BRIDGING THE EDUCATION GAP: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN SUPPORTING STATELESS CHILDREN

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Abstract: *This study focuses on the educational opportunities for stateless children in Sabah, highlighting the ongoing challenges they face in enrolling in formal school settings and their inability to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). It emphasizes the need for support from various perspectives, even if only in the short to medium term. Alternative learning centers (ALCs), as social enterprises, play a crucial role in addressing these issues and demonstrate a positive impact, particularly in reducing adverse socio-economic effects. Given the positive contributions of these social enterprises, it is beneficial to explore how they are implemented to empower this marginalized community through education. This study employs a qualitative method, specifically a single case study, to examine a related phenomenon in a real-world context. The findings reveal several key themes: creative and comprehensive learning strategies, transformative impact on societal benefits and proper physical setting. Thus, it provides an indicator of the importance of ALCs and encourages stakeholders to support them wherever possible, including in curriculum development and other support systems.*

Keywords: *Education, Stateless children, Alternative learning center, Social enterprise*
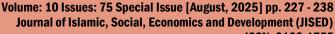
Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets to promote peace and prosperity for people and the planet, calling on all countries, both developed and developing, to take collective action now and in the future. The central principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to ensure that no one is left behind (United Nations, 2024).

As a member of the United Nations, Malaysia is committed to achieving sustainable development by mapping out initiatives that involve non-governmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, and the government to align the SDGs with the Malaysia Plan (MP) (Ministry of Economy, 2021). This includes the roles of social enterprises as key actors in these efforts as they integrate business skills with innovative solutions to positively impact the local communities in sustainable development (Kumi, 2019; Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

The importance of promoting education for sustainable development and integrating sustainable development actively into education was emphasized by the UN through SDG4, Quality Education. SDG4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. It is considered a key enabler for achieving most other SDGs (United Nations, 2024). Empowering individuals through education and skills development will allow them access to better jobs and higher incomes, ultimately leading to improved quality of life and well-being. (Economic Planning Unit, 2022).

In Malaysia, the government has made many amendments and improvements over the years and access to education continues to be expanded as to increase the inclusiveness across the ethnicities and regions (Economic Planning Unit, 2022), however, according to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), this does not reflect the actual situation on the ground. It stated that "…it is important to note that there are still challenges and limitations arising, such as non-inclusiveness and discrimination issues, especially when a high number of refugees and stateless children are banned from attending the public schools." (SUHAKAM, n.d.). Even though education is a significant tool to reduce inequality, unfortunately it remains a privilege that is still beyond reach for many children and the main challenges (Catherall & Richardson, 2017).

According to the United Nations, education is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of citizenship status. Stateless children in Malaysia, however, face major challenges in accessing education because current laws only allow citizen children to attend public schools. As a result, non-citizen children must either pay high school fees or go to alternative learning centers (ALCs) even though it often lacks standardized and quality education (Aimin et al., 2024; Pang et al., 2019). ALCs offer essential educational opportunities for children by building a foundation in literacy and numeracy, using flexible teaching methods and teaching lifelong skills such as life skills and civic responsibility (Pang et al., 2019).

Similarly, stateless children in India face barriers to education due to discrimination within refugee groups (Madhusmita, 2025). In Myanmar, the government restricts social benefits, including access to education, for stateless children (Bhattacharjee, 2024). While in Bangladesh, education is deprioritized for stateless children, who often face unsafe labor conditions and limited opportunities (Hossain et al., 2025). These challenges highlight the critical role of social entrepreneurship initiatives like ALCs in addressing educational exclusion. Considering ALCs serve as primary platforms providing basic education to stateless

children, this study explores how these centres operate to meet their needs (Muslihudin et al., 2023; Storen, 2025). This exploration will demonstrate their contributions, improve their strategies, and inform authorities about their vital role in overcoming discrimination and exclusion.

Literature Review

Stateless Children and Access to Education

In Malaysia, no other state faces the issue of stateless children caused by foreign migrants or refugees as urgently as Sabah (Jassica Jane et al., 2020). The persistent challenges of statelessness and the factors that put populations at risk of becoming stateless in Sabah remain significant issues (Rodziana Mohamed Razali, 2017).

Stateless people are individuals who are not recognized as nationals by any State under its laws, including those with undetermined nationality (Aning Tedong et al., 2024). According to Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless person is defined as "a person who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law." Official definition of stateless people according to UNHCR is "Stateless people are not recognized as citizens by any country. Denied the right to nationality, they often face barriers such as limited access to education, healthcare, employment, the ability to open a bank account, buy a house, and even marry." (United Nations Childrens' Fund, 2023).

The right to education is recognized in many human rights instruments, which emphasize that every child should have the opportunity to exercise this right. Equality is fundamental to education, and no child should face discrimination based on their legal status (Mahleza & Maake-Malatji, 2024). In Sabah, many stateless children lack access to educational opportunities due to the absence of proper legal documentation (Esther S Chong & Penang Institute, 2019). United Nations Childrens' Fund (UNICEF) reports that about 90.7% of stateless children in Sabah cannot attend pre-primary education, which severely affects their development and future chances. (United Nations Childrens' Fund, 2019). Considering this justification, this study adopts the context of Sabah as its foundation, recognizing the urgent need to address these concerning facts.

The Future Begins with Education

While education is a fundamental tool for poverty reduction, the inability to access basic education often traps children in a cycle of generational poverty (Aimin et al., 2024; Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2023; Selvakumaran et al., 2022). As they grow up without quality formal education, they become adults with limited skills and competencies, making it difficult for them to find jobs (Aning Tedong et al., 2024). The lack of exposure to a school environment can weaken their spirits, lead to negative behaviors, and foster low self-esteem. Instead of spending their time in school, they may waste it and become vulnerable to social problems and external threats (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2023; Selvakumaran et al., 2020). Such missed educational opportunities have led to rampant illiteracy and the lack of employable skills among these children (Aimin et al., 2024; Loganathan et al., 2023).

Subsequently, when formal education is unavailable, alternative options must be offered to children from this disadvantaged group to ensure that everyone has access to education, regardless of their religion, race, nationality, or location (Pang et al., 2019). In Malaysia, many undocumented and stateless children depend on informal education offered by community

learning centers (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, 2023). This alternative learning center that creates a safe and supportive environment caters to all students, regardless of their legal status, gender, or disability and are supported by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs)

The exact number of ALCs in Sabah is uncertain, but it is believed to be in the hundreds. These centers serve children who cannot attend public schools and find private schools too expensive. A key feature of ALCs is that the teaching and learning content is tailored to the specific context of the students, and the curriculum is not standardized (United Nations Childrens' Fund, 2019). Although these ALCs lack certification and accreditation and are often overcrowded, they provide the only opportunity for these children to receive an education (Rachel Chong, 2024; United Nations Childrens' Fund, 2019). On this basis, ALCs should strengthen their roles and strategies to meet the educational needs and expectations of stateless children.

Some ALCs in Sabah are registered and accredited as social enterprises focused on their social mission while maintaining financial sustainability. Social enterprises, in fact, primarily emphasize education, which is the largest segment of their activities, aimed at promoting literacy and learning (British Council, 2018). One of the sustainable ALCs is an accredited social enterprise, Cahaya Society. Established in 2019 where the organization firmly believes that education is a critical component of life. Located in Sandakan, Sabah, a state surrounded by stateless children, Cahaya Society is driven to intervene within the community to provide basic education. Through their efforts, they aim to address the educational disparities and ensure that every child has the chance to learn and thrive despite their circumstances.

Methodology

Qualitative Approach and Case Study Method

This study seeks to explore and examine the operationalization and organization of ALCs, which are regarded as a phenomenon studied within a real-world context. Thus, this study is exploratory in nature and qualitative in approach, utilizing a single-case study method that necessitates intensive data collection (Yin, 2018). Additionally, case study research is appropriate for investigating this phenomenon (Yin, 2018) and can effectively reveal the relevant themes within a real-world setting.

Data Collection Method and Case Study Protocol

Cahaya Society, aligning with the study's requirements, has been purposefully selected as a single case study and serves as the key informant. Their details were obtained from the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Cooperatives Development (KUSKOP) as this social enterprise is legally registered with the ministry and meets the criteria of a social enterprise engaged in providing education for stateless children. The co-founder was one of the main informants, along with three members for interviews and three stateless schoolchildren involved in observations.

Multiple sources of evidence, including in-depth interviews, on-site observations, photo taking and digital document reviews, are employed to obtain evidence. Utilizing a wide range of evidence sources, as arguments supported by multiple sources are considered superior in quality, more convincing and accurate (Yin, 2018). Employing data triangulation from various sources allows for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon, thereby improving the

validity and credibility of the results. Additionally, this method helps to mitigate the risk of depending too heavily on potentially biased interview excerpts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Proper case study protocol applied with ethical consideration to protect the informant and means to increase reliability of this study. Interviews and observations were conducted at the informant's locations according to their scheduled times. With permission, audio recordings of the interviews, which lasted 90 minutes, were made. The informant was informed about the study's nature and voluntarily agreed to participate. This research specifically analyzed evidence from webpages and social media documents, utilizing the organization's official website (covering approximately 1 to 2 years) and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook (covering about 6 months to 1 year).
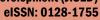
Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interview sessions, observation notes and photos were transcribed word-for-word to capture the "emerging patterns, categories, subcategories, themes, and concepts" (Saldana, 2009). Digital documents were also reviewed to understand their content. The data was then systematically analyzed and interpreted to develop a strong concept explaining the observed patterns and identifying main themes. Initial codes that aligned with the research objectives were created, leading to the discovery of patterns and themes that provided new insights into the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each theme was refined, named, and summarized to convey a clear central idea and maintain a consistent narrative throughout the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results

Table 1 below presents the findings of this study, collected from multiple sources of evidence. It also illustrates the mapping between the strategies implemented by Cahaya Society and the identified socio-economic issues faced by stateless children.

Table 1: Excerpts from multiple sources of evidence

Socio-economy issues	Multiple Source of Evidence		
	Interview excerpts (IV)	Document reviews (DR)	Observation notes (ON) & Site photos (SP)
Rampant illiteracy	…after can write and read, we then move on to philosophy, ideologies and teaching the Quran or Iqra'. …when we teach math, we concentrate on foundational concepts such as addition and other basic subjects. The next module we are focusing on … and financial literacy. Our volunteers consist of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and members of the general public.	The Alumni Club of Cahaya is preparing games and crafts for basic literacy and numeracy classes in a creative and innovative way to enhance their impact. The use of engaging play significantly aids in the reading development of children. The children of Cahaya are also introduced to computer use and the latest applications to enhance their digital literacy and boost their creativity.	SP: The founder conducts religious class, which include activities such as teaching the Quran, Jawi script, and fundamental beliefs of Islam. SP: Cahaya Society has established a mini library as part of its facilities, ensuring that basic necessities for the learning process are readily available for the children.
Cycle of generational poverty	The two mothers are no longer just learners… For each garment, the customer	The children are given the opportunity to run small businesses during festive	SP: Well-trained mothers are able to be independent and now busy completing the

Socio-economy issues	Multiple Source of Evidence		
	Interview excerpts (IV)	**Document reviews (DR)**	**Observation notes (ON) & Site photos (SP)**
	pays five ringgit, which we do not keep; instead, we give it directly to the mothers. We typically collect requests for sewing services or sublimation shirts. There are also Islamic primary schools that order their school uniforms from us.	seasons to enhance their entrepreneurial and communication skills while providing valuable exposure and experience in the field. The Financial Literacy Workshop is conducted in a hands-on manner, involving creative and colorful activities to achieve the best impact.	bookings for the sewing orders. Sewing skills training that can serve as a source of income for their families.
Limited skill and competencies	Once the students master these main components, we proceed to financial literacy and money management, which includes price comparison and saving money. We aim to ensure that every day, they can make wise choices, understanding their economic situation. …we teach them how to spend more wisely, which is essential for their financial well-being	Students are nurtured in creative skills through the creation of crafts. This also teaches them patience and perseverance. Cybersecurity education equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect themselves and those around them from online scams and threats. The Public Speaking or Speech Workshop teaches the children to express themselves, build confidence in facing the public, and articulate their views effectively.	ON: The educational area is the largest space, featuring warm decorations intended for students and equipped with all the necessary facilities and equipment to enhance learning and, importantly, to spark interest.
Difficult to find jobs, lack of employable skills	This means that individuals must first become literate before they can advance to the next level in terms of skills development. …these skills for their economic empowerment for economic purposes. After the three months of theoretical learning, they will then move on to practical training.	Exposure to children who are trained to perform music in public helps them overcome shyness, build self-confidence, and develop teamwork skills. They are also provided with sewing skills training. This helps to increase their income and serve as a potential employment opportunity.	SP: Garaj Society serves as the production and sales arm of Cahaya Society, generating income through the sale of a variety of merchandise and arts pieces. Exposure the children with such valuable experience. ON: They are active in attending expos and events to sell their merchandise, thereby generating income and promoting the center.
Weaken spirit, negative behaviors, low self-esteem	…module focuses on community sustainability, specifically the Physical Education and Community Health Module (PFKK). … to address children's needs, injury management, types of	To enhance spirit and cultivate a sense of gratitude and empathy towards others and their surroundings, individuals are taught to	SP: The spacious classroom designed for education and can accommodate many children, ensuring effective communication and an

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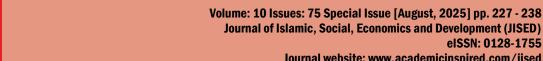| Socio-economy issues	Multiple Source of Evidence		
	Interview excerpts (IV)	Document reviews (DR)	Observation notes (ON) & Site photos (SP)
	injuries, sexual harassment, and emotional well-being.	"walk in the shoes" of people with disabilities.	enjoyable learning experience.
	…we sing and play the ukulele…this class is centered around music and play.	Although they are stateless children themselves, they still learn about their country of birth to instill a sense of love and pride for their nation.	SP: At Cahaya Society, they believe that music can help children's minds feel free and appreciated, as it allows them to engage in activities they enjoy. They use ukelele and suitable songs for this.
Vulnerable to social problems, external threats	…they can make wise choices, understanding their economic situation. …we teach them how to spend more wisely, which is essential for their financial well-being.	Children of Cahaya do not attend school, and therefore, they are not exposed to physical and health education. To address this gap, Cahaya Society organizes education sessions and exposure regarding these essential areas. In addition to basic physical education and health, awareness of mental health is also crucial nowadays.	SP: Basic health facilities and a first aid kit are provided at the center due to a lack of access at home. SP: Prototype and module of Pendidikan Fizikal dan Kesihatan Komuniti (PFKK).

Based on the findings presented above, there are three main themes that emerged from the analysis conducted to answer how these centers operationalize and organize to meet the educational needs of these children. The first theme is creative and comprehensive learning strategies. The second theme is impactful strategies towards socio-economic issues while the last main theme identified is proper physical setting of the learning center.

Discussion

Creative and comprehensive learning strategies
The findings indicate a clear sense of creativity and comprehensiveness in the implementation of learning strategies at Cahaya Society. They aim to educate the children holistically and comprehensively so that they grow up with a strong identity and moral competencies essential for their survival. Recognizing that they are still children, the approach to their learning, especially for vulnerable ones like them, must be creative. To prepare children for future challenges, lessons should realistically reflect real-life situations, building necessary skills and competencies (Baccal & Ormilla, 2021).

To mitigate rampant illiteracy among children, Cahaya Society has adopted playful and musical methods in their teaching approach, such as spelling games. Additionally, to equip them with skills like sewing and using computers, children must first learn to read and write. This approach motivates them, as these skills are essential for their economic empowerment. The volunteers at Cahaya Society include skilled professionals, such as teachers, who contribute to this mission. Cahaya Society also incorporates various skills such as soft skills, spiritual education, financial literacy, and digital literacy as part of their comprehensive

strategies. These elements are essential in equipping children with the necessary competencies to navigate their environments effectively and prepare for future challenges.

Carranza et al., (2020) support the findings that social enterprises must continually incorporate innovation into their social solutions and leverage creativity to identify opportunities. This aligns with Forouharfar et al., (2018) conclusion that creativity is fundamental to the development and success of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship fosters improvement for the benefit of society (Ahlstrom et al., 2018) and advances the development of creative and sustainable solutions to address social and environmental issues (Fernández-Guadaño & Diez, 2024).

Transformative impact on societal concerns

At Cahaya Society, various initiatives and methods are implemented with the intention of transforming society, particularly for vulnerable groups like children. Cahaya Society aims to ensure that children grow up well-educated and not weakened by their challenging circumstances. The key aspects of this theme, as evident from the findings, include fostering motivation, nurturing positive behaviors and identities, and providing essential skills and competencies, ensuring a holistic approach to developing competent and competitive individuals.

The challenges they face, such as generational poverty and difficulties in finding employment due to a lack of employable skills that stemmed from poor education, are hoped to be addressed through the alternative education they received. These children are vulnerable to social problems and external threats, however, through various engaging activities and programs, it is expected that they will focus their time and energy on self-improvement at Cahaya Society, thereby avoiding negative influences.

The findings demonstrate the impacts of Cahaya Society's efforts and the sense of sustainability in their beneficiaries' lives stemmed from the education delivered. This aligns with Portales (2019), who highlights transformative changes reported by Cahaya Society, pertaining to positive changes within the communities attributable to the social enterprise's efforts in fulfilling its mission. This notion is further supported by Baigun (2022) and Cabral-Gouveia et al., (2023) that asserted ability to narrow the education attainment gap and learning outcomes between vulnerable population groups reflects a critical indicator of a social enterprise's success in fulfilling its mission.

Proper physical setting

Effective learning processes also require physical facilities and resources. Although Cahaya Society may be just ALC, they strive to provide the basic necessities for their children's learning within their means. The combination of a holistic and impactful approach with conducive physical facilities significantly enhances the learning process.

Cahaya Society has established a mini library to ensure that basic necessities for the learning process are readily available for the children. They also introduce children to computer use and the latest applications to enhance their digital literacy and boost creativity. The educational area is the largest space, featuring warm decorations designed for students and equipped with all necessary facilities to enhance learning and spark interest. Garaj Society serves as the production and sales arm of Cahaya Society, teaching children about entrepreneurship and project management. They learn patience while mastering the ukulele, which helps develop

their skills. Basic health facilities and a first aid kit are provided at the center due to limited access at home, ensuring that the children feel safe and secure.

Physical resources and equipment significantly impact educational outcomes, influencing behavior, engagement, and achievement while access to multimedia tools enhances resourcefulness and innovation (Baccal & Ormilla, 2021). Furthermore, learning spaces that leverage digital technologies can personalize learning and accommodate diverse student needs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

Conclusion
This study aims to raise awareness among key stakeholders about the importance of education for stateless children. Enhancing laws and regulations can be complex and lengthy, often requiring significant advocacy. Therefore, it is essential to empower and support ALCs as they can serve as immediate resources for stateless children lacking access to formal education. This study demonstrated that the strategies implemented by ALCs effectively mitigate the adverse socio-economic impacts experienced by this marginalized group. Understanding the strategies used by ALCs can serve as a benchmark for alternative education, providing insights into how these centers can enhance their effectiveness in supporting stateless children.

Given that Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) have already made significant strategic contributions, this proves the important role and presence of ALC interventions in this issue. Therefore, to amplify the impact, this study calls on academics to assist further in curriculum development and urges industry stakeholders to provide support in various forms, including funding, volunteer assistance, and motivational resources. With these measures in place, it is hoped that this issue will be mitigated, thereby fostering a more equitable and sustainable future for their generation through education.
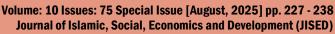
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