

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION FOR UNDOCUMENTED INDONESIAN CHILDREN IN THE OIL PALM PLANTATIONS OF SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian immigration policy prohibits foreign workers with a Visit Pass (Temporary Employment) from bringing their family members into Malaysia. Thus, undocumented Indonesian children living with their migrant parents in Sarawak's oil palm plantations are denied enrolment in Malaysian public schools. They can only enrol in the Community Learning Centres (CLCs), which were established based on the agreement between Sarawak and the Indonesian government. This study employs Critical Theory and Critical Policy Analysis as its primary theoretical framework to analyse the educational policies affecting undocumented Indonesian children in Sarawak. It examines the implications of CLCs' registration status, the impact on related stakeholders, and the issues and challenges faced in providing primary-level education to Indonesian children. This study has adopted a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and open-ended online forms to collect data from interviewees and participants. All the data were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework. This study found that only 16 out of 66 CLCs receive annual operational funds from the Indonesian government. It discovered various impacts on the Indonesian and Sarawak Governments, the plantations, and the Indonesian children. It also identified issues and challenges, namely the lack of facilities and qualified teachers, multi-grade classrooms, and late-start students.

Keywords: Alternative education, community learning centres, oil palm plantations, Sarawak, undocumented Indonesian children

Submission: 19th September 2024

Accepted: 7th May 2026

<https://doi.org/10.33736/ijbs.14349.2026>

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Malaysia, the Malaysian Immigration Department has listed four conditions a Visit Pass (Temporary Employment), VP(TE), holder must follow when working in the country (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2016). First, the VP(TE) holders must not work as front liners. Secondly, the pass holders are not allowed to change employers and work sectors. Thirdly, the marriage of the pass holders is prohibited with local or foreign citizens in Malaysia. Lastly, the workers' family members are not allowed to enter and live in Malaysia. However, reports have shown that undocumented Indonesian children are living with their migrant parents in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak (Wong et al., 2021; Yu, 2016).

The education policies for non-Malaysian children have changed over the years. Before 1995, non-Malaysian children were allowed to attend Malaysian national schools without issues. In 1995, an additional rule was added which required non-Malaysian children to pay an annual fee of RM120 for primary school enrolment and RM240 for secondary school. Subsequently, in 1998, only specific categories of non-Malaysian children were allowed to enrol in Malaysian national schools with the required documents (Attorney General's Chambers of Malaysia, 1996; Loganathan et al., 2022). In 2009, undocumented children could enrol in national schools as long as one of their parents was a Malaysian citizen. In 2019, the Zero Reject Policy was introduced by the Ministry of Education Malaysia to address the issue of enrolling undocumented children into Malaysian national schools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018; Nawi et al., 2024). However, one of the parents of the undocumented child must be a Malaysian. Otherwise, the parents must be foreign embassy staff or working in government agencies with valid work permits.

Since the majority of the Indonesian children in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak have both Indonesian parents, these children can't be accepted into Malaysian national schools. Therefore, the only option for undocumented Indonesian children is the alternative education programme offered by the Community Learning Centres (CLCs) in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak, which was established based on the agreement between Sarawak and the Indonesian Government. According to Datuk Fatimah Abdullah, the Minister of Women, Welfare, and Family Development, the Indonesian Government provides teaching staff to Sarawak, while the oil palm plantations in Sarawak provide infrastructure (Borneo Post, 2015).

This research employs Critical Theory and Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) as its primary theoretical frameworks to analyse the educational policies affecting undocumented Indonesian children in Sarawak. Critical Theory, rooted in the Frankfurt School philosophy, provides a lens to examine power dynamics and systemic inequalities inherent in these policies, aiming to highlight and address social injustices (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Building on this foundation, CPA scrutinises the discrepancies between policy rhetoric and practice, exploring how these policies distribute power and resources, potentially reinforcing or challenging existing inequalities (Young & Diem, 2018; Levinson et al., 2020). By applying these frameworks, this study seeks to contribute to broader academic and policy debates on education, migration, and labour policies in Malaysia. A comprehensive understanding of these issues is necessary to inform policy interventions that can effectively address the educational needs of undocumented Indonesian children and promote social justice.

Table 1: The number of CLCs and students in Sarawak

Year	Number of CLCs in Sarawak	Changes from the previous year (%)	Number of students	Changes from the previous year (%)
2016	16	Not available	674	Not available
2017	16	0	826	22.6
2018	54	237.5	1474	78.5
2019	63	16.7	1870	26.9
2020	63	0	1956	4.6
2023	66	4.8	Not available	Not available

Source: Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Kuching (2020)

The first 16 CLCs in Sarawak were established in 2016 in the Miri and Bintulu Divisions, Sarawak, which accommodated a total of 674 students (Table 1). The number of students increased to 826 in 2017, an increase of 22.6 per cent, with no increment in the number of CLCs. A sharp increase was recorded in 2018 with an addition of 38 CLCs, an increment of about 237.5 per cent, for a total of 54 CLCs in Sarawak. At the same time, the number of students also increased to 1,474, approximately 78.5 per cent from the previous year. The total number of CLCs in 2019 was 63, an increase of 16.7 per cent. The number of students also increased to 1,870, with an increase of 26.9 per cent. In December 2020, the number of CLCs was still maintained at 63, accommodating 1,956 Indonesian students in the plantations of Sarawak, an increase of 4.6 per cent from 2019. Lately, the number of CLCs increased to 66 in December 2023.

In terms of academic matters, the main difference between CLCs and Malaysian public schools is the curriculum. The CLCs in Sarawak use the Indonesian curriculum, which is similar to schools in Indonesia, with Bahasa Indonesia as the medium of instruction. On the other hand, Malaysian public schools use the Malaysian teaching curriculum with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. There are two groups of teachers in Sarawak's CLCs: *Guru Bina* (a qualified teacher) and *Guru Pamong* (a non-qualified teacher). *Guru Bina* is assigned and paid by the Indonesian government, while *Guru Pamong* is recruited and paid by respective plantations (Wong et al., 2021).

Although there are studies that investigate the issue of alternative education in other countries, research focusing on the setting of CLCs in Sarawak that provide alternative education to undocumented Indonesian children appears to be very limited and understudied. With the unique condition of CLCs in Sarawak, this study is intended to fill the gap in alternative education and CLCs' model in Sarawak by examining the implications of registered and non-registered CLCs on their daily operation, the impact of CLCs on related stakeholders, and the issues and challenges the CLCs face in providing primary-level education to Indonesian children.

This study interviews with the representatives of CLCs and oil palm plantations to provide insights into CLCs in Sarawak. The findings showed that there were significant implications for funding between registered and non-registered CLCs. Other than that, the establishment of CLCs also has significant impacts on the Indonesian government, the Sarawak government, oil palm plantations, and undocumented Indonesian children. Lastly, this study has identified issues and

challenges of operating CLCs in Sarawak, namely the lack of facilities and qualified teachers, multi-grade classrooms, and late-start students.

1.1. Critical Theory and Critical Policy Analysis

Critical Theory is a fundamental framework for analysing educational policies, particularly in contexts of social injustice and systemic inequalities. This theory emerged from the Frankfurt School philosophy in the early 20th century, shaped by key figures like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Their mission was to critique and change society by addressing power structures and inequalities (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Critical theorists argue that knowledge and science should serve the goal of human emancipation, namely to improve human conditions and social justice, rather than being pursued solely for their own sake (Britannica, 2024). This perspective lays a base for examining educational policy in the context of power dynamics and inequalities. Focusing on the relationship between knowledge, power, and social structures, Critical Theory encourages a transformative approach to education that seeks to empower marginalised groups and promote equity (Misiaszek, 2023).

By building on the foundation of Critical Theory, Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) emerges as a focused and specific application to the field of education (Young & Diem, 2018). Specifically, CPA questions who benefit from certain policies and whose interests are marginalised. On top of that, CPA has also been utilised by researchers in analysing educational policy, namely to examine the dissimilarity between policy rhetoric and practised reality, to explore the distribution of power, resources, and inequality (Diem et al., 2014; Young & Diem, 2017). CPA also emphasises the importance of context in policy analysis. It recognises that educational policies are not created or implemented in a vacuum but are influenced by social, political, and economic forces. By examining these factors, CPA provides insights and explanations of policies that can reinforce or challenge the existing inequalities (Levinson et al., 2020). Thus, through these frameworks, this research could provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational issues and environment about undocumented Indonesian children living in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

No country uses a similar alternative education programme as CLCs in Sarawak, Malaysia (Cahill et al., 2020; Phillippi et al., 2021; Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020; Thorne, 2017). However, there are two paradigms of alternative education in the literature in general. One focuses on disciplinary and problematic students who are removed from ordinary schools in Western countries (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020; Russell & Thomson, 2011; Thorne, 2017). The other focuses on the marginalised children or young people who are excluded from mainstream education due to poverty and the status of immigrants in Asian countries (Islam, 2016; Nawarat, 2012; Phyu, 2018; SS Coaching, 2018; Tuangratananon et al., 2019; Tuladhar, 2004; UNICEF Thailand, 2020).

In contrast to Asian countries, most alternative education studies in the West focus on disciplinary and problematic students. Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) examine the education issue of the young people who are involved in the criminal justice system in Tasmania, Australia,

while Russell and Thomson (2011) investigate troublesome students excluded from mainstream education in England. Similarly, Gut and McLaughlin (2012) explore the issue of alternative education in the context of disciplinary students who are removed from schools. Nonetheless, Thorne (2017) studies the emergence of alternative education and students with challenging behaviour or at risk in the context of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

Some studies correlate the number of alternative schools with disenfranchised students. Kim and Taylor (2008) examine an alternative high school in the United States and discover that the alternative school positively impacts the students. The school is able to provide a caring environment for its students. However, this alternative school is different, as students are only enrolled for a maximum of two years before returning to their original school.

Countries in Asia, namely Bangladesh, Nepal, and India, along with ASEAN countries like Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, offer alternative education to vulnerable children. For example, there is an alternative education programme in Bangladesh called the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) Education Programme. However, this programme targets underprivileged children, not undocumented migrant children (*BRAC Education Programme*, 2015). Similar to Bangladesh, India also has an alternative education programme called the Open Basic Education (OBE) Programme, and it targets children who are unable to go to or drop out of school (SS Coaching, n.d.).

Similarly, Myanmar and Nepal also have alternative education programmes for underprivileged children. The programme in Myanmar is called Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE), which is a free programme for children who do not have the opportunity to go to school, especially those from poor families (Phyu, 2018). In terms of Nepal, it has two alternative education programmes for Nepali children called the Out-of-School Programme (OSP) and the Out-of-School Girls Education Programme. The main target of OSP is children aged between 8 and 14 who do not have access to formal education, are unable to attend full-time schooling, and have dropped out of school (Tuladhar, 2004). On the other hand, the Out-of-School Girls Education programme targets out-of-school girls who are aged between 7 and 13 years old to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as knowledge and awareness in health and population education (Tuladhar, 2004).

In the ASEAN region, apart from Malaysia, Thailand has an alternative education programme for undocumented migrant children. It is called Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs), which are located in Chiang Mai. Since the Thailand education policy changed in 2005, undocumented migrant children in Thailand have been allowed to enrol in Thailand's public schools (Nawarat, 2012). However, many Myanmar migrants are still sending their undocumented children to MLCs, with about 19,410 migrant children in 2019 (UNICEF Thailand, 2020). For short-term stayers, they prefer to send their children to MLCs because the centres use the Myanmar teaching curriculum. Moreover, these children can continue their studies when they return to Myanmar later. Secondly, MLCs are more 'flexible' in document checking. Although legal status or citizenship is not a prerequisite to enrol in Thailand's public schools, certain schools may request work permits or passports, which makes migrant parents reluctant to send their children there. Thirdly, it is due to the location. Usually, MLCs are located close to the residential areas of migrants. Therefore, it is convenient for the children to go to MLCs (Tuangratananon et al., 2019).

In Malaysia, undocumented children are vulnerable. There are various factors that a child becoming undocumented, namely the failure of marriage registration and the birth of children, abandoned children, adopted children, children of refugees, and undocumented migrants (Yusoff et al., 2019). Under the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/1963, asylum-seekers, refugees, and irregular migrants are categorised as illegal immigrants (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013). Since Malaysia is not a contracting state to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, the children of refugees and undocumented migrants have no protection by the law in Malaysia, cannot access social services and enrol in public schools, and have to face discrimination due to their status (Child Rights Coalition Malaysia, 2013; Makhtar et al., 2015; Taib, 2013; UNHCR, 2013; Yusoff et al., 2019).

Irregular migrants who bring their children with them to Malaysia and Thailand face different challenges, particularly in terms of language barriers (Bryant, 2005). Unlike Burmese migrants in Thailand, Indonesians in Malaysia do not face significant linguistic barriers. However, providing necessary services such as education and healthcare to irregular migrant children can be a politically sensitive issue, as some may perceive it as a pull factor that could encourage more irregular migrants into the host country.

In the context of Sabah, the neighbouring state of Sarawak, there are more than 227 CLCs throughout the state. As stated by the previous Indonesian ambassador to Malaysia, Rusdi Kirana, once these children reach the age of 12, they must return to Indonesia to finish their education (Patrick, 2017). Many Indonesian articles emphasise that everyone has the right to education and affirm that CLCs in the plantations are the best solution so far to provide primary-level education to Indonesian children (Awaliyah & Aini, 2019; Damayanti et al., 2023; Handoyo & Triarda, 2020; KBRI Kuala Lumpur, 2018; Sopyan, 2022; Viviansari, 2019). However, very little research focuses on alternative education and CLCs for undocumented Indonesian children, particularly in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak, Malaysia.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising face-to-face semi-structured interviews, interviews through telephone calls, text messaging, and an online form (open-ended questions) to gather data from participants and interviewees. This methodology reflects Critical Theory and Critical Policy Analysis, focusing on understanding the experiences of marginalised groups and the related power dynamics. By amplifying the voices of individuals directly impacted by educational policies, this study enriches the larger academic and policy discussions surrounding social justice and educational equity. The qualitative data gathered offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered by undocumented Indonesian children in Sarawak, guiding the development of targeted policy interventions to effectively meet their educational needs.

The interview sessions were scheduled at times convenient for the interviewees, who agreed to participate knowing in advance that there would be no compensation. The interviewees were fully aware that their involvement was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to stop and withdraw from the interview at any point during the sessions. The face-to-face interview sessions with the General Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia and the coordinators of Sarawak's CLC

lasted for between two and three hours. The interview sessions through telephone calls with the management staff of the oil palm plantations lasted for less than 20 minutes each session, and it took several sessions to complete the whole interview process. The text messaging with the management staff was carried out over days and up to weeks, depending on the speed of replying and the amount of data the interviewees provided. Lastly, the online form was answered by the 34 CLC teachers.

The purposive sampling method was used to select interviewees for this study. The main attribute of the selected interviewees was based on their knowledge and engagement with the CLCs in Sarawak. The selected interviewees and participants of this study were the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Kuching, the two coordinators of Sarawak's CLC, three plantation managers with more than 10 years of work experience (in three districts of Sarawak, namely Miri, Mukah and Bintulu), a human resource manager with 16 years of work experience (Miri), a human resource executive with seven years work experience (Miri), and a manager in the Department of Sustainability with 18 years of work experience (Bintulu).

The purposive sampling method was also employed to select participants for the online form (open-ended questions). The main criteria for the participants for the online form were CLC teachers in Sarawak. First, the authors obtained the list of CLC teachers from the CLC coordinators. Out of 128 CLC teachers in Sarawak, 34 were identified by the CLC coordinators with the criteria of these teachers having access to an internet connection. Lastly, 34 CLC teachers participated and answered the online form, which comprised 23 *Guru Bina* and 11 *Guru Pamong*. All the data were analysed by using thematic analysis.

The six-phase thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) is referred to. It starts with familiarising oneself with the data, followed by generating initial codes, then searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining themes, and lastly, the write-up. Through the process, the authors were able to capture interesting feedback, search for themes and group them according to the research questions. The themes were the annual fund from the Indonesian government, the impacts of CLCs on different stakeholders, and the issues and challenges of establishing CLCs in Sarawak.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The emergence of CLCs resulted from a labour shortage in the oil palm plantations of Sarawak. The labour shortage is a serious issue that is faced by the oil palm industry (Ismail et al., 2018). As reported in The Borneo Post (2015), the former Land Development Minister of Sarawak emphasised that the government has tried its best to recruit locals to work in oil palm plantations, but there are no takers. Similarly, the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) agreed that it is a difficult task to recruit locals to work in oil palm plantations (Masiron, 2018). Therefore, in order to solve the labour shortage problem, the oil palm plantations in Sarawak have to depend on foreign workers. In order to attract Indonesian workers, especially those with children, CLCs have become one of the significant factors. Additionally, CLC is also a requirement for plantations that comply with the International Sustainability and Carbon Certification (ISCC).

4.1. Community Learning Centres with Permits

Among the 66 CLCs in Sarawak, only 16 are registered and approved by the Private Education Division of the Ministry of Education Malaysia (Bahagian Pendidikan Swasta Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, BPSKPM) and the Sarawak State Education Department (Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak, JPNS), with permits (General Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, personal communication, June 24, 2020). In 2018, an additional 15 CLCs submitted their applications to BPSKPM and JPNS for approval. Subsequently, another 15 CLCs submitted their applications in 2019, and 17 CLCs submitted their applications in 2020. However, until December 2023, none of these applications had been approved.

The implication of a registered CLC is the provision of annual funding from the Indonesian government. Registered CLCs with a permit from BPSKPM and KPNS will get a *Nombor Pokok Sekolah Nasional* (NPSN) from the Ministry of Education Indonesia (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Indonesia, n.d.). CLCs with NPSN are recognised as registered schools in the context of Indonesia. Therefore, these CLCs are getting an annual operation allowance from the Indonesian government for the purpose of improving the facilities of the CLCs, purchasing stationery, paying for electricity, water, and phone bills, preparing hand sanitiser, repairing work, procuring motorcycles, computers, laptops, printers, and other necessities for the CLCs.

CLCs with NPSN are called CLC *Induk* (Main CLC). The other CLCs that are located within the same division as the CLC *Induk* will operate based on their fund distribution. The concept seems like the best solution as a sustainable way to keep the other CLCs, without a permit, alive and operating. In addition, some migrant parents generously pay the CLCs, intending to help them operate. The second advantage of a registered CLC is that each student enrolled in the centre will get a *Nombor Induk Siswa Nasional* (NISN). CLC students with an NISN will get a certificate from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia for sitting in the Year 6 final national exam.

4.2. The Impact of CLCs on the Indonesian Government and Children

Providing primary-level education to the Indonesian children in Sarawak's plantations could reduce the number of illiterate children. Without CLCs, these children do not have other places with a conducive learning environment. They are not only unable to contribute to the development of Indonesia in the future, but they also burden their home country (Hartati & Andawiyah, 2020). Thus, CLCs in Sarawak lay the foundation to produce educated manpower for Indonesia.

Secondly, the Indonesian government fulfils its responsibilities by providing primary-level education to its citizens through CLCs. It is mandatory for the Indonesian government to provide primary school education to Indonesian children, even if the children are in other countries (Hartati & Andawiyah, 2020; Itasari, 2020; Viviansari, 2019). Therefore, CLC is the best option for the Indonesian government to address the education rights and needs of undocumented Indonesian children in Sarawak, Malaysia. Nonetheless, through the alternative education programme in CLCs, these children could be developed into the future manpower of Indonesia.

For children, education is one of the essential elements to breaking the chain of poverty and to have a better future (Suarno et al., 2021). In the context of the CLCs in the oil palm plantations in Sarawak, children between 7 and 12 years old have a chance to study in primary-level education. They could study the exact syllabus as the schools in Indonesia. With the same syllabus and curriculum, these children have an easy transition to their secondary school studies when they return to Indonesia.

In addition, the annual scholarship called *Beasiswa Afirmasi Pendidikan Menengah* (ADEM) for the selected CLC students to continue their secondary education in Indonesia will surely benefit the students and reduce the burden on the migrant parents. The annual scholarship was started in 2015 and covers the tuition fees and living allowance of the scholarship holders studying at the level of *Sekolah Menengah Atas* (SMA), year 10 to 12 in secondary school. According to the Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia di Kota Kinabalu Sabah Malaysia (2019), the Indonesian Government has offered 500 ADEM scholarships to Indonesian Migrant Children in Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, to continue their studies in Indonesia.

Among the 500 scholarship holders (*Beswan*), most were from Sabah's CLCs and the Indonesian School in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. On the other hand, only 13 scholarship holders were from Sarawak's CLCs. In 2020, there were only seven students from the CLCs in Sarawak who obtained the ADEM scholarship. In 2021/2022, 21 CLC students in Sarawak obtained the scholarship. Thus, the existence of CLCs in Sarawak has created a positive social impact on Indonesian children.

The recipients of the ADEM scholarship from the CLCs in Sarawak have always been relatively lower than the CLCs and schools in Sabah. One of the CLC coordinators explains that, other than the Indonesian school (*Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu*), there are more than 227 CLCs in Sabah. In contrast, there are only 66 CLCs in Sarawak. In this case, the students in Sarawak are outnumbered by the students in Sabah. Thus, it makes sense that the number of ADEM scholarships from the CLCs in Sarawak is always lower than in Sabah.

4.3. *The Impact of CLCs on the Sarawak Government and the Oil Palm Plantations*

Providing primary-level education to the Indonesian children in the plantations of Sarawak could address the accusation of child labour raised by Western countries. For example, in February 2022, US customs seized Malaysian palm oil that was worth RM10.5 million, with the reason this palm oil was produced by forced labour (Murugiah, 2022; "US CBP," 2022). Thus, the provision of CLCs in oil palm plantations could prove that the oil palm plantations provide primary education to the children, but do not take them as child labour.

Plantations that comply with the International Sustainability and Carbon Certification (ISCC) must provide access to education for the children on site. Principle 4 in ISCC is called Compliance with Human, Labour and Land Rights. Under Principle 4.1.6, "All children of primary schooling age (according to national legislation) living on the farm or plantation must have access to primary school education, either through provided transport to a public primary school or through adequate on-site schooling" (International Sustainability and Carbon Certification, 2016:36). Therefore, plantations with ISCC must either provide transport for children in the plantation to commute between plantation and school or set up a CLC in their

plantation. An Interviewee from a Bintulu plantation pointed out that “We cannot send the children to the public schools. That is why we set up CLCs in our plantations”. Since public primary school is not an option for Indonesian children, mainly due to the shortage of essential documents, CLC is the only option to fulfil the requirement of on-site schooling.

Another impact of CLCs on oil palm plantations in Sarawak is the supply of labour. Since oil palm plantations in Sarawak are having difficulty recruiting local workers, foreign workers are the best option to solve the labour shortage problem. Thus, by establishing CLCs in the oil palm plantations, it could attract potential migrant workers who intend to migrate with their children.

CLC could also reduce the potential accidents involving Indonesian children on-site. In terms of the safety of the children, CLCs not only play the role of an informal school, but they also act as a childcare centre to make sure that children are occupied with schoolwork instead of roaming around the plantations, which endangers themselves and others. A teacher in Bintulu highlighted that “some parents not only perceive CLC as a school, but a childcare centre for someone to look after their children”.

4.4. The Lack of Facilities and Qualified Teachers

Among the 34 CLC teachers who participated in the study, the majority of them stated that the lack of facilities at CLCs affects the students' motivation and undermines the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Some of them also raised concerns about the limited number and the size of the classrooms. According to one of the teachers in a CLC in Miri, “It is difficult to teach with the mixture of students from different years in a small classroom”. Through observation of the authors, the CLC in Miri had only two classrooms, and there was only a chair for the teacher without a table in both classrooms. Students had to sit on the floor and write on a low and long wooden table. Even though the table could accommodate up to five students, due to the limited number of wooden tables available, it was shared by eight students, which exceeded its capacity. In addition, a *Guru Pamong* from Bintulu highlighted that “other than limited classrooms, teaching students from diverse backgrounds is also a challenge”. Students who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have different ways of learning and interacting. Added by a *Guru Bina* in Bintulu, “Some students speak different languages or dialects at home, which can affect their understanding and communication in the classroom”. Thus, teachers have to be culturally sensitive and adapt their teaching strategies to achieve effective teaching and learning in class.

Overall, there are 28 *Guru Bina* and 100 *Guru Pamong* in the CLCs in Sarawak. *Guru Bina* is a teacher with teaching qualifications and who is qualified to teach in Indonesian public schools. Referring to one of the *Guru Bina* in Mukah Division, he has eight years of teaching experience in West Java, Indonesia, before teaching in Sarawak. In addition, *Guru Bina* is recruited and assigned by the Ministry of Education of Indonesia to the CLCs in Sarawak, and the ministry pays their salary. As highlighted by the *Guru Bina*, “I have to travel to other CLCs, which only have *Guru Pamong*, once every fortnight, to assist in the matter of teaching, training, and daily operation due to the shortages of teachers”.

On the other hand, *Guru Pamong* is not a qualified teacher, and the main role of *Guru Pamong* is to teach in CLCs due to the shortage of *Guru Bina* (Viviansari, 2019). As further explained by

one of the CLC coordinators in Sarawak, a *Guru Pamong* can be an existing plantation worker who is later converted to become a *Guru Pamong* based on the negotiation between the plantation companies and workers. Thus, *Guru Pamong* is still receiving the same salary from the plantation company as before, and the only thing that changes is the job, from a plantation worker to a CLC teacher (*Guru Pamong*). In addition, *Guru Pamong* must at least hold a secondary school qualification.

4.5. *The Multi-Grade Classrooms and Late-Start Students*

The multi-grade classroom is a major challenge for the CLCs in Sarawak. Due to the limited classrooms available in the CLCs, students from different grade levels are grouped together to share the same classroom. Due to the setting, teachers could not focus on just one group of students but on multiple groups of students from various grade levels. A CLC teacher from the Miri Division finds class management challenging and demanding because students frequently lose focus when attention is given to students from other grades. Although the teacher assigns tasks and exercises to students, they generally struggle to maintain focus while he is teaching another group of students. As justified by a *Guru Pamong* in Bintulu, “I feel exhausted to teach in a multi-grade class. It is very difficult for me and the students to lose focus”. All the 34 CLC teachers are not satisfied with this setup and affirmed that it has a negative impact in the process of teaching and learning.

Another significant issue faced by the CLCs and teachers is how to integrate late-start students. When a plantation establishes a CLC, some children are more than seven years old but have never attended school or CLC, and a mismatch between age and literacy level happens. In this case, the children are not allowed to enrol in the class according to their age. They have to start in a lower-grade class. According to one of the CLC coordinators, some nine-year-old children are unable to remember the sequence of ABC correctly. Placing nine-year-old children in the Year 1 class might undermine their self-confidence. Therefore, the CLC teachers have to enrol the children in the Year 2 class. Added by a *Guru Bina* in Miri, “Sometimes parents are the ones who did not send their children to the CLC. Some parents take education very lightly and cause these children to start late at CLC”. One of the teachers' challenges is to work hard with the children so that they can catch up with the learning syllabus. To achieve that, the teachers have to conduct extra classes on their initiative, including night and weekend classes.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the access to primary-level education for undocumented Indonesian children living in Sarawak's oil palm plantations. One of the key findings of this study is the insufficient availability of operational funds for the CLCs. Despite the recognition of the importance of education for undocumented Indonesian children, only 16 out of 66 CLCs receive annual funding due to their registration status. This lack of funding severely limits the capacity of the CLCs to provide quality education and adequate resources to the children, presenting a direct structural challenge to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which demands inclusive, equitable, and lifelong quality education for all children regardless of their legal status. This finding highlights the systemic inequalities and power dynamics inherent in the provision of education for undocumented children, as discussed in

Critical Theory (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). The lack of funding for the 50 CLCs underscores the discrepancies between policy rhetoric and practice, a key focus of Critical Policy Analysis (Young & Diem, 2018), particularly as it exposes how localised policy barriers can actively hinder the regional realisation of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). These findings contribute to broader academic and policy debates on the need for more equitable and inclusive educational policies that address the needs of marginalised groups.

Moreover, the CLCs demonstrate positive consequences for different stakeholders involved. The provision of CLCs offers a glimmer of hope for the children and their families, enabling access to education in a foreign country. Additionally, several persistent challenges were identified that hinder the delivery of education to undocumented Indonesian children. These challenges include the lack of facilities and qualified teachers, the presence of multi-grade classrooms, and the issue of late-start students. These challenges undermine both the process of teaching by teachers and the process of learning by students in class.

Lastly, this study highlights the urgent need for coordinated efforts from all stakeholders involved in overcoming the obstacles to primary-level education faced by undocumented Indonesian children in Sarawak's oil palm plantations. Policies and interventions should focus on increasing the number of registered CLCs in Sarawak so that these CLCs can secure sustainable annual funding from the Indonesian government and increase the number of *Guru Bina* in Sarawak. Only through collaborative action between the Indonesian government and the Sarawak State Government could undocumented Indonesian children have equitable educational opportunities in a foreign land.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank all participants who participated in this study.

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