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Preservice Teachers' Participation in a Refugee Community Engagement Project

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Abstract

In today's dynamic educational landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognizing the imperative adoption of purpose-led learning. Purpose-led HEIs proactively leverage their resources and expertise to contribute positively to communities and empower students with essential competencies for their future professions. This study explored an innovative purpose-led pedagogy in teacher education by integrating refugee community engagement. Twenty preservice teachers conducted lessons for 223 kindergarten and primary school students at two alternative learning centers in Malaysia. Data from students' artifacts, video recordings, and reflective videos were collected and analyzed. Findings showed that preservice teachers successfully designed and implemented appropriate lessons, enhanced their classroom management skills, and fostered positive relationships with refugee students. Insights into the challenges faced in a refugee school setting broadened their perspectives on global educational issues and nurtured empathy. This study suggests a transformative shift in HEIs' preservice teacher education programs toward a community-based and inclusive model.

Keywords: *teacher education, refugee, community engagement, purpose-led, preservice teachers*

Adopción de un modelo de formación docente con propósito:

Participación de futuros docentes en un proyecto de vinculación comunitaria con refugiados.

Yee Ling Lee, Vinothini Vasodavan y
Revati Ramakrishnan

Resumen

En el dinámico panorama educativo actual, las Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) cada vez más reconocen la necesidad de adoptar un modelo de aprendizaje basado en el propósito. Estas IES que usan este modelo, utilizan proactivamente sus recursos y experiencia para contribuir positivamente a las comunidades y empoderar a los estudiantes con competencias esenciales para sus futuras profesiones. Este estudio exploró una pedagogía innovadora basada en el propósito en la formación docente, integrando la vinculación comunitaria con refugiados. Veinte futuros docentes impartieron clases a 223 estudiantes de preescolar y primaria en dos centros de aprendizaje alternativo en Malasia. Se recopilaron y analizaron datos de los artefactos, grabaciones de vídeo y videos reflexivos de los estudiantes. Los hallazgos mostraron que los futuros docentes diseñaron e implementaron exitosamente lecciones apropiadas, mejoraron sus habilidades de manejo del aula y desarrollaron relaciones positivas con los estudiantes refugiados. El conocimiento de los desafíos que enfrentan los refugiados en un entorno escolar amplió sus perspectivas sobre los problemas educativos globales y fomentó la empatía. Este estudio sugiere un cambio transformador en los programas de formación docente de las IES hacia un modelo inclusivo basado en la comunidad.

Palabras clave: *Formación docente, vinculación comunitaria con refugiados, en base al propósito, formación docente*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by Karla Díaz Freire, Ph.D.

Introduction

The dynamic and complex world of education demands a transformative role by universities—from an ivory tower to a social agent that responds to modern societal needs. This calls for universities to be purpose-driven or purpose-led approach. Purpose-led education connects students' academic achievements with their future vocations and callings in life, focusing on helping students to live out their lives “in a narrative form which is structured regarding telos [purpose], of virtues and rules” (Bergman, 2011, p. 45). In today's educational landscape, the adoption of purpose-led learning is increasingly imperative, emerging as one of the missions or visions of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Rey et al., 2022). Purpose-led higher education involves leveraging universities' resources, expertise, skilled individuals, and collective efforts to make positive contributions to the communities and empowers students to learn by unlocking their innate drive through discovering and developing core competencies needed in their future professions (Moreno, 2023). These concepts suggest a synergy between organizational and personal purposes. Harmonizing individual fulfillment with organizational objectives provides a more comprehensive view for purposeful learning (Rey & Malbašić, 2022).

A purpose-led teacher education involves incorporating sustainable development into the curriculum and exposing preservice teachers to real-world issues related to sustainability (Bürgener & Barth, 2018). This includes engaging preservice teachers in alternative educational contexts such as schools run by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) besides mainstream classrooms. Although most teacher education programs aim to develop preservice teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Wessels et al., 2024), nurturing their hearts is equally important. HEIs must develop preservice teachers' ethic of care, bridging their understanding and practice of educating diverse learners (Güler et al., 2018). Refugee community engagement projects (RCEP) can potentially align HEIs' social responsibility with preservice teachers' personal growth and development (Haski-Leventhal, 2020).

It is estimated that there are 23,823 school-aged refugee children (RC) in Malaysia (UNHCR, 2024). They can only enroll in NGOs-run community-based learning centers. Currently, there are 128 community-based learning centers for refugee students registered under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia. Only 30% of those children are enrolled (UNHCR, 2024). This rise creates purpose-led opportunities to prepare preservice teachers for future teaching in various teaching contexts, yet HEIs are slow to empower preservice teachers with social responsibility. Teacher education should move beyond teaching superficial pedagogy, theoretical knowledge, and curriculum development to preservice teachers (Wessels et al., 2024) toward purpose-led programs that can make a positive impact on communities (Haski-Leventhal, 2020). Nevertheless, research on purpose-led teacher education is scarce.

Designing purpose-led programs is crucial to equip preservice teachers with the competencies to promote diversity, inclusion, and equity in their future classrooms (Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018). Preservice teachers need exposure to various initiatives in the larger community that can shape future classrooms. Yet, teacher education is insufficient in preparing dynamic and proactive teachers (Almazroa et al., 2024). This is caused by a lack of opportunities for preservice teachers to be involved in projects or discussions relevant to global issues as well as disengagement of HEIs from communities. Involvement in RCEP builds preservice teachers' teaching capacity and self-awareness of discrimination toward underprivileged children (Halpern et al., 2024). More empirical investigations are needed to assess the outcomes of purpose-led teacher education in a refugee education context.

Guided by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the university that the researchers are currently serving introduced 11 impact laboratories, aiming to empower our student communities and fulfill the purpose to positively impact different societies. Education for All (Edu4All) is one of the impact laboratories, which aims to support vulnerable individuals and communities to attain educational liberation. This study embedded RCEP as a purpose-led pedagogy to develop professional competencies among preservice teachers. RCEP was an initiative of Edu4All to promote equitable education to vulnerable communities, including RC. This study was guided by the following research

questions: How does a purpose-led refugee community engagement program in preservice teacher education assist in the preparation of future teachers?

Literature Review

This section will review the existing literature in relation to the framing of the study. The key dimensions include purpose-driven higher education and community engagement, refugee education in Malaysia, and preservice teachers' engagement in refugee education.

Purpose-Driven Higher Education and Community Engagement

The concept of purpose-driven higher education is multifaceted. A purpose-driven university utilizes its resources, expertise, skilled individuals, and collective efforts to make consistent positive contributions to communities (Haski-Leventhal, 2020). It empowers students to become future-ready graduates equipped with the skills, knowledge, and values to impact the communities (Haski-Leventhal, 2020) and unlocks students' innate drive to learn through discovering and developing core professional competencies (Moreno, 2023). A well-aligned organization's purposes and personal growth can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of purpose-led to all stakeholders (Rey & Malbašić, 2022).

A purpose-led teacher education program incorporates the concept of sustainable development into its curriculum and creates learning environments to relate real-world issues to sustainability (Bürgener & Barth, 2018). This includes engaging preservice teachers in alternative educational contexts such as NGOs-run schools, community services, curriculum development, research commitment, conferences, and training (Chakraborty et al., 2021). Community engagement is a highly recommended purpose-led pedagogy that can inspire students on societal and global issues, cultivate social responsibility (Milner, 2014), and catalyze their professional development. This initiative can also create awareness of Target 4.1 under United Nations SDG 4, which is to ensure that all children, regardless of their gender, complete free, equitable, and quality primary education (United Nations, 2015).

Community engagement initiative is grounded in Dewey's experiential learning theory. In Dewey's theory, knowledge is socially constructed based on contextual experiences in real-life situations (Grady, 2003). Placing learners in real-world contexts allows them to gain experience, including knowledge and skills they can apply in different situations. Experience is central for learning, but not all experience is educative. An educational experience is one that leads to an anticipated educational outcome. This is aligned with the principle of purpose-led learning, which emphasizes the importance of making an impact on stakeholders' lives. Dewey also highlights that reflection is important to help learners make connections between the actual experience and the knowledge and skills they gain. Through community engagement, students learn to think critically, communicate effectively, and demonstrate leadership to serve the needy groups for fostering social responsibility (Chakraborty et al., 2021).

Refugee Education in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the host countries to the large number of refugees who leave their home countries due to war, suppression, racial conflicts, and political affiliation (Thavamalar Thuraisingam et al., 2022). Refugee children in Malaysia are denied access to the formal education system and instead attend 128 community-based learning centers (UNHCR, 2024). Only 14% (i.e., 1234) RC aged 3–5 years enrolled in preschool education, whereas 44% (i.e., 5046) RC aged 6–13 years enrolled in primary education. The percentage of children aged 14–17 enrolled in secondary education decreases to 16% (i.e., 874).

These centers lack government oversight, resulting in inconsistent policies, finance, staffing, learning resources, student-teacher stressors, and teacher attrition (Thavamalar Thuraisingam et al., 2022). High teacher turnover has negative impacts on the quality of refugee education. In most of the learning centers, refugee teachers are refugees who have only completed their secondary education. They have not gone through formal teacher training to address the challenging and overwhelming

teaching issues in refugee schools (O'neal et al., 2018). Therefore, refugee teachers can benefit from training and support from HEIs.

Preservice Teachers' Involvement in Refugee Community-Based Projects

RCEP is fueled by a need to respond to challenges facing preservice teachers in diverse classroom settings. Some teachers held prejudice against refugee students, assuming that they are a burden and a threat to the societal structure and economic system (Güler et al., 2018; Saldiray & Meydan, 2023). HEIs need to plan programs to support the development of preservice teachers' positive perception and cultivation of social justice awareness toward RC (Saldiray & Meydan, 2023). Involvement in RCEP brings positive impacts on preservice teachers in terms of teaching competencies, cultural awareness, global views, personal beliefs, and professional growth (Halpern et al., 2024; Saldiray & Meydan, 2023; Walker, 2023; Wessels et al., 2024). For instance, the preservice English teachers in the study by Halpern et al. (2024) developed different competencies after teaching the RC for a semester. Their self-awareness flourished, as they could analyze an issue through the lens of immigrant children. Development of empathy allowed the preservice teachers to understand the children's struggles in life and thus changed their perceptions of them. They also developed culturally responsive pedagogy in response to the children's customs, characteristics, experiences, and perspectives to foster equity in education (Walker, 2023).

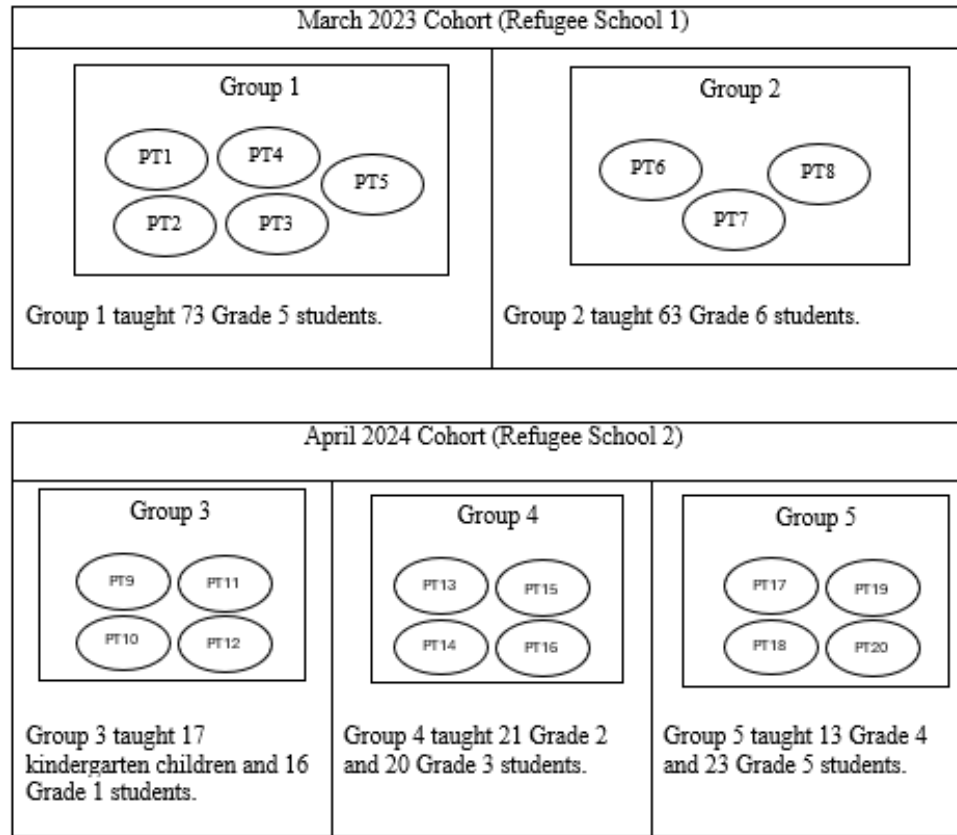
Similar findings were reported by Wessels et al. (2024). In their research, the preservice teachers who were involved in a 2-week workshop with refugee communities became more caring educators who were willing to develop personal connections with the RC. Sharing of lived experiences by the refugee disrupted stereotypes such as poor language competency and negligence of education. The preservice teachers in Saldiray and Meydan's study (2023) thought that emotional competencies such as developing bonds with RC, adopting a motherly approach, and keeping in touch could create an inclusive environment for the children.

Methodology

Research Context

The RCEP took place at two refugee schools situated in Selangor, Malaysia. These educational institutions are committed to the provision of holistic education, specifically catering to underprivileged and marginalized groups, notably encompassing RC. These schools play host to a diverse cohort of RC originating from over 10 countries, with a predominant representation from Myanmar. Before the implementation of this study, Human Ethics Committee approval was secured.

Their academic trajectory led them to enroll in a module titled Science—Energy and Interaction during March semester of in the year of 2023 and 2024. This module stands as a mandatory cornerstone for all preservice teachers specialized in primary education, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Over the 2 years, this project involved more than 220 kindergarten and primary refugee school students. The preservice teachers were divided into groups and assigned to teach different groups of school children at two schools. The preservice teachers were allowed to form their own groups. This aimed to foster a sense of autonomy, which could promote ownership of learning and leverage the diversity of perspectives and experiences within the members. Figure 1 shows the year level and number of school children involved in this project.

Figure 1.*Grouping and Task Assignment*

In this RCEP, each preservice teacher group taught a 1.5-hr lesson twice on the same instruction day to the RC. These topics taught were chosen by the science teachers at the refugee school based on the curriculum they were using. The topics and activities conducted during RCEP are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.*Topics and Activities Conducted During RCEP*

Cohort	Group	Topic	Activities Conducted
March 2023	Group 1	Light and shadow	Station games (formation of colored shadow), experiments (factors affecting the size of shadow), drawings, question and answer sessions, whole-class discussions, exit ticket
	Group 2	Forces	Experiments (factors affecting frictional force), quiz, whole-class discussions, exit ticket
April 2024	Group 3	Wind	Creating paper windmills, storytelling, explanation
	Group 4	Three states of matter	Creating mind maps, categorizing objects, presentation, whole-class discussions
	Group 5	Energy	Experiments (conversion of energy), whole-class discussions, worksheets

Participants

This investigation involved two cohorts of 20 preservice educators specializing in primary education in a private university in Malaysia, where 17 of them were female students. The preservice teachers' profiles are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Preservice Teachers' Profile

Demographic	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	3 (15)
	Female	17 (85)
Nationality	Malaysian	10 (50)
	International	10 (50)
Academic year	1.5	1 (5)
	2.0	8 (40)
	2.5	11 (55)

Data Collection and Instruments

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Data were collected from the preservice teachers' reflective videos, classroom observations, teaching recordings, field notes, and artifacts, such as lesson plans, exit tickets, and worksheets. The first author was the lecturer teaching this module, whereas the second author was the project collaborator. Both authors took turns observing the lessons conducted by different preservice teachers' groups. For instance, the first author observed Group 1, whereas the second author observed Group 2 for an hour. During the observation, field notes that focused on the preservice teachers' teaching practices and challenges they faced were recorded. In the next hour, the first and the second author swapped the group observed to minimize individual bias and improve inter-rater reliability of the data. Most of the teaching sessions were recorded.

After the RCEP, each preservice teacher recorded a 5-minute reflective video to share the knowledge and skills they gained from this engagement. Reflective prompts, such as "What did you learn about the educational needs of refugee children?", "How do you relate this experience with the principles of teaching and learning you learned in the classrooms?", and "How did this project prepare you for your future career?", were used to guide them to critically examine their experiences, practices, and outcomes of RCEP.

Data Analysis

The teaching videos and reflective videos were transcribed verbatim and coded by the first and second authors separately. Then, the codes were reviewed and revised based on the consensus of the two coders. Once agreement was reached on the coding schemes, all responses were coded. Next, the coders discussed their coding results and explained their coding decisions until a consensus was reached. Across the entire process, approximately 10% of changes were made. During this process, the two coders also ensured that no new codes emerged from the data and data saturation was achieved. The codes were categorized into themes to provide insights on how a RCEP prepared preservice teachers for their future teaching profession. The themes by the two coders were again compared till no new themes emerged.

The multiple roles of the first and the second authors as researchers, module lecturers, and observers might impact the trustworthiness of the study. For instance, the participants might feel pressured to respond positively to RCEP and there might be biases during data interpretation. A few strategies were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study. First, multiple data sources, such as reflective videos, classroom observations, teaching recordings, and field notes, were collected for data triangulation. Cross-checking data using multiple sources helped ensure the consistency of empirical data. The second strategy involved keeping records of how the codes were developed, refined, and collapsed into themes, allowing an audit

trail. Finally, the third author, who was not directly involved in this project, served as a peer reviewer. During the debriefing session, she challenged the two coders' decisions to ensure that the codes and themes were not shaped by their biases.

Research Findings

Through a comprehensive analysis of the data, six discernible themes have surfaced, delineating the ways in which engagement in RCEP contributes to the preparation of preservice teachers for their future career. These emergent themes encompassed (a) practicing communication skills, (b) developing self-efficacy in teaching, (c) applying PCK, (d) heightening awareness of social responsibility, (e) identifying areas for improvement, (f) acquiring hands-on learning experience, and (g) dealing with challenges.

Practicing Communication Skills

PT4 and PT9 shared that RCEP provided opportunities for the preservice teachers to practice their communication skills:

I am an introvert, and I am always shy to talk in public. However, when it comes to teaching, I know I must be able to communicate ideas clearly to my students. I am often quiet in the classroom. This engagement gave me the opportunity to interact with my group members and refugee kids. I used the language appropriate to their level when I talked to them.

I had the chance to practice my communication skills. When I saw that the children looked confused, I tried to explain my instructions again. I also learned that I need to convey my thoughts clearly . . . It is also important to explain scientific concepts accurately to avoid misconceptions.

The preservice teachers clearly stated the learning outcomes of the lessons, explained scientific concepts, and threw questions to the school children to trigger their thinking. One example took place when PT1 from Group 1 explored the formation of colored shadows with the RC.

- PT1 : What is the color of shadow that you see in your daily life?
 RC : Black
 RC : Can it be another color?
 PT1 : This is a good question. What do you think?
 RC : I have only seen black shadows before.
 PT1 : Today, we are going to investigate shadow formation. Now, we are going to do a simple activity to see if it is possible to form a shadow of different colors. Who can tell me how the shadow is formed?
 RC : When there is light
 PT1 : Thanks for trying. Shadow is formed when light is blocked by an opaque object.

Instead of providing a direct answer to the children, PT3 asked a rhetorical question to trigger the children's thinking. She then related the child's question to the aim of the activity and guided them to make the colored shadows step-by-step. The preservice teachers also responded to the children by affirming their answers or providing feedback. For instance, they were seen saying, "Yes, you are right. Shadow is formed when light is blocked by an opaque object," and "That's a good conclusion. The rougher the surface, the more the frictional force."

The preservice teachers used both verbal and nonverbal communication to interact with the refugee students as shown in the classroom observation.

- PT8 : Let's look at this picture. In which direction is this man moving?
 RC : Left
 PT8 : Yes. He is moving to the left. (Lifting and moving her left hand.)
 Which direction is the air resistance?
 RC : Right. (PT8 was raising her right hand.)
 PT8 : Next, how about this one? What are the boys doing? (pointing at the picture)
 RC : Cycling (to the right).
 PT8 : Now tell me, what is the direction of air resistance?

- RC : To the left.
 PT8 : (Clapping and smiling). Good job. That's air resistance. It is a kind of frictional force that opposes motion.

Classroom observation shows that the preservice teachers practiced their communication skills during their engagement with the RC. The nonverbal representations used by PT8 were two pictures (i.e., a man was skating, and two boys were cycling): hand gestures (i.e., raised her hands and clapped her hands) and facial expression (i.e., smiled). He also asked some questions verbally to assess the students' understanding of the direction of air resistance.

Developing Self-Efficacy in Teaching

Self-efficacy refers to the student-teacher's belief in his/her ability to design and conduct effective lessons for the target groups. The findings show that RCEP helped them develop self-efficacy in teaching. PT8 said,

The biggest challenge is my nervousness as this was the first time I taught a class of 40 students. But when I saw the eagerness shown by the children in learning, it gave me confidence and courage to conduct my lesson effectively.

PT4 added that, "Overall, I think we did well in teaching the children. I could see that they enjoyed the activities. This built my confidence as now I believe that I am able to create appropriate activities for children."

Applying Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Three preservice teachers perceived that being able to apply PCK, including classroom management skills, in real class settings made the RCEP meaningful. PT1 said,

This experience was meaningful since I had the opportunity to apply my lesson plan in a real classroom setting. I wanted to make it interesting to the kids by introducing something which was new for them, which was the colored shadow. They were really astonished by how the shadows can change color.

As observed during the teaching sessions, the preservice teachers were actively involved in facilitating the discussions and activities with the RC. For instance, at each station, the Group 1 preservice teachers completed the hands-on activities together with the children. At Stations 3 and 4, they drew patterns on the glass papers, shone torchlight through the papers, and observed the colored shadows formed on the wall. At Stations 1 and 2, they were seen moving the objects closer and away from the wall, while asking the children a series of questions, such as "What can you see now?", "Is the shadow getting bigger?", and "What will happen to the size of the shadow when I move the torch light away from the object?"

PT8 reflected on his pedagogical role in terms of classroom management skills, saying, "I learned how to manage a class, especially a large class with 40 students. Without proper classroom management skills, no children can learn effectively."

To better manage the large group of children, PT8 and his group members split the class into six small groups during the experimental investigations (i.e., investigating the nature of the surface area on the magnitude of frictional force). They moved from one group to another, observing how the children recorded the results in the worksheets, measured the distance traveled by toy car, and completed the questions in the worksheet.

Since the preservice teachers conducted the lesson twice in different student groups, they adopted different techniques based on the students' responses and responded impromptu to keep the children engaged. PT5 explained,

The most meaningful part is learning to adapt our teaching and interactions to suit the different needs and characteristics of different children in the two sessions. For example, the students in the second session were more passive. We provided more prompting questions to encourage them

to talk. This experience taught me the importance of flexible teaching and impactful interactions with children.

The preservice teachers' ability to adapt was evident in G3 when they adjusted their lesson plan to cater for the needs of kindergarten and Grade 1 students. In the kindergarten classroom, G3 guided the young children to build a windmill using papers, straws, and a pin. The children colored their windmills and explained their choices of colors to the preservice teachers and their peers. The children spent 45 minutes completing this task. Since the lesson was scheduled for an hour, the preservice teachers spent the remaining 15 minutes socializing with the children. G3 predicted that Grade 1 students would complete the task faster than the kindergarten children. During the break time, they searched online for stories related to windmills. For the lesson with Grade 1 students, first, G3 told the windmill story, followed by questioning to ensure that the students understood the storyline. They also asked more scientific questions such as "What is wind?" and "What can wind be used for?" during the lesson. This incident showed that the preservice teachers could respond promptly to emerging issues in the classroom.

Co-teaching was one of the pedagogies applied during the RCEP. Co-teaching occurs when two or more instructors share instruction planning, delivery, and assessment in a single physical space. The preservice teachers recognized co-teaching as an opportunity to learn different teaching techniques from their peers and receive peer support. PT3 shared,

It was inspiring to see my friends teaching. I have learned some skills and picked up some words that they used in the classroom. I observed them and we conducted the lesson together. I think we inspired each other to be better teachers.

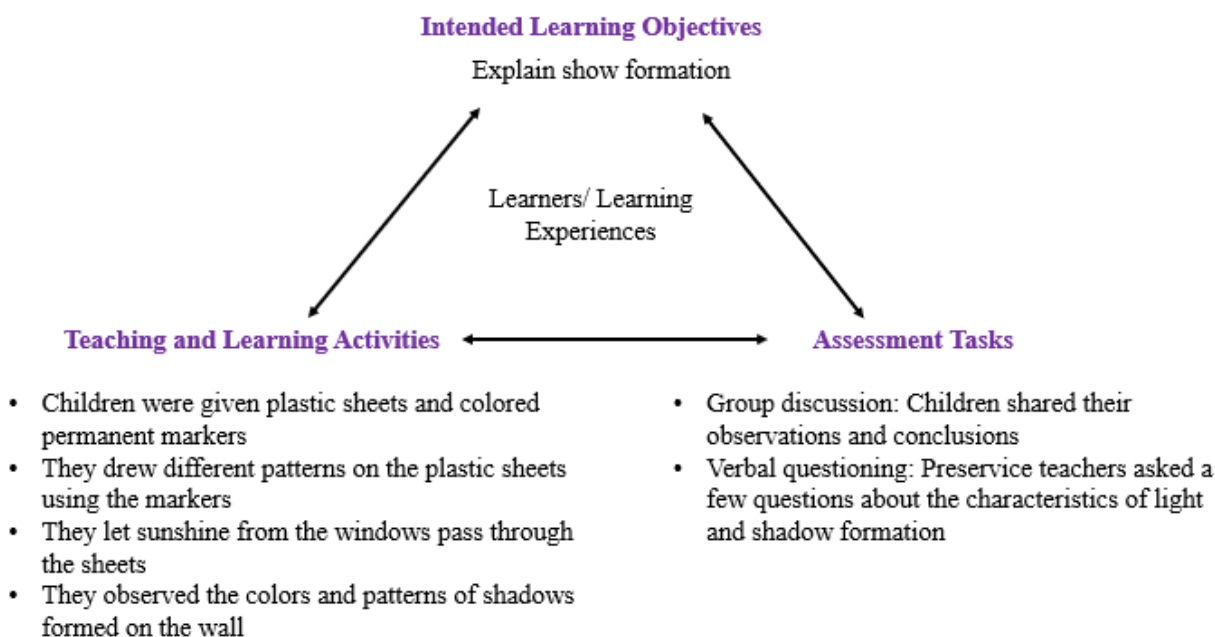
PT15 shared the same thought,

I am grateful to have supportive and cooperative group mates. We brainstormed a lot of interesting ideas to create a fun learning environment for refugee children. As each of us took care of a group of children, we were able to observe their needs more closely and interacted with each child more often.

PT2 said that the distribution of labor during co-teaching makes classroom management easier, "I appreciate the effort by my teammate when we prepared the lesson and during the delivery of the lesson. Co-teaching is beneficial as it makes it easier for us to manage a large class with more than 40 children."

In addition, PCK was also manifested in terms of creating a safe and inclusive environment for RC. PT10 explained, "Children will pay more attention in the classroom with a positive and supportive atmosphere. For example, some students behaved like they did not like the activity. Teachers need to use some interesting and fun strategies to grab their attention."

As evidence of a positive learning environment, the Y5 RC were able to produce different patterns on the glass paper. They were fascinated by the colored shadows formed on the wall. They were also curious to investigate the color of the shadow formed when the blue and red shadows overlapped with each other. On the exit ticket, the children recorded that the colored shadow formation activity was fun. The lesson content regarding the target year group and teaching context was appropriate. The depth of the content was suitable for the RC. There was a constructive alignment among the lesson learning outcomes, the teaching activities, and the assessment tasks. Figure 2 summarizes the constructive alignment between the learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment tasks designed by Group 1.

Figure 2.*Constructive Alignment Between Learning Outcome, Activities, and Assessment***Developing Awareness of Social Norms and Responsibility**

Social responsibility refers to one's ability to take actions that benefit society. The preservice teachers presumed that participating in RCEP was a way to fulfill one's social responsibility. PT7 reflected, "There is an increased awareness of refugee education after experiencing the learning environment in the refugee school in person. As teachers, we need to promote equity in education."

PT 14 and PT 15 were international students from Myanmar. It saddened them when they found that most of the RC in Refugee School 2 were the minorities from their home country:

I read about the minorities in Myanmar who have fled our country due to persecution and violence. I had mixed feelings when I saw them in Malaysia. I am grateful for the peace and privilege I have in my country. However, I also empathize with them and am thinking how I can support underprivileged communities when I am back in Myanmar.

PT9 talked about her improved awareness of the existence of an alternative learning pathway, "I am aware that besides the mainstream schools, there are alternative learning centers for refugee children. Everyone has the right to receive education. As a teacher, we need to provide equal learning opportunities for all children" (Reflective video-PT3-00:43).

The preservice teachers from foreign countries such as Japan and China had never been exposed to refugee education. This community engagement project was an eye-opener for them. PT9 from Japan said,

I have never been exposed to refugee education since we don't have refugees in Japan. Now I am aware that the opportunity to receive education does not come naturally. Some fled their countries because of war, oppression etc. We, the lucky ones, can help support the refugee children.

Before the implementation of the lesson, the preservice teachers attempted to understand the school context so that they could play an active role in realizing their social responsibilities. They consulted with the center

managers about the availability of facilities such as projectors, whiteboard, and electrical plugs; student demographics and their language proficiency; and the curricula the schools were using so that they could design feasible lesson plans for the children.

Identifying Areas for Improvement

The self-reflective video provided an opportunity for the preservice teachers to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses after the RCEP. This is essential for them to plan actions for future improvement. PT1 reflected on the aspects of classroom management:

There are still rooms for improvement. I think it was a bit disorganized when I split the kids into groups. It was chaotic as all the kids were moving around the classroom at the same time. I need better classroom management.

PT5 acknowledged the importance of having sound content knowledge:

There are things I need to improve. I really learned with my heart that having good content knowledge is important when it comes to teaching regardless of the subject. I need to ensure that I have good scientific knowledge before teaching a topic.

The issue reflected by PT5 was observed during the lessons. For instance, G2 seemed to have difficulty in explaining to the school students why their toy took a longer time to travel on a smooth surface (i.e., a piece of paper) compared with a rough surface (i.e., a piece of sandpaper). This indicated that the preservice teachers did not have sound knowledge about fair tests and constant variables. Thus, the acquisition of sound subject matter knowledge is important before entering classrooms.

During the classroom observation, G3 was found to face some challenges in communicating with kindergarten children. Three out of four members of G3 were international students who were not able to speak the Malay language. Whereas the young children could not speak English. Most of the time, the preservice did not know what to do with the children but sat there with them. PT11 reflected,

This experience made me aware of my own strengths and weaknesses in teaching kids. When the kids did not know how to speak in English, I didn't know what to do . . . This is an issue I may also face in my future career. Also, I am not good at singing children's songs and telling them stories. I need to learn how to respond to any teaching issues promptly and calmly.

Gaining Hands-On Experience

Hands-on experiences allowed the preservice teachers to learn by doing things and solving problems they faced in the refugee school. For instance, PT2 said, "This project extends our learning outside the classroom. This provides more hands-on experience and opportunities for teaching besides our practicum. This type of collaboration allows us to learn through practice besides listening to theoretical lectures."

For the preservice teachers who had not gone for their practicum, the RCEP helped them connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations. PT19 explained,

We learned to design lesson plans, learning activities and learning resources for students in different modules. However, we never have the opportunities to apply these lesson plans in a real-life classroom setting. This was a good opportunity to see if the lesson we designed worked or did not work. I gained valuable hands-on experience especially dealing with children from different school settings. This experience prepared me for my coming practicum.

The preservice teachers bridged their theoretical knowledge and classroom practices in a few ways. In one instance, G4 actively applied the principles of behaviorism in their lessons. PT16 was seen trying to grasp the students' attention by instructing them to "Eyes on You" when he said, "Eyes on Me." PT15 acknowledged the students' efforts by saying "Good job. Your group categorizes all objects into three states of matter correctly," and "Your group received five stickers for explaining why wind is a gas." On the other

hand, G2 and G5 designed science experiments using the principles of inquiry-based learning. G2 encouraged the students to ask questions about air resistance and investigated how different types of surfaces impacted the distance traveled by a toy car, simulating real-world situations of a car traveling on roads with rough or smooth surfaces.

Dealing With challenges

The educational settings in refugee schools, which are different from mainstream schools, posed challenges to the preservice teachers. One of the challenges was language barriers, especially among young children and those who had just arrived in Malaysia. Some of them could only understand their mother tongue, whereas some had very limited understanding of English. G3, who was teaching kindergarten and year 1 students, strived for their best to overcome this challenge. PT11 reflected, “Most of the young children could not understand English. But I am the only one who can speak in Malay language. So, I told them a story titled ‘Kincir air ajaib’ (a magic windmill) using Malay language.”

A few preservice teachers mentioned that spontaneity was crucial to address the challenges in the field. For instance, the facilities, resources, and classroom settings hindered the implementation of some activities. PT5 said,

First, we planned to have the four station games in the classroom. But the space was limited. It would be difficult for the kids to move around. Therefore, we quickly decided to move two station games to the empty study space outside the classroom.

G5 designed an experiment that required the school children to tie a rope on two surfaces to form a “bridge.” PT18 explained that they had to adapt their plan based on the availability of the resources in the school. She said, “We observed the furniture in the classroom and agreed that it was best to tie the rope on two chairs, instead of two tables (initial plan). The height was ideal.” This indicated that adaptability is crucial to overcome the challenges faced in the setting.

The preservice teachers also found it challenging to manage a class with a large number of students. For instance, G2 had to teach a Grade 2 class with 40 students. They overcame this challenge by distributing the supervising tasks among the three members. PT7 said, “Each of us had to take care of three groups and check their experiment set-up. This could be quite tough. We walked from one group to another to ensure the kids could follow our instructions.”

The preservice teachers also faced some classroom management issues. In the kindergarten classroom, a 4-year-old child was seen lying on the floor. In a year 6 classroom, a few students did not want to get involved in the experiment. PT8 approached these students and asked them the reasons for not joining the activity. He saw that the students were holding Rubik’s Cubes in their hands. Being a Rubik’s Cube fan himself, he played the cube with the students for a while before directing them to join their peers. As for the young kindergarten child, the G3 members pacified her for a while and then just let her lie on the floor.

Another challenge was the limited resources at the refugee schools. For instance, Refugee School 2 was not equipped with projectors. G3, G4, and G5 either wrote short notes on the whiteboards or prepared printed pictures for the children. G1 overcame the issue of limited space in the classroom by bringing a student group to the common space outside the classroom so that the children could sit in a circle to create colored shadows and share their findings with their peers.

Discussion

Purpose-led universities should transform in response to the societal challenges and changes (Pouilleau, 2020; Shen & Teng, 2019), given their rich resources and roles as the center of social interactions and intellectual exchanges (Pouilleau, 2020). This agenda can be advanced through well-designed teacher education and continual professional development, including preservice teachers’ engagement with refugee communities to broaden their views on equitable education. This study aimed to explore how RCEP can prepare preservice teachers for their future careers. In line with the previous studies (Halpern et al., 2024;

Wessels et al., 2024), this study showed that the preservice teachers started to socially construct knowledge and experience through refugee community engagement to impact a larger community.

The research findings support the existing literature on the positive impact of RCEP in equipping preservice teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitudes in teaching (Boyd & Darragh, 2020; Walker, 2023). PCK involved teaching strategies responsive to children's learning needs, classroom management, co-teaching, and inclusive learning environments. Teaching is a dynamic process for preservice teachers to acquire knowledge and skills in authentic and meaningful contexts, especially inclusive settings for marginalized groups (An, 2019). The preservice teachers reflected greater awareness of sustainability-related issues such as social justice and inquiry in education after engaging in RCEP. Teachers' consciousness of social injustice is more likely to design projects addressing societal issues and to empower their students to be advocates for social action (Boyd & Darragh, 2020). Hence, forging partnerships with different refugee schools and intervention centers can widen preservice teachers' global views and foster equitable education.

Reflecting deeply on their involvement in RCEP allowed the preservice teachers to self-assess their performance and future improvement. This aligns with the principles of purpose-led learning, which emphasize personal purpose, responsibilities for self-growth, and impact on communities (Pouilleau, 2020). Critical reflection work structure and impact of community engagement boosts students' self-actualization and readiness for the future workplace (Shen & Teng, 2019). Reflective discussions are essential for preservice teachers to analyze experiences and learning outcomes. This leads to professional growth and an increased quality of teaching skills. Creating a habit of reflective practice promotes ongoing and sustainable instructional improvement for preservice teachers (Weaver et al., 2023).

The preservice teachers, despite their limited teaching experience, showed high commitment in overcoming the challenges faced throughout the RCEP. Classroom management, student number, language, and resources are common barriers (Devkar & Waghmare, 2024). In community projects with culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse participants, language barriers may cause isolation in participation (Townsend et al., 2021). Technologies such as artificial intelligence translators and videos with Malay language subtitles can mitigate these barriers (Devkar & Waghmare, 2024). Findings showed that adaptability, spontaneity, and open-mindedness were crucial to addressing challenges in real-world settings. Developing rapport with RC through sharing common interests with them was helpful, but not all challenges could be overcome in a short time. Preservice teachers need to gradually develop their competencies in teaching and managing diverse learners (Tang et al., 2016).

While highlighting the benefits of RCEP to preservice teachers is essential, overemphasizing service as wholly positive may neglect RC's complexities in life and reduce their stories to mere teaching tools (Butin, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). Service providers should critically reflect on their fixed mindset about the communities they serve (Mitchell, 2008), such as relating marginalized groups with poverty and illiteracy. Such concerns align with the framework of critical service-learning, which encourages service providers to view themselves as agents of social change, to examine power distribution, and to foster authentic relationships with beneficiaries (Mitchell, 2008). In this study, the RCEP was intentionally designed in collaboration with the alternative learning center managers, who identified topics based on refugee students' needs and existing knowledge, reviewed the learning materials for appropriateness, and advised on culturally responsive pedagogies. These relationships were grounded on mutual respect, trust, and shared decision making, acknowledging the refugee communities as active collaborators in the learning process, not passive recipients (Mitchell, 2008). The preservice teachers also cultivated a deeper sense of social responsibility through continuous reflection on their experiences.

The findings revealed that the preservice teachers gained the ability to create and deliver lessons that target multiple stages of child development and developing stronger classroom management in refugee school settings. This experience broadened their understanding of global education issues and developed attitudes of care, showing evident movement toward community-based and inclusive practices in teacher education (Darling-Hammand, 2017; Zeichner, 2010). However, for the same programs to scale up and be sustained in the longer term, they need support from an enabling education policy framework. The lack of formal recognition for learning centers managed by refugee communities, limited access to national exams,

and the absence of opportunities for refugee teachers pursuing teacher training indicate the urgent need for equitable and inclusive policies (Dryden-Peterson, 2011; UNHCR, 2019). Therefore, it highlights the imperative need for designing community-based engagement activities in higher education to find bottom-up innovations for supporting these alternative learning centers using a purpose-led learning framework (UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusion

Integrating purposive learning as a pedagogy can empower preservice teachers as proactive learners who are equipped with core competencies and self-driven motivation to bring impacts on their communities and their own (Shen & Teng, 2019). Besides mainstream schools, the establishment of alternative learning centers for RC creates opportunities for HEIs to immerse preservice teachers in purposeful learning through community engagement projects for those marginalized children. The RCEP in this study was an initiative to develop collaborative partnerships with alternative learning centers to bring mutual benefits to preservice teachers and refugee students. The findings show that the preservice teachers' experiences with the RCEP were positive and signaled a unique opportunity for personal growth and preparation for their future teaching careers.

This study has practical implications for the professional development of preservice teachers and purpose-led teacher education. Teachers at refugee schools face a lot of pedagogical challenges in their unique educational settings. The commonest pedagogical methods used are lecture presentations, with teachers asking factual questions rather than idea-provoking questions (Mendenhall et al., 2015). There are limited comprehension checks and an absence of conceptual learning at refugee schools (Mendenhall et al., 2015). Involvement of trained preservice teachers in refugee education encourages the sharing of knowledge and skills among the teachers to improve the quality of education at refugee schools. At the same time, the research findings indicate that RCEP is a potential teaching approach to enhance teacher education programs. RCEP can be an early teacher preparation program for student teachers (Coffey, 2010). This will allow preservice teachers to develop essential teaching skills to prepare them for independent teaching in the future.

To ensure successful implementation of RCEP, it is crucial for universities to gain insights into the needs of communities and refugee students' demographics to design appropriate lessons for them. This may include adopting culturally responsive pedagogy to integrate refugee students' cultures into learning activities and resources. The reason is students' culture and lived experiences, which influence how they understand and make sense of the world or themselves, are an integral part of who they are as learners. Refugee communities also need opportunities to discover their own strengths and assets to realize mutually beneficial engagement and to sustain long-term partnerships (Clifford & Petrescu, 2012).

As part of RCEP, the preservice teachers are required to prepare lesson plans and teaching materials tailored to the learning needs of refugee students. These resources are not only used during their teaching practicum but are also handed over to the refugee learning centers. In doing so, the project contributes to social sustainability by equipping local refugee teachers with ready-to-use, quality teaching materials. This ongoing resource sharing supports the long-term self-sufficiency of refugee educators, empowering them to continue delivering lessons effectively even after the project ends (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

Although this study has practical implications for preservice teachers' professional development, a few aspects could be improved regarding data collection methods and sample size. The data collection method, which only involved recording some parts of the sessions, provided limited information on how RCEP benefited the preservice teachers. For example, a significant finding is the increased awareness of social responsibility for underprivileged communities among the preservice teachers. However, the researchers did not delve deeper into this finding, as there was no follow-up interview. Besides, since the researchers did not record the whole teaching process for every group, there was a lack of supporting evidence for data triangulation to create an in-depth picture of how this awareness was transformed into actions in their teaching. For future studies, researchers can collect additional data from questionnaires and interviews to understand how such awareness was developed throughout the process.

The second limitation is the small sample size, which only involved 20 preservice teachers from one university. Although all the preservice teachers taking this specialization module were involved in the program, the research findings cannot be generalized to other educational contexts. An effective purpose-led teacher education should be mutually beneficial for universities and communities. In the future, data can be collected from different stakeholders, including RC, teachers of refugees, and refugee school leaders, to explore the impact of RCEP on them.

This study also revealed that the preservice teachers faced a language barrier, limited resources, and young children's off-task behaviors while they were engaged in RCEP. They put in effort to address these challenges, but the outcomes of these coping strategies were not assessed. Future studies can focus on exploring the challenges faced by the preservice teachers and evaluating their coping strategies in-depth. Such research can provide guidelines for implementing RCEP effectively to realize the objectives of purpose-driven education.

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