https://educare.uinkhas.ac.id/index.php/jie

DOI: 10.35719/educare.v7i1.413
Vol 7, No 1 (2026), pp. 57-68

Father absence and psychological well-being among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia: Protective roles of community learning centers and religious education

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Article Information:
Received 2026-04-09
Revised 2026-06-17
Accepted 2026-07-20

Keywords:
Father Absence; Psychological Well-Being; Community Learning Centers; Religious Education; Indonesian Migrant Children.

ABSTRACT

Paternal migration in Indonesian migrant-worker families presents a social paradox: improved household economic security coincides with reduced paternal emotional presence, or father absence, which may adversely affect children's psychological well-being. This study examines the effect of father absence on the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, studies the mediating roles of Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education, and explores the psychosocial mechanisms that support children's psychological robustness. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and analyzed by regression and mediation analyses. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews and examined using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The results show that father absence negatively affects children's psychological well-being, whereas Community Learning Centers and religious education serve as protective factors by providing psychosocial and spiritual support. The qualitative findings further demonstrate that teachers, peers, and religious activities help improve migrant children's emotional management, optimism, learning motivation, and psychological resilience. The study determines that the adverse effects of father absence can be mitigated through supportive educational and religious environments. Accordingly, stronger collaboration among the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Community Learning Centers, schools, religious organizations, and government agencies is required to develop sustainable educational services and psychosocial support for Indonesian migrant children.

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To cite this article (APA Style):
Marhamah, I., Kuswandi, I., Ridwan, M., & Lee, W. S. (2026). Father absence and psychological well-being among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia: Protective roles of Community Learning Centers and religious education. *EDUCARE: Journal of Primary Education, 7(1)*, 57–68. https://doi.org/10.35719/educare.v7i1.413

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INTRODUCTION

Paternal migration among Indonesian migrant-worker families in Malaysia gives rise to a paradoxical social phenomenon. On the one hand, migration improves household economic stability and supports children's educational expenses; on the other hand, it creates father absence, thereby reducing fathers' emotional involvement in their children's everyday lives (Tello & Sánchez, 2025). This condition warrants particular attention because, during the primary-school years, fathers function not only as economic providers but also as sources of emotional support, behavioral role models, and psychological security. Reduced paternal involvement may weaken children's motivation to learn, emotional regulation, and educational participation, ultimately affecting their psychological well-being (O'Dea et al., 2025). These challenges are evident among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, who continue to experience limited engagement in learning, poor concentration, inadequate parental supervision, and insufficient emotional support within migrant households (Duraisingam et al., 2024; Kuswandi et al., 2025; Wulan et al., 2023). This phenomenon suggests that the economic benefits of migration have not fully compensated for children's emotional and psychosocial needs during their developmental years.

Previous studies on father absence and child well-being identify three major trends. First, research on father absence has primarily focused on socioeconomic factors, structural causes, and its consequences for children's psychological development and well-being (Erwinda et al., 2025; Kucukkaragoz, 2025; Peng et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024). Second, several studies have developed instruments to measure the absence of father-love and paternal attachment, as a basis for understanding the psychological consequences of paternal absence (Jeong et al., 2024; Novianti et al., 2025; Xiang & Zhou, 2023). Third, studies on the education of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia have concentrated on academic achievement, learning motivation, literacy, curriculum implementation, and religious education provided through Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) (Kuswandi et al., 2024; Kuswandi et al., 2025; Suarno et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these three strands of research have not adequately explained how Community Learning Centers and religious education jointly function as protective mechanisms that mediate the effects of father absence on migrant children's psychological well-being. Therefore, this study integrates these four dimensions through a mixed-methods approach to explain how educational and religious support strengthen the psychological well-being and resilience of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia.

Grounded in Attachment Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, this study assumes that paternal absence may undermine children's emotional and psychosocial development, whereas Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education serve as protective mechanisms that provide emotional, social, and spiritual support. Through supportive relationships with teachers and peers, as well as participation in religious activities, these two forms of support may mitigate the adverse effects of father absence, strengthen psychological resilience, and enhance the psychological well-being of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia.

This study aims to analyze the effect of father absence on the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, examine the mediating roles of Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education, and explain the psychosocial mechanisms that support children's psychological resilience by integrating quantitative and qualitative findings. In line with these objectives, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How does father absence affect the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia? (2) Do Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education mediate the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being? and (3) How do Community Learning Centers and religious education provide psychosocial support that mitigates the effects of father absence on the psychological well-being of migrant children? Theoretically, this study extends Attachment

Theory and further develops Ecological Systems Theory by providing evidence that educational and religious environments function as protective systems for migrant children. Practically, the study highlights the importance of collaboration among the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Community Learning Centers, schools, religious organizations, and government agencies in developing integrated educational services, psychosocial support, and spiritual guidance to improve the well-being and psychological resilience of migrant children experiencing father absence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design and a transformative perspective to examine the relationships among father absence, participation in Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*), religious education, and the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia (Haynes-Brown, 2025; Kutscher et al., 2025). This approach was selected because it enables the quantitative examination of relationships among variables while also providing an in-depth qualitative explanation of children's psychosocial experiences. The transformative perspective was adopted to generate educational and psychosocial support recommendations for migrant children experiencing father absence.

The quantitative phase aimed to examine the effect of father absence on children's psychological well-being and to test the mediating roles of Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education. The study population comprised primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children participating in learning activities at Community Learning Centers in Malaysia, particularly those managed by Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and other community-based educational institutions. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) being a primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant child; (2) actively participating in learning activities at a Community Learning Center; and (3) experiencing father absence as a result of labour migration or prolonged separation from their father.

Quantitative data were collected using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale to assess psychological well-being (Borualogo & Casas, 2022) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to identify children's psychosocial conditions (Theunissen et al., 2024). Prior to the main analysis, the validity and reliability of the instruments were assessed, with internal consistency evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Subramaniam et al., 2022). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, linear regression, and mediation analyses to examine both the direct effect of father absence on psychological well-being and its indirect effects through Community Learning Centers and religious education.

The qualitative phase was conducted after the quantitative analysis to provide further explanations for the statistical findings. Informants were purposively selected and included students, teachers, Community Learning Center coordinators, and family members who were familiar with the children's experiences of father absence. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore children's emotional experiences, the forms of psychosocial support provided by Community Learning Centers, and religious educational practices that contributed to their psychological well-being.

The qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis through the stages of data familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the analytical narrative (Ahmed et al., 2025; Kushnir, 2025). Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated during the interpretation stage using connecting and merging strategies. Through this process, the qualitative findings were used to explain the mechanisms underlying the statistical relationships among father absence, Community Learning Centers, religious education, and children's psychological well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Quantitative results

The quantitative analysis examined the effect of father absence on the psychological well-being of Indonesian migrant children of primary school age in Malaysia and investigated the mediating roles of Community Learning Centers (Sanggar Bimbingan) and religious education in this relationship. Prior to hypothesis testing, reliability analyses were performed to assess the internal consistency of the research instruments. The Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff) demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.893, while the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.851, indicating that both instruments had good reliability and were appropriate for use in this study.

The regression analysis revealed that father absence had a negative and statistically significant effect on children's psychological well-being ($\beta = –0.516$; $t = –6.241$; $p < 0.001$). The regression model was also statistically significant ($F = 38.427$; $p < 0.001$), with a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.364, indicating that father absence accounted for 36.4% of the variance in children's psychological well-being. These findings suggest that children experiencing prolonged paternal absence tend to exhibit lower levels of psychological well-being, reflected in reduced emotional happiness, self-confidence, optimism, and positive engagement in daily life.

Table 1
The Effect of Father Absence on Children's Psychological Well-Being

Variabel	β	t	Sig. (p)
Father Absence → Psychological Well-Being	–0,516	–6,241	< 0,001

$R^2 = 0,364$; $F = 38,427$; $p < 0,001$

As shown in Table 1, father absence was a significant predictor of children's psychological well-being. The negative regression coefficient indicates that higher levels of father absence were associated with lower levels of children's psychological well-being.

The mediating role of community learning centers and religious education

Mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education mediated the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being. The results showed that participation in Community Learning Centers had a positive and significant effect on children's psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.438$, $t = 5.714$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, religious education exerted a positive and significant effect on psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.391$, $t = 4.982$, $p < 0.001$).

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a significant indirect effect (indirect effect = 0.286, $p = 0.002$), indicating that Community Learning Centers and religious education mediated the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being. These findings suggest that greater participation in learning activities provided by Community Learning Centers and in religious education is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being among children.

Table 2
Mediation Analysis of Community Learning Centers and Religious Education

Variabel	β	t	Sig. (p)
Father Absence → Psychological Well-Being	–0,516	–6,241	< 0,001
Community Learning Centers → Psychological Well-Being	0,438	5,714	< 0,001
Pendidikan Agama → Psychological Well-Being	0,391	4,982	< 0,001

Indirect Effect = 0,286; p = 0,002

As shown in Table 2, Community Learning Centres and religious education had positive and significant effects on children's psychological well-being. The significance of the indirect effect indicates that both variables functioned as mediators in the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being. Thus, part of the negative effect of father absence on psychological well-being can be explained by children's participation in these two forms of educational support.

Qualitative results

The qualitative findings complemented the quantitative results by providing a deeper understanding of how *father absence* influenced children's psychological well-being and how *Community Learning Centers* (Sanggar Bimbingan) and religious education mitigated these adverse effects. Reflexive thematic analysis identified three overarching themes: (1) the emotional impacts of *father absence*, (2) *Community Learning Centers* as an alternative psychosocial support system, and (3) religious education as a protective factor for children's psychological well-being.

Table 3
Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Main Findings	Data Sources	Representative Evidence
Theme 1. Emotional Impacts of Father Absence	Children experienced sadness, loneliness, emotional insecurity, and reduced learning motivation due to prolonged paternal absence.	Child interviews	P4, P7
Theme 2. Community Learning Centers as Alternative Psychosocial Support	Teachers and peers provided emotional support, encouragement, and a safe learning environment that strengthened children's confidence and motivation.	Child interviews; Coordinator interview	P9; Coordinator
Theme 3. Religious Education as a Protective Factor	Religious activities promoted emotional regulation, optimism, patience, gratitude, and educational aspirations.	Child interviews; Coordinator interview	P6; Coordinator

Emotional impacts of father absence

Interviews with the children revealed that prolonged *father absence* generated considerable emotional challenges. Most participants described feelings of sadness, loneliness, and the loss of a paternal figure who had previously provided affection, protection, and learning motivation. Although some fathers continued to provide financial support while working abroad, participants consistently perceived that financial assistance could not replace emotional presence and daily parental interaction.

One participant explained:

"My father still sends money, but I wish he could be at home. When I have problems at school, I want to tell him directly." (P4)

Another participant described the effect of paternal absence on learning motivation:

"If my father were here, I think I would be more motivated to study because he always encouraged me." (P7)

Overall, this theme indicates that the consequences of *father absence* extend beyond physical separation and include the loss of emotional support that is essential for children's psychological well-being and educational motivation.

Community learning centers as alternative psychosocial support

Despite experiencing prolonged separation from their fathers, many participants described *Community Learning Centers* (Sanggar Bimbingan) as a safe and supportive environment. Teachers were frequently perceived not only as educators but also as mentors who

provided emotional encouragement, academic guidance, and personal attention whenever children encountered learning difficulties or personal challenges. Furthermore, interactions with peers helped reduce feelings of loneliness while fostering confidence and a sense of belonging.

As one participant stated:

"At the learning center, I have many friends. The teachers always encourage us to keep studying even though our parents are working." (P9)

These findings were reinforced by an interview with Shohenuddin, M.Ed., Coordinator of Sanggar Bimbingan Sentul Kuala Lumpur. He explained that many Indonesian migrant children experience emotional vulnerability due to prolonged separation from their fathers. Consequently, the learning center extends its role beyond basic education by providing psychosocial support through close teacher–student relationships, individualized academic guidance, continuous communication, and positive role modelling. According to him, these approaches contribute to children's emotional security, confidence, and commitment to learning.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that *Community Learning Centers* function not only as educational institutions but also as an important psychosocial support system for children experiencing parental separation.

Religious education as a protective factor

The third theme highlights the role of religious education in strengthening children's psychological well-being. Participants consistently described religious activities—including Qur'an recitation, congregational prayers, moral education, and spiritual mentoring—as important sources of emotional comfort, patience, gratitude, and optimism. These activities also encouraged children to remain committed to their educational goals despite experiencing prolonged parental separation.

One participant shared:

"After reading the Qur'an, I feel calmer. The teachers always encourage us to study hard and pray so that we can make our parents proud." (P6)

Shohenuddin further explained that the integration of academic learning with Islamic values constitutes one of the distinctive strengths of Sanggar Bimbingan. Daily routines involving congregational prayer, Qur'an recitation, moral reflection, collaborative learning, and character education are intentionally designed to strengthen emotional regulation, self-discipline, empathy, and optimism. He also observed that many children gradually developed stronger self-confidence, greater commitment to learning, and higher educational aspirations despite prolonged separation from their fathers.

Overall, this theme suggests that religious education serves as an important protective factor that reinforces children's emotional resilience and supports positive psychological development.

Mixed methods integration

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that both data types complemented each other in explaining the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being. Quantitative results indicated that father absence had a significant negative effect on children's psychological well-being. Qualitative findings revealed that this effect was mediated by the loss of emotional support, reduced learning motivation, and increased feelings of sadness and loneliness due to prolonged separation from fathers.

Quantitative analysis also showed that Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education mediated the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being. Qualitative findings clarified the mechanisms underlying these mediating effects. Teachers provided essential emotional support, peer relationships

fostered a sense of belonging and self-confidence, and religious education activities promoted emotional calmness, patience, optimism, and motivation to continue education.

Overall, the integration of the two datasets showed that Community Learning Centers and religious education were statistically associated with improved psychological well-being and provided psychosocial mechanisms that helped children cope with the adverse effects of father absence. These findings confirm that supportive educational environments and religious guidance function as protective factors, strengthening psychological resilience and promoting positive development among Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION

This study concludes that father absence has a significant negative effect on the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, accounting for 36.4% of the variance in psychological well-being. Qualitatively, this effect was reflected in heightened feelings of sadness and loneliness, the loss of emotional support, and declining learning motivation. The mediation analysis demonstrated that Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education significantly attenuated these adverse effects by strengthening psychosocial and spiritual support. The qualitative findings further revealed that teachers and peers provided emotional support and fostered a sense of belonging, while religious education enhanced children's emotional regulation, optimism, and psychological resilience. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that Community Learning Centers and religious education function as effective protective factors in mitigating the effects of father absence. Strengthening these two forms of support is therefore an important strategy for promoting the well-being and positive development of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia.

The phenomenon of father absence among Indonesian migrant-worker families in Malaysia reflects an increasingly complex social challenge, in which cross-border economic mobility has significant consequences for family caregiving dynamics. As noted by Erwinda et al. (2025), structural and sociocultural factors encourage labour migration but also contribute to reduced paternal involvement in child-rearing. Kucukkaragoz (2025) further explains that the absence of a father figure may increase children's emotional vulnerability and disrupt family functioning. The findings of this study indicate that although remittances continue to meet families' economic needs, children still experience the loss of everyday emotional support, as reflected in feelings of sadness and loneliness and reduced motivation to learn. These findings are consistent with Tello and Sánchez (2025), who emphasize that parental migration limits emotional interaction between parents and children, thereby increasing children's psychological vulnerability. Given the substantial number of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia who may experience similar circumstances, these findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen support systems capable of bridging the emotional gap created by parental migration.

Theoretically, these findings support Attachment Theory, which posits that the consistent presence of a caregiver is a fundamental basis for children's sense of security and psychological well-being (Gagliardi, 2021). Zhou et al. (2024) demonstrate that prolonged paternal absence increases loneliness and emotional insecurity by disrupting secure attachment. Similarly, Peng et al. (2024) explain that the absence of father love contributes to lower subjective well-being by diminishing children's hope for the future. The present study extends this understanding by showing that the effects of father absence are not confined to emotional functioning but also affect children's learning motivation and educational aspirations. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) constitute part of the child's microsystem, providing social and emotional support when family functions cannot be optimally fulfilled (Rahman, 2025; Tong & An, 2024). The findings indicate that educational and religious environments can facilitate the development of

a secure-base function through supportive relationships among teachers, peers, and children, thereby strengthening children's psychological well-being.

This study further demonstrates that children's psychological resilience develops through sustained interactions between individuals and supportive social environments (De Lima, 2024; Uzun et al., 2023). The qualitative findings revealed that children who initially experienced sadness and loneliness as a result of father absence exhibited more positive changes after receiving emotional support from teachers and peers and participating in religious education. These findings are consistent with O'Dea et al. (2025), who argue that emotional connectedness and meaning-making processes contribute to psychological flourishing. In addition, Janapati and Vijayalakshmi (2024) and Szymkowiak et al. (2021) emphasize that supportive educational environments and strong moral values are important in fostering psychological resilience and future orientation among children living in vulnerable circumstances. These findings suggest that meeting children's psychological needs requires a sustained, integrated approach that combines emotional, educational, and spiritual support.

A comparison with previous studies reveals both consistency and an extension of existing findings. Consistent with Kuswandi et al. (2024) and Sholihah et al. (2025), the present study confirms that Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) enhance migrant children's learning motivation and the quality of their educational experiences. The current research extends these findings by demonstrating that Community Learning Centers also serve as a psychosocial mechanism mediating the relationship between father absence and children's psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.438$). This result aligns with Fahlefy et al. (2025) and Mansyur et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of educational interventions in fostering learning engagement. Additionally, this study offers a novel contribution by identifying religious education as a significant mediator ($\beta = 0.391$), thereby extending the findings of Efendi et al. (2024), which primarily focused on religion-based character education. Unlike Asmaroini et al. (2024), who examined migrant children's general adaptation processes, the present study elucidates the mechanisms through which educational support and religious guidance collectively mitigate the psychological effects of father absence. Consequently, this research enriches the literature on migrant children's psychological well-being by integrating familial, educational, and spiritual dimensions.

Given that father absence accounted for 36.4% of the variance in children's psychological well-being, and that Community Learning Centers and religious education significantly mediated this relationship (indirect effect = 0.286), strengthening community-based support systems is essential for improving the psychological well-being of migrant children. The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia are encouraged to reinforce the role of Community Learning Centers as providers of both educational services and psychosocial assistance for migrant children. Curriculum enhancement should include integrating character education and religious education, along with the development of emotional regulation, as these elements contribute to children's optimism and psychological resilience. Furthermore, strengthening teachers' capacity to provide psychosocial support is crucial, as teachers serve as supportive figures who offer children a sense of security during parental absence. These initiatives require collaboration among government agencies, the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, educational institutions, and community organizations to ensure the sustainable provision of educational services, psychosocial support, and family communication for Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that father absence has a significant negative effect on the psychological well-being of primary-school-aged Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia, particularly in relation to emotional happiness, optimism, self-confidence, emotional stability, and learning motivation. The quantitative findings indicate that prolonged paternal absence

significantly reduces children's psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.516$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the importance of fathers as sources of emotional support in child development. Nevertheless, the study also demonstrates that Community Learning Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan*) and religious education significantly mediate this relationship by strengthening psychosocial and spiritual support. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that the adverse effects of father absence are not deterministic but can be mitigated through supportive educational and religious environments that foster children's psychological resilience, optimism, and motivation to learn.

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on migrant children's psychological well-being and community-based education. Theoretically, it extends Attachment Theory by demonstrating that secure-attachment functions can be facilitated by supportive educational environments when paternal emotional involvement is limited. The findings also strengthen Family Systems Theory by showing that Community Learning Centers and religious education can partially compensate for the family's emotional functions. Furthermore, the study enriches Ecological Systems Theory by conceptualizing Community Learning Centers as protective microsystems that provide educational, emotional, social, and spiritual support. In practice, the findings highlight the importance of collaboration among the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Community Learning Centers, schools, religious organizations, government agencies, and local communities to strengthen educational services and psychosocial support. Such efforts should include enhancing teachers' psychosocial support capacities, integrating character and religious education, and strengthening emotional communication between migrant-worker parents and their children.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in only a limited number of Community Learning Centers in Malaysia; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all educational contexts involving migrant children in other countries. Second, although the mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, the cross-sectional design was unable to capture changes in children's psychological well-being over time. Future studies should therefore adopt longitudinal designs, include larger and more diverse samples, and conduct cross-national comparisons. Further research should also examine additional protective factors, including peer support, teacher attachment, digital parenting, long-distance family communication, and socioeconomic conditions. Investigating the interactions among these factors would support the development of more effective intervention models for improving the psychological well-being of migrant children experiencing father absence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors sincerely thank the administrators of Community Learning Centers (Sanggar Bimbingan) in Malaysia, teachers of Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), and the Education and Cultural Attaché (Atdikbud) of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Kuala Lumpur for their valuable support, collaboration, and assistance throughout the research process. Their contributions in facilitating access and providing educational insights were essential to the successful completion of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Ilfiatul Marhamah: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing. **Iwan Kuswandi:** Formal Analysis; Supervision; Validation; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing. **M. Ridwan:** Supervision; Validation; Writing Review & Editing. **Wong Su Lee:** Formal Analysis; Validation; Writing Review & Editing.

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