over time, and felt deeply, with emotions like sadness or hopelessness.

Policy Impact on Education

Informal refugee schools typically relied on UNHCR protection letters to keep students safe; indeed, each refugee school kept their UNHCR school protection letters framed on their school walls. The threat of UNHCR revoking Chin school protections made schools feel unsafe, and parents and children were more vulnerable to raids and arrests. "A lot of families are without any [refugee card] status [due to UNHCR revocation of Chin refugee status]. So they are very worried to send their children to school because they can be arrested at any time." (Htun, T1)

> ... the [Chin refugee] children, they lost their future [due to the loss of UNHCR-protected refugee status], that is very difficult ... They need to be a citizen, they need education, they need some documents, they need some IC [identity cards]. Now they have nothing. They have nothing. That's very hopeless. (Lwin, T1)

> If they [students] have the UNHCR [refugee protection] card ... police might not be disturb to them. And the parents as well. But without the [refugee] card, it's no guarantee at all. They ... can be arrested at any time. (Nu, T1)

Along with protection cessation, UNHCR also ceased the limited funding they had provided to a very small number of the Chin informal refugee schools. Our interviews with participants highlighted the fact that without external funding, schools were forced to downsize, shut down, or demand a higher school fee from students to maintain operation. Our participants also spoke to how the number of informal refugee schools and students began to dwindle, how there were fewer learning resources. "UNHCR also stopped giving us the textbook. So ... we have only one copy of the textbook, then we make copy for the whole school." (Nu, T1) Volunteer teachers from other countries were also told by UNHCR to stop working in Chin informal refugee schools.

> When they [UNHCR] announced the cessation policy, they sent all the announcements to ... the sponsorship and everything and ... Our volunteer teachers were called for the meeting with them. They said no, don't volunteer anymore ... UNHCR cut off all our support ... They said [to] them, Chin not refugee anymore ... they persuade [the sponsors] to ... stop their funding. (Maung, T1)

> ... [Funding received] totally depends on the UNHCR, so, we've been dealing with UNHCR on their decision [to cease protection and funding] ... saying like we don't even need protection or support. [Our school used to have] a very big school ... it was two floors. And the students can study the whole day. But now, they have to study half-day ... started from last year, we have to do two [half-day] shifts, morning and afternoon. (Sein, T1)

> Another thing is education changes because I would say most of the Myanmar refugees schools, are funded [prior to the Chin refugee protection cessation]. I mean, like sponsored by some people. So, if there is a change in that [funding], and a few schools have to shut down, like, close. So, like last time [prior to the refugee policy cessation] it

was a lot compared to now . . . a lot more schools and the number of students as well . . . So, now we are becoming much less, compared to last time. A lot lesser [schools and students]. (Thein, T1)

Policy Impact on Mental Health

Emotional reactions by the Chin informal refugee school leaders to the Malaysian refugee policies, in addition to UNHCR's Chin refugee cessation policy, were many, shifting over time, and felt deeply. Their emotions included intense worry for their refugee students, sadness, hopelessness, and diminished hope for resettlement. In this section, we address Malaysian refugee policies' mental health impacts, and then we detail their expressed mental health responses to the UNHCR Chin refugee cessation policy.

Due to Malaysian and UNHCR refugee policy and lack of resettlement opportunities, our Chin refugee participants felt like they were living in limbo – stuck between not being able to safely return to Myanmar, not being able to live safely in Malaysia, and no longer having the refugee protections that would allow them to resettle to a safe country where they would no longer be refugees: "We feel like strangers all the time, is like our destination is not reach there yet, so . . . we just feel like a stranger, just like Israel, I wandering in the wilderness." (Nu, T2) Another school leader said: "Now is, no life [due to Malaysian and UNHCR refugee policies]. We feel there is no life and no hope and no future. So, we could not manage our life, so we are like between, not hot not cold . . . in Malaysia, we could not start our life." (Lwin, T2)

> [Being a refugee in Malaysia] affect them [refugee students] long term, and then they become nothing, they say, they become nothing when in the future . . . they themselves think that they are nothing, so, powerless. That's a problem, so I really worry about all those kids, like that they might feel nothing, [but] they are a good kid . . . Every [family] member get hard, and the [refugee student] kid also get hard, the father . . . upset, and . . . the parents become argue, fighting, so . . . the kid also understand we are refugee . . . Even my son always ask me . . . when can we go to another country [for safe resettlement] and go to the school [an official school, not informal learning center, in another country] . . . every children understand about this. So . . . they become very upset, useless, feeling very down. (Lwin, T2)

The cessation policy had immediate, disturbing impacts on refugee mental health, including suicides of Chin refugees when the Chin refugee cessation policy was announced and their UNHCR refugee cards were not renewed. These deaths from suicide led to many in the Chin community feeling deep anguish and hopelessness, as expressed by many of our participants "So they [UNHCR] say you won't be . . . refugee anymore. So (clears throat) uhh (clears throat) it was like so sad, because after the announcement it led . . . some [Chin] refugees suicide." (Maung, T1) "I find [heard of] about 4 or 5 person, they suicide themselves." (Lwin, T2)

We have had to one person [Chin refugee] after he was rejected by UNHCR, he commit suicide. He jumped down from the 14th floor . . . after we conducted a funeral service, his close friend . . . told me that this guy has shared me around two or three times about his [UNHCR refugee card renewal] status, how I'm going to manage my life, and how I'm going to carry on this . . . After a few days later, he jumped off, he didn't inform [anyone] anything. Secretly he has a plan to commit suicide. So he jumped on the 14th floor and he died on the spot right there. (Htun, T1)

A young man who has done suicide, jumping from the . . . high rise building. It's all because of the UNHCR cards . . . So, the day that he extend [tried to renew] his card, I think he did not get the card . . . And he got so upset, and then I think he do the suicide. (Sein, T1)

The most intense emotions expressed by informal refugee school leaders included fear and anger. Fear was deeply felt in reaction to the policies and policy change and were freely expressed in the interviews. One of the biggest fears participants expressed was refoulement to Myanmar, and, relatedly, losing their refugee cards which leads to extortion, jail, and possibly refoulement. They fear and know that they are easy prey to police extortion without a refugee card – "If you have UN card we have, they release us. But those who are didn't have UN card, they arrest and they ask for money so they pay money [bribe] . . . Like police, and [I am] scared they arrest me . . . .[if] they cannot pay [a bribe], they have to jail." (Ploy, T1)

They're constantly in a fearful state of whether they'll get detained, and get deported back to their home country. So, their mind is always full of concern about their safety, the basic needs, the food, whether can get enough money for the family to survive for another month, so it's always struggling to make ends meet. (Amy, T2)

In the first wave of interviews, interview participants rarely expressed frustration and anger with us. When we did member checking at T2 and asked about the lack of frustration and anger expressed with us, one of the participants confirmed that participants likely felt more comfortable communicating their frustration with each other, but less so with us as non-Chin interviewers. Below, the participant explained at T2 that Chin angry feelings and expression were directed more at UNHCR than the Malaysian government due to the cessation policy and their higher expectations for protections and resettlement from UNHCR.

The [Malaysian] police are doing their job, so we can understand that . . . but, for the UNHCR, we hope that they will be helping us, but then, they're not helping us as well. And then, they even they discriminate us . . . I may feel a bit frustrating . . . for the [Chin refugee] people like many years that waiting in the [resettlement] list like more than 10 years, how they're going to do? They are not resettle us, or maybe wait until that we are getting old? Until over 60 years [old], then they are going to resettle, then what are we going to do there, right? So, I feel like it is not very correct. (Nu, T2)

When I was in Chin state [in Myanmar], forced labours . . . and then discriminated by . . . persecuted by . . . the [Myanmar] soldiers, governments, everything. We thought it was the usual. Yeah, we got used to it so we don't want to complain anymore . . . but when we

know that . . . was crimes in international law, then after that we realise that . . . we are humans and we should have human rights. So the same things in Malaysia, bribings and these kind of things have become like for them [Chin] normal even they cannot be angry with that, because you know, like as long as they can support their families, as long as they can send their kids to schools. The most important thing is to live with their families. For me, like I'm angry with these 3 groups. The government of Myanmar, the government of Malaysia, [and] . . . UNHCR . . . because of these three, we are in, refugees are in trouble. (Maung, T2)

Theme 3: At T1, Chin community education, emotional, and logistical support played a protective role in the face of negative refugee policy impacts, with the interaction of their religious, community, and school healing environments helping many cope

Spirituality as a Protective Factor

Spirituality played a protective role for our participants. Spirituality was expressed as a way to cope, for their education community, with the negative impact of refugee policies. When asked about how they coped with struggles they faced, the Chin's religious beliefs and community were named as a major source of strength and hope. " . . . my mindset have been like a trauma already for me . . . But I keep on praying to God, I talking to God that . . . I believe that you'll be make me resettle in very soon." (Nu, T2) Despite and amidst their adversities, they expressed a benevolent view of a God who they viewed as merciful, unlike UNHCR or governments which were supposed to protect refugees – they voiced that only God can provide such protection. Another school leader said, "We just only pray to God that the protection, the real protection from him." (Nu, T1)

> And the pastor . . . encourage our members that God will open the door . . . has a plan for us. This crisis, like in the time of Jeremiah, the people of Israel were in the dark for long time So we don't know how God has a plan. And how God is going to lead us. But we still have hope. (Htun, T1)
>
> I start to . . . seek God, faith . . . Every morning I have to read the scripture and the scripture give me understanding, slowly slowly understanding and then give me patience . . . We think a lot and we can do . . . very little . . . so . . . we get stressed . . . So the scripture help us also, everyday. (Lwin, T1)

Practical, Financial, and Emotional Support in the Education Community

The Chin refugees' religious beliefs and practices appeared to be inextricably intertwined with a sense of belonging in faith communities, where resources are pooled as well as practical and financial help are rendered, especially to Chin informal refugee schools. "The [school] community is based on the [church] fellowship we collect offering on every Sunday . . . By God's grace

we [our school] can still barely ran by ourselves [even with the church fellow-ship financial support]." (Htun, T1) The community also provides support around health, police detentions, and for those without a refugee card.

> We have [Chin] community … that would look after … [Chin refugee] people who have difficulties like sickness. They need to go to hospital. They have problems with bad people, police arrest something. Then, those without the UNHCR card rely totally on them [the Chin community]. (Thein, T1)

In the follow-up interviews, we asked if and how emotions were shared and supported among the Chin refugees, because emotions were rarely mentioned in the first round of interviews. One interviewee said that refugees share "emotional problems and everything" with each other (Maung, T2).

> We have to talk and talk and talk and talk … we may have inside, that kind of feeling, but we overcome with praying to God and believing to God, so means that it's a bit relax out of stress, even they still have it, then we pray together and after every day of the school days whenever that we finish, we get back here … We pray together. During that time we talk, and mostly we talk about students' matters a lot. (laugh) So, when we think of students' matters then we think we forget about our matters. (Nu, T2)

Theme 4: Unprecedented local, national, and global chin refugee advocacy as a protective factor to cope with UNHCR's cessation policy. The advocacy was perceived as effective in returning protections to cChin

Chin Refugees Advocate for Policy Reversal

Chin refugee community's advocacy, first in Malaysia then globally, was unprecedented and effective in successfully fighting for UNHCR refugee protections to be returned to the Chin, approximately a month prior to T2. UNHCR protections for informal refugee schools, teachers, and students who were refugees were also regained as a result of the successful advocacy. In sum, these were the steps taken by the Chin in their advocacy: (1) local Chin protests against UNHCR; (2) collaboration on advocacy with local nonprofits, members of Malaysia's parliament, and international human rights organizations; (3) local press conferences; and (3) advocacy for support from British and Australian parliaments against UNHCR's removal of Chin protections. Figure 2 depicts steps taken by the Chin to advocate for the reinstatement of their protections.

A Chin refugee community and school leader in Malaysia, who we interviewed at T1 and T2, shared with us the audacious story of advocacy, which he spearheaded. "It was like the first protest Chin refugee[s] have in our life. The whole story, because this is the first time." Never before had Chin refugees come out of the shadows to publicly and vocally assert themselves in both public and governmental spheres in a country where their human rights are denied. The Chin wrestled with safety concerns of public protest and advocacy

while their status as refugees hung in the balance without UNHCR protection. A peaceful demonstration involving communities of various Chin tribes coalesced into a unified force of policy advocacy. "We didn't expect that much people will be coming to the demonstration outside of UNHCR-Malaysia (2021). But from our side we arranged some of the schools, the students . . . teachers . . . the police officer allowed us to get like three hundred people, but at the time we were like five hundred refugees there." (Maung, T2)

The Chin refugee community and school leader in Malaysia (Maung) further explained to us at T2 that Chin advocacy at the grassroots level in Malaysia gathered strength with local media involvement, partnerships with local citizens and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and lobbying of Malaysian members of parliament. He described that a large joint press conference with the Chin's local partners was held on Chin National Day on February 20, 2019 whichfocused attention to their public outcry. Globally, unequivocal support from international humanitarian agencies in Thailand as well as parliaments in Australia and the United Kingdom poured in and argued for reinstatement of UNHCR protections to the Chin. An Australian senator who visited the Chin state in Myanmar and Malaysia was alarmed by on-going Chin persecution in Myanmar and vowed to advocate for the Chin community (Bik, 2019). He issued a statement citing Myanmar's continued persecution of Chin and ongoing conflict as evidence to UNHCR headquarters in Geneva for a review of the cessation policy. Maung explained that after the press conference and Australian senator's statement, UNHCR soon returned the refugee protections to the Chin and stated that the security of the Chin was no longer safe back in the Chin state of Myanmar. It was a remarkable, rare example of empowerment by the Chin of their own community to the point of their becoming an advocacy force to return their own protections.

Continued Concerns for the Impact of Refugee Policy

Following the reversal of the cessation policy, the Chin people continued to bear the power and weight of UNHCR policy. A Chin community and school leader argued that "the mission [fighting for their rights and future] is incomplete." (Maung, T2) Some informal refugee school leaders have argued for
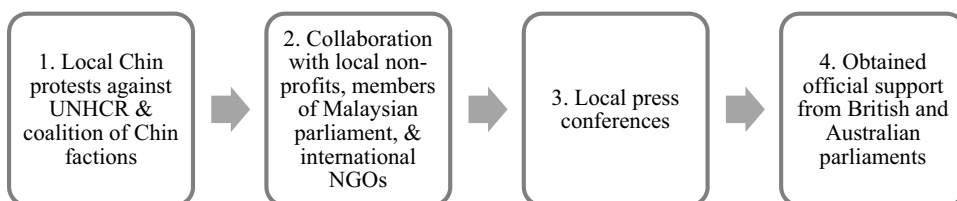
Figure 2. Steps Taken by Chin Refugees to Advocate for Cessation Policy Reversal.

inclusion of refugee students in the Malaysian public education system or an appropriate license from the Ministry of Education for their informal refugee school to be registered as an international school.

Given the institutional restrictions of a host country hostile to refugees, community-run refugee schools continue with the goal of providing rudimentary learning and English skills, while holding out hope for better education opportunities upon resettlement. "They [refugee children] cannot go to the government school . . . there's nothing [in Malaysia]. Except they understand English and some education, so they have nothing [no rights to a full education], so they really want to . . . [resettle in another] country and continue their education." (Lwin, T2). Their yearning was captured, movingly, in a dream shared by a Kachin informal refugee school leader interviewed, "We just, you know, what we dream of is from our centre [informal refugee school], the whole centre, we will take off in the one airplane and go together, we wanted to do, we wanted to be like that, to any country [for resettlement] . . . That's good, that's a big dream and I'm not very sure whether it can become true or not." (Nu, T2)

An advocate argued for refugees to unite to provide more effective pressure on Malaysian Ministers of Parliament and government officials to change the refugee policy, like providing government education access.

> I keep saying this over and over, NGOs, CSOs, human rights people, refugee rights people, you and me we can fight until we die. But we need political regime, we need political intervention to make the big change happen. . . . so we go in as a group of people, you know who do different things but who advocate for the rights of [all of] the refugees in other ways . . . we go together as one united factor, one united force, that in itself is important, and . . . we want to work together (Praveena, T1)

Discussion

The main contribution of this study was the amplification of refugee education leaders' lived experiences regarding risk and protective factors in the face of refugee policy impacts on refugee education and mental health. Such impacts and protective factors were especially important to identify, prior to consultation development, at a time when Chin refugee protections for individual refugees and their schools were rescinded by UNHCR. Community-level protective factors were also important, including school and religious community support, but especially the factor that was most striking – effective refugee community collective action and advocacy in the face of nearly insurmountable obstacles. The larger contribution of this study to school consultation was to inform the development of future consultation interventions and research in a participatory, culturally-relevant manner via formative qualitative research. The discussion links our results to theory and research on

PCSC and a decolonizing approach, in addition to implications for consultation, advocacy, and the context of refugee education, human rights, and healing through collective action.

Participatory Culture-Specific Consultation odel (PCSC)

The current study relied on the PCSC pre-consultation phase of exploring multi-level ecological impacts. As Nastasi and Naser (2020) and Hazel (2017) noted, school consultation often fails to recognize or integrate the rights of children. Such rights of children include the right to education, which is dependent on policies. If our consultation had not been preceded by the iterative and culture-specific model laid out by PCSC, we would have been ignorant to the pervasive impacts of policy changes on Chin informal refugee schools, students, and future consultees. Our pre-consultation formative research involving cultural inquiry will inform future consultation problem identification and intervention design. For example, our pre-consultation work in this study highlighted the ways that instability and fear for safety complicated and further exacerbated school-level issues, which informed problem identification. Also, our understanding of the communities' strength in collective action and support for each other were important assets crucial to the planning of the intervention to come.

Our results fit within the PCSC model of exploring ecological impacts through participants voicing community-level protective factors of advocacy, in addition to school and religious support. We would argue that participants shared experiences of resistance and resilience while also underscoring the significance of macro-level policy on refugee teachers and students. Our results are consistent with chronosystem effects over time, given the loss and then reinstatement of UNHCR refugee protections that this study was uniquely able to capture via two-time-point interviews with the majority of participants. The ability of micro-level informal refugee schools to keep their UNHCR refugee school protection letters, as a result of macro-level UNHCR policy reinstatement, was incredibly important to the refugee school leaders we interviewed. Indeed, we can interpret our results to say that the improvement in macro-level refugee policy led to some tentative renewed hope for refugee school communities, despite continued safety concerns in Malaysia.

In addition to the PCSC framework, we think that the qualitative research methods and resulting themes gleaned from the refugee education community fit well in Smith and Nevin's (2006) framework of liberatory roles for consultants involving a participatory-informed and strengths-based approach guided by valuing community wisdom and insights, with the goal of understanding the whole person prior to consultation intervention development. Similar to our study's theme identifying refugee social action for policy change, Kia-Keating and Juang's (2022) conceptualization of the

decolonization of refugee psychology research is relevant for our findings given our valuing the identification of relevant problems and strengths via participant voices in addition to our goal of amplifying the Chin community's social action for systemic change. Also, radical healing from trauma through collective action and advocacy is relevant to our results, as posited by French et al. (2020). For instance, the participant named Nu used the word "trauma" to describe their experience and how religion provided a form of coping, with implications for healing from trauma. In some ways, a religious community could be seen as collective coping. As psychologists, our first response tends to be an individual approach toward healing, like providing therapy and coping techniques to, for example, prevent more suicides. In the face of systemic oppression, individual therapy would be akin to the Chin using a butter knife as a tool to fend for themselves when what they needed was the radical healing sword of collective coping, advocacy, and action. School consultation has the potential to act as a radical healing sword of advocacy and collective action, by collaborating with refugee partners to support school and community advocacy consultation.

Policy, Protective Factors, and Advocacy

Policy Impact

Fear and uncertainty were predominant responses to UNHCR's cessation policy. Without refugee protections, it seemed difficult to plan and have hope for the future when, in Malaysia, they had limited daily access to work, education, and a decreased level of personal agency to move freely or make decisions without fear of reprisal, in addition to the lost opportunity to be resettled to a safe country due to their losing their refugee card. Much fear was expressed about informal refugee schools needing to close due to UNHCR removing Chin informal refugee schools' letters of protection. As Priebe et al. (2016) discussed in their review of 69 studies with refugees and asylum-seekers, the socioeconomic conditions of host and transit countries and the uncertainty of stability and protection within those countries contributes to mental health concerns among refugees. Some participants in this study spoke of others in the community who completed suicide upon learning that their UNHCR-issued refugee identification card would not be renewed, underscoring the bleak sense of hopelessness permeating their community due to the cessation of Chin refugee protections.

Community-Level Protective Factors

Community support and religious beliefs played a protective role in coping with negative policy impacts. Of note is the interrelated nature of community, religious, and school support in the Chin refugee education community in Malaysia, similar to conclusions drawn by a systematic review of refugees in

transit countries (Posselt et al., 2018), like Malaysia. Community-run informal refugee schools and churches became venues for Chin to come together to offer and receive practical, religious, and socioemotional support, suggesting the importance of community networks to serve a multitude of practical and psychosocial functions. Therefore, refugee resilience may encompass a more communal than individual experience of resilience, compared to the individualized view of resilience held in Western society (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Social connectedness has been reported as a refugee coping strategy (e.g., Nakash et al., 2017). Similarly, in this study, cultural and religious aspects of a community seemed to facilitate a sense of belonging and stability necessary to cope with their changing and stressful environment (e.g., Akinyemi et al., 2016; Elsass & Phuntsok, 2009). It is noteworthy that many Chin fled Myanmar due to religious restrictions and persecution caused by their being Christian; the Burmese government has been known for coercion of Chin Christian children to convert to Buddhism (Radio Free Asia, 2012). Religious activities and engagement in their current community may foster a sense of individual and collective cultural identity critical for a small, marginalized group (e.g., Thoits, 2013). These community factors may create a healing environment in the context of informal refugee schools and churches, especially in the face of possible refugee trauma (Mollica, 2018).

Advocacy

Advocacy emerged as a community-level protective factor with Chin refugee adults and students coming out of the shadows to advocate for policy change, despite the risk of refugees protesting in transit countries. UNHCR claimed that it reversed its cessation policy only due to "the worsening security situation in the southern Chin state in Myanmar." In contrast, we, the Chin, human rights groups, and political allies viewed the coming together of the Chin and supportive institutions as likely changing UNHCR policy via the successful fight and publicity (on local, national, and international levels) to reclaim their status and protections as refugees (APRRN, 2019).

Such advocacy had positive consequences for Chin informal refugee schools in Malaysia. At the same time, consultation approaches often deemphasize advocacy, despite some history of consultation theories framing community social action as a form of collaborative consultation (e.g., Consultee-Centered Mental Health Consultation; Caplan et al., 1994). There have been a number of examples of refugee-led activism, protest, and advocacy in Germany (Bhimji, 2016), Uganda (Edström & Dolan, 2019), Turkey (Erensu, 2016), and the Palestinian territories (Barber & Olsen, 2009), to name a few. Given the levels of political violence to which refugees are subjected, some have argued that their resistance and advocacy are necessary (Barber & Olsen, 2009; Cummings et al., 2017). Socio-political advocacy may lead to an increase in refugees' sense of agency with the outcome of strengthening their identity as an agent of

change (Elsass & Phuntsok, 2009; Lavie-Ajayi & Slonim-Nevo, 2017), similar to the concept of radical healing via collective action and advocacy (French et al., 2020). Compared to predominant narratives casting refugees in the role of the powerless and disempowered, counter-deficit-based narratives about refugees are, however, grossly limited in the literature and media at large (DeMartino, 2020). In contrast, empowering counter-narratives may contribute to refugee resistance and education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), and advocacy is a natural and important extension of decolonizing school consultation via counter-narratives (Clare, 2009). In this case, the Chin were able to catalyze their sense of power via collective action. Notably, Chin advocacy suggested the importance of self-representation and meaningful participation of refugees in the shaping of policies that impact their own lives, with implications for transformational leadership in forced displacement across the globe (Alio et al., 2020).

Promotion of collective well-being via collective advocacy is emphasized in the PCSC framework (Nastasi & Naser, 2020). Furthermore, Nastasi and Naser (2020) highlighted that same-culture and transcultural advocacy is a crucial role of a school psychologist, especially as part of school consultation. School psychologists could advocate for engaging teachers and students from refugee backgrounds in school-level strategizing and decision-making; encourage refugee-led initiatives; and dismantle systemic barriers for meaningful participation in making schools a more equitable and supportive environment. Other forms of advocacy include advocating for the international rights of children to survive, be educated, and participate in society (Hazel, 2017; Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009).

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. All participants were derived from one geographical area located in the capital of Malaysia. Thus, the results were limited to the Chin refugee population specific to the one area and country. Generalizability may also have been limited by a small-scale qualitative study. The intention of the study, however, was not to generalize but to understand the lived experiences of participants via in-depth engagement with narratives from a sample of Chin education leaders and advocates in Malaysia. Additional points of triangulation would further enhance data trustworthiness, like Chin advocacy artifacts and formal school observations in addition to Chin community advocacy planning meetings, protests, and press conference participation and observation. In addition, interviews with international advocacy partners that rallied with the Chin would have furthered triangulation. Furthermore, our study would have benefitted from ethnographic methods to immerse in and capture the culture of informal refugee schools and communities (e.g., Newman, 2021), in addition to policy mapping. Also, this

study would have been more participatory if Chin school leadership had helped design the questions, and if our interviews were conducted by a Chin interviewer, which may have allowed participants to feel more comfortable and open (e.g., Kia-Keating & Juang, 2022).

Conclusions, Future Directions, and Implications

The contribution of this study was to articulate refugee school leaders' concerns about the impact of UNHCR refugee cessation policies on refugee education and mental health, in addition to protective factors like the community, schools, religious faith, and advocacy. Based on themes developed from refugee school leader and advocate input, this paper concludes that the UNHCR Chin refugee cessation policy had a negative impact on refugee education and mental health, and Chin school and religious communities were essential protective factors. The story of the Chin refugee advocacy steps taken to reclaim their refugee protections, including refugee school protections, contributes to a view of refugee activism as having the potential to facilitate policy-level change.

  systemic view, it is easy for consultation researchers to neglect policy impacts or assume that they are difficult to assess; and there may be an assumption that consultees are not capable of successfully advocating for change on national and global level policies. A transcultural approach to consultation, however, compels consultants to examine the larger socio-political system instead of focusing solely on individual problems by taking an interest in the social, economical, and political spheres that influence the consultees (Nastasi et al., 2020). Socio-political context can be investigated via formative qualitative or quantitative methods to identify macro-level factors (e.g., education policy, socio-political policy on rights and protection) which impact one's consultees prior to starting consultation (Nastasi et al., 2020). Asking the consultees is a good first step toward understanding policy impacts. Education policy literature can be helpful to offer guidance on ways to assess policy impacts on education, including an examination of artifacts, social network analyses, pre- and post-policy change, and documentation of decision-making processes about policies. Other future research steps from this pre-consultation study would be to translate our formative research findings into a consultation intervention; and to evaluate the intervention, as we subsequently did. The results from the present qualitative study were very preliminary at the time of the start of the subsequent consultation study; however, the preliminary results informed the subsequent consultation intervention by allowing the first and second author, who led the intervention, to use the policy impact and resilience information to inform the training of the

consultants and consultation suTranslation of results into interventions also deserves in-depth qualitative research on the process of translating and partnering with the community in creating the resulting intervention.

This study underscores the necessity to consider and understand multi-level ecological influences in the resilience of refugees, including historical, cultural, and sociopolitical influences on refugee education and mental health. Such ecological impacts hold important implications for consultation, and the school consultant's role as an agent of social justice (Li & Vazquez-Nuttall, 2009). Upon fleeing persecution and violence in their country-of-origin, refugee students and teachers are continuously subjected to environmental stressors such as xenophobia and discrimination, as well as threats of human rights violations and loss of refugee protections which promote refugee rights. We have been heartened by American Psychological Association (APA), National Association for School Psychologists (NASP), and the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) organizational-level advocacy at the United Nations to further child rights (Nastasi et al., 2020). We recommend a future direction for school psychology professional organizations to further advocacy around international policies protecting child rights, including refugee rights.

We also suggest a future direction of conceptualizing the elevation of minoritized refugees' experiences in education as an act of advocacy. Research and practice can focus on amplifying a partnering community's advocacy, rather than focusing on the advocacy of the consultant on behalf of a minoritized group. Advocacy via participatory pre-consultation processes in international or local settings deserves more attention in school psychology academic research and practice (Clare, 2009). The advocacy we saw from refugees in our study had the consequences of improving refugee child, family, and community rights. Such advocacy results in our paper underscore the need to advocate for changes in policies to support rights in school psychology, consistent with Nastasi et al. (2020): "We propose that advocacy in school psychology involves actions directed toward change in policies, laws, structures, and practices within the child's ecological system, for the purpose of promoting healthy systems (schools, families, community, peer group) and individuals (children and adolescents, teachers, caregivers)," (p. 442) and to use advocacy and global, intercultural approaches across professional roles, including domestic and international consultation.

Lessons on approaching school-related issues from a broader contextual lens can be drawn from this study and applied to consultation work in many settings. Indeed, this study's findings are applicable to schools with refugees worldwide, especially in school psychologists' consultation with the intention of facilitating refugee education communities' goals for growth, whether upon resettlement or stuck in transit. From these lessons, we hope school consultants glean the importance of facilitation and integration of advocacy into

universal supports and interventions, domestically and abroad. In our study we found that Chin advocacy was an important tool for coping. In an international or local context, school consultants can be influential in bringing stakeholders together to discuss the ways that school and district policies are or are not honoring the rights of children to access education (e.g., Nastasi et al., 2020). Another consideration at the level of universal supports, could be working with other school staff to inform students and families of their rights to education and how they might be able to engage with organizations actively advocating for them. We also encourage school consultants who work with refugee teachers and students to engage in school consultation that is enhanced by a participatory process with refugee school leaders and teachers in consultation program development (Nastasi, 2017). International school consultation formative research with marginalized schools holds implications for the necessity of understanding the intersection of contextual, political, and policy impacts on minoritized students and teachers prior to starting international, or local, consultation.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Colleen R. O'Neal, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of School Psychology in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park (Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education). Her primary research goals are to identify emotion-focused risk and resilience processes among immigrant and minoritized students with a focus on prevention.

Su Chen Tan, Ph.D. is a Counseling Psychologist and researcher who has done adjunct teaching at Monash University, Malaysia. She has been a co-PI on the Resilient Refugee Consultation Intervention with refugee school teachers in Malaysia for 10 years.

Jasmine Parrott has been a tutor (instructor) in the Psychology department at HELP University, Malaysia, and she is on the path towards getting a master's degree in Clinical Psychology. She is current conducting research on the Resilient Refugee Consultation Intervention with refugee school teachers in Malaysia.

Shannon Martin, M.A. is a School Psychology doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park (Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education). Her primary research interest is racial bias and anti-racist actions among teachers.

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Appendix A

Time 1 Interview Questions

(1) How has the situation of refugees in Malaysia changed or stayed the same here since five years ago? *Probe: Refugee schools and students*
(2) What changes have the Chin experienced with UNHCR? *Probe: Policy changes, refugee status and rights, school funding and resource support*
(3) How does the recent change in the Malaysian government impact refugees, if any?
(4) Are there any other challenges and struggles faced by refugees that you did not mention?
(5) How do these changes and challenges impact you and your people? *Probe: How has refugee education been impacted?*
(6) Given the many challenges and difficulties faced, what helps the Chin cope?
(7) Could you tell us about the needs of refugee students in your school?
(8) What about the needs of refugee teachers? What are their training needs?

Time 2 Follow-up Interview Questions

(1) What are your thoughts now on how refugee policies may have affected refugee education? *Probe: Impact of return of Chin refugee protections?*
(2) What was your experience of how and why advocacy was effective?
(3) What are your thoughts about the preliminary themes we developed based on our [T1] interviews with you and other refugee school leaders? How similar or different are they to how you would describe your impressions and experience?