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MUNICIPAL AGENCY AND LOCAL-LEVEL EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MIGRANT EDUCATION IN LIBYA

Hassan Salem

Department of Education and Professional Development, Centre for Strategic and International Research and Studies, Libya
hassansalem623@gmail.com

Salah Darhubi

Department of Education and Professional Development, Centre for Strategic and International Research and Studies, Libya
salah.salah664@yahoo.com

Hussein Salem

Department of Education and Professional Development, Centre for Strategic and International Research and Studies, Libya
hassinsalem23@yahoo.com

Ali Aljrai

Department of Education and Professional Development, Centre for Strategic and International Research and Studies, Libya
a.aljrai@zu.edu.ly

Abstract

This paper examines the role of municipal agency in promoting educational inclusion for migrant and displaced learners in Libya and comparable transitional contexts. It responds to the practical reality that, where national institutions are fragmented or under pressure, municipalities often become the first level of governance through which families seek access to schooling, documentation, transport, social protection, language support, and community mediation. Drawing on multilevel governance theory, social inclusion theory, and educational equity frameworks, the paper develops a conceptual model for local-level educational inclusion. The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology, using document analysis and comparative policy review to synthesise evidence from international organisations, refugee education scholarship, urban learning policy, and Libyan migration data. The analysis argues that municipal inclusion is not simply a matter of school placement; rather, it requires coordinated local governance linking schools, municipal offices, civil society, health and psychosocial services, community leaders, and national ministries. In Libya, this issue is particularly significant because the country functions as a major regional migration hub while also managing the consequences of political fragmentation, uneven local capacity, and pressures on public services. The paper proposes a Municipal Educational Inclusion Model composed of five interdependent dimensions: local governance and coordination, equitable access, meaningful participation, integrated learner support, and outcome monitoring. It concludes that municipalities can play a transformative role when they are adequately resourced, legally supported, and connected to national policy. The paper recommends clearer municipal mandates, local education inclusion committees, teacher professional development, data-informed planning, community partnerships, digital learning support, and protection-sensitive referral systems.

Keywords:

Migrant Education, Libya, Educational Inclusion, Municipal Governance, Refugee Youth, Social Cohesion, Education Policy

Introduction

Migration, displacement, and educational inequality have become central concerns for education systems across the world. These concerns are especially acute in countries where migration intersects with political fragmentation, economic uncertainty, and uneven public service delivery. Libya occupies a strategic position between Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and Europe, and its towns and municipalities are directly affected by the movement of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, and returnees. In such circumstances, the question of educational inclusion cannot be addressed only through national policy statements. It must also be examined at the local level, where families encounter schools, municipal offices, community organisations, health services, and everyday social relations.

Municipalities are often the first public institutions to observe educational exclusion. They encounter children who lack documents, learners who have experienced trauma or interrupted schooling, families with limited Arabic language proficiency, and communities where poverty, discrimination, or legal uncertainty reduces participation. Although formal authority over education may remain centralised within national ministries, local authorities frequently mediate access to school spaces, connect families to services, mobilise community support, and coordinate emergency responses. Municipal agency therefore refers to the capacity of local authorities and local networks to act creatively, responsibly, and collaboratively in response to educational needs.

The need to strengthen local-level educational inclusion is particularly important in Libya. Recent IOM data indicate that Libya continued to host a large migrant population in 2026, while UNHCR reporting shows the increasing impact of Sudanese displacement on Libya's protection and service systems. These population movements place additional pressure on schools and municipalities, but they also create an opportunity to design inclusive governance mechanisms that link education with social cohesion, child protection, and local development. The present paper addresses this policy and research gap by asking: How can municipalities in Libya support educational inclusion for migrant and displaced learners, and what conceptual model can guide local action?

The paper makes three contributions. First, it removes the narrow view of inclusion as a school-only responsibility and situates inclusion within local governance. Second, it connects global literature on multilevel governance, refugee education, and inclusive learning cities to the

Libyan context. Third, it proposes a practical Municipal Educational Inclusion Model that can inform policy dialogue, conference discussion, and future empirical research.

Context: Migration, Municipalities, and Education in Libya

Libya's migration context is shaped by geography, labour markets, conflict, and regional displacement. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix has repeatedly identified Libya as a country of destination and transit, with migrants distributed across many localities. In January and February 2026, IOM estimated that 936,134 migrants were present in Libya. This figure illustrates why municipal planning cannot treat migration as an exceptional or temporary issue. For many municipalities, migrant families are part of everyday social and economic life, even when their legal status remains insecure or their access to services is inconsistent.

The increase in Sudanese displacement following the conflict that began in 2023 has also intensified local pressures. UNHCR reported in March 2026 that hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees had fled to Libya since 2023, with movement continuing towards areas such as Alkufra. Such displacement has educational implications for school-age children, adolescents, and youth who may arrive after interrupted schooling, loss of documentation, family separation, or traumatic experiences. Municipal authorities are therefore positioned at the intersection of humanitarian response, public service management, and community relations.

Education in Libya has historically been a public responsibility, but political instability has weakened institutional coordination and created disparities between localities. Schools in some areas face shortages of trained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, damaged infrastructure, limited digital resources, and weak referral links with social services. Migrant learners may experience these general constraints alongside additional barriers such as language, stigma, legal uncertainty, poverty, and lack of recognised previous educational records. Municipal action cannot solve all of these issues alone, but it can reduce exclusion by identifying needs, mobilising local resources, and coordinating with national and international actors.

Municipal involvement is also important because education is closely connected to social cohesion and national stability. When children are excluded from school, they become more vulnerable to exploitation, informal labour, social isolation, and marginalisation. Conversely, when municipalities support inclusive learning environments, they can contribute to trust between communities, reduce tensions, and strengthen local resilience. For Libya, local

educational inclusion should therefore be understood as both an educational priority and a community-stability strategy.

Literature Review

International scholarship increasingly recognises that migrant and refugee education depends on both school-level practice and wider governance systems. Dryden-Peterson (2016) argues that refugee education must be understood in relation to displacement trajectories, uncertain futures, and the institutional conditions of host contexts. Cerna's OECD work similarly stresses that refugee education requires a holistic approach addressing academic learning, language development, social-emotional support, and family engagement. These studies are important for Libya because migrant and displaced learners may not only require access to classrooms; they may require structured support to participate meaningfully and progress over time.

Inclusive education literature provides a second foundation. UNESCO's policy guidelines define inclusion as a process of transforming schools and learning systems so that all learners can participate. The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report further emphasises that exclusion occurs through background, ability, location, poverty, language, migration status, and discriminatory attitudes. This means that inclusion is not achieved simply by permitting enrolment. Inclusion requires addressing barriers in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, school culture, language support, teacher preparation, and financing.

A third strand of literature concerns municipal and urban governance. Learning city scholarship highlights the capacity of local authorities to mobilise schools, families, community organisations, libraries, civil society, and digital resources to widen participation in learning. Osborne (2021) argues that inclusive lifelong learning depends on local arrangements that reach vulnerable groups beyond the formal school system. For migrant education, this suggests that municipalities can function as connectors, bringing together education, welfare, health, protection, and community engagement.

The multilevel governance literature is equally relevant. Hooghe and Marks (2001) show that policy problems are often managed across multiple levels rather than by one central authority. Migration and education are typical multilevel problems: national governments define legal frameworks and curricula; municipalities manage local realities; schools implement daily

practice; international organisations provide data, funding, and technical support; and communities influence acceptance or resistance. In fragmented political environments, the quality of coordination across these levels becomes decisive.

Libyan educational research also supports the need for realistic, context-sensitive reform. Salem's (2018) study of Libyan lecturers' perceptions of technology use in EFL classrooms found that educators may hold positive attitudes towards innovation while still facing institutional, infrastructural, and policy constraints. Although that study focused on higher education and technology, its broader implication is relevant: educational reform in Libya must address capacity, training, infrastructure, and governance rather than relying only on policy aspiration. Municipal inclusion requires the same practical orientation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on three connected perspectives: multilevel governance theory, social inclusion theory, and educational equity frameworks. Together, they provide a lens for understanding how municipalities can support migrant education even when they do not control all formal aspects of schooling.

Multilevel governance theory explains why education policy is shaped through interaction among national ministries, municipalities, schools, international organisations, civil society, and communities. In the Libyan context, national education policy may define curriculum and school regulations, but local authorities often understand the practical barriers faced by families. Municipal agency is therefore not a replacement for national authority; it is a complementary capacity that enables national commitments to become local practice.

Social inclusion theory focuses on participation, belonging, access to rights, and social recognition. In migrant education, inclusion means that learners are not treated as temporary or marginal bodies in classrooms, but as students with identities, aspirations, and capabilities. It also means that families can communicate with schools and that communities are encouraged to view education as a shared social good rather than a scarce resource to be defended against outsiders.

Educational equity frameworks emphasise fairness in resources, opportunities, and outcomes. Equity differs from simple equality because learners do not start from the same position. Migrant and displaced learners may need language bridging, psychosocial support,

flexible documentation requirements, accelerated learning, remedial programmes, transport assistance, or protection referrals. A municipal equity framework asks which local barriers prevent participation and what targeted measures can reduce those barriers.

The conceptual argument of the paper is that municipal inclusion depends on the interaction of governance, access, participation, support, and outcomes. If any one of these dimensions is absent, inclusion remains incomplete. A child may be enrolled but unsupported; a municipality may have goodwill but no data; a school may accept learners but lack teacher training; or a national policy may be inclusive in principle but inaccessible at local level.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative conceptual research design based on document analysis and comparative policy review. It does not claim to present primary fieldwork data. Instead, it synthesises academic literature, official organisational reports, and policy-oriented evidence in order to develop a conceptual model suitable for Libya and comparable transitional contexts.

The review included four categories of sources: international scholarship on refugee and migrant education; inclusive education and social inclusion theory; literature on municipal governance and learning cities; and current organisational reports relating to migration and displacement in Libya. Sources were selected for relevance, credibility, and usefulness in informing policy recommendations. The analysis was guided by the following questions: What barriers affect migrant and displaced learners? What role can municipalities play in reducing those barriers? Which governance arrangements are required for local inclusion to be sustainable? How can these insights be translated into a practical model for Libya?

The methodology has two limitations. First, because the paper is conceptual, its findings require future empirical testing through interviews, municipal case studies, school observations, and policy analysis. Second, available data on migrant education in Libya remain incomplete and uneven across localities. Nevertheless, conceptual work is valuable at this stage because it helps structure policy debate, clarify responsibilities, and identify directions for future research.

Municipal Agency and Educational Inclusion

Municipal agency can be understood as the ability of local authorities to identify educational barriers, mobilise resources, coordinate stakeholders, and advocate for vulnerable learners. This agency is not unlimited. Municipalities may face weak budgets, limited staff, political pressure, insufficient data, and unclear legal mandates. However, even under constraints, municipalities can influence the conditions under which migrant learners access and experience education.

First, municipalities can support access by mapping school-age migrant and displaced children, identifying enrolment obstacles, coordinating with school administrators, and negotiating flexible documentation procedures where national law allows. They can also support transportation planning, classroom allocation, and referrals to remedial or language support programmes.

Second, municipalities can support participation by building trust with families and communities. Migrant parents may fear contact with authorities, lack information about enrolment procedures, or feel unwelcome in schools. Municipal offices, community leaders, civil society organisations, and schools can jointly provide orientation sessions, multilingual information, and family liaison mechanisms.

Third, municipalities can support learner wellbeing by connecting education with health, psychosocial support, child protection, and social assistance. Many displaced learners have experienced conflict, insecurity, or dangerous journeys. Teachers cannot address these needs alone. A municipal referral system can reduce fragmentation and ensure that schools know where to seek support.

Fourth, municipalities can strengthen local data and accountability. Without basic information about who is excluded, where they live, and what barriers they face, inclusion remains rhetorical. Local education dashboards, school attendance monitoring, and anonymised needs assessments can help municipalities plan more effectively while protecting learners' privacy and safety.

Libyan Case Analysis

The Libyan case demonstrates why local-level inclusion is necessary. In a context marked by political fragmentation, regional diversity, migration flows, and uneven infrastructure,

national policy alone may not reach all schools and communities with equal force. Municipalities vary in capacity, but they often possess practical knowledge of local needs. They know which schools are overcrowded, which communities are receiving new arrivals, which civil society organisations are active, and where transport or documentation problems prevent enrolment.

At the same time, municipalities cannot be expected to carry responsibility without legal, financial, and technical support. A key policy risk is the transfer of responsibility without the transfer of resources. For municipal inclusion to work in Libya, local authorities need clear mandates, coordination with the Ministry of Education, access to data, training on child protection and inclusion, and partnerships with organisations such as UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, and local NGOs.

The Libyan case also requires sensitivity to public concerns. Migration is often politicised, and communities may fear pressure on schools, housing, jobs, or public budgets. Educational inclusion policy should therefore be framed not as a threat to citizens but as a protection-sensitive and stability-oriented approach. When children are educated, communities are safer, families are better informed, and young people are less vulnerable to exploitation. Municipal communication strategies should emphasise shared benefits, legal obligations, and the humanitarian importance of protecting children.

Proposed Municipal Educational Inclusion Model

Based on the literature and Libyan context, this paper proposes a Municipal Educational Inclusion Model with five interdependent dimensions. The model is designed as a practical planning tool for local authorities and education policymakers rather than a rigid administrative structure.

Table 1: *Municipal Educational Inclusion Model*

Dimension	Municipal Role	Practical Actions	Expected Outcome
Governance and coordination	Create local mechanisms that connect education, protection, health, and civil society.	Establish municipal education inclusion committees; hold regular school-municipality meetings; coordinate with national ministries and partners.	Clear responsibilities, reduced fragmentation, and faster response to emerging needs.
Equitable access	Identify and reduce barriers to school entry.	Map school-age migrant learners; clarify enrolment	Higher enrolment and fewer children left outside

		procedures; support documentation pathways; coordinate transport and school placement.	school.
Meaningful participation	Ensure learners and families can participate safely and confidently.	Provide family orientation; create school liaison roles; support language bridging; address discrimination and bullying.	Improved attendance, belonging, and communication between schools and families.
Integrated support services	Connect education with wellbeing, protection, and social support.	Create referral pathways for psychosocial support, health care, child protection, and remedial learning.	Better learner wellbeing and reduced dropout risk.
Outcome monitoring	Use data to plan and improve inclusion.	Track attendance, progression, barriers, and support needs using ethical and anonymised data systems.	Evidence-informed planning and stronger accountability.

Findings and Analytical Discussion

The analysis produces four main findings. First, educational inclusion for migrant and displaced learners is a governance issue, not only a classroom issue. Schools are central, but they require support from municipal offices, health services, protection actors, families, and national ministries. Second, municipalities are strategically positioned to identify exclusion early because they are closer to communities than central institutions. Third, local inclusion must be supported by data, training, and resources; goodwill alone is insufficient. Fourth, inclusion policy in Libya should be linked to social cohesion and local stability, because exclusion from education can intensify vulnerability and community tension.

These findings challenge two common assumptions. The first is that migrant education can be solved through enrolment alone. Enrolment is necessary, but it does not guarantee learning, wellbeing, or progression. The second assumption is that municipalities are merely administrative units. In reality, they can act as policy brokers, conveners, and problem-solvers, especially when national systems are under pressure.

However, municipal agency also carries risks. If local discretion is not guided by rights-based principles, inclusion may vary widely between municipalities. Some localities may

be supportive, while others may be restrictive or under-resourced. To avoid unequal treatment, national policy should set minimum inclusion standards while allowing municipalities to adapt implementation to local realities.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for Libyan education policymakers, municipalities, and partner organisations:

1. Establish municipal education inclusion committees that include school leaders, municipal representatives, social services, civil society, and community mediators.
2. Develop clear local guidance on enrolment procedures for migrant, refugee, displaced, and undocumented learners, aligned with national law and child-rights principles.
3. Create municipal referral pathways linking schools with health, psychosocial support, child protection, and social assistance services.
4. Provide teacher professional development on inclusive pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, multilingual classrooms, anti-discrimination, and community engagement.
5. Improve local education data systems while protecting privacy and avoiding any use of school data for punitive migration enforcement.
6. Support digital inclusion through community learning spaces, low-cost connectivity, and blended remedial learning for learners with interrupted schooling.
7. Mobilise partnerships with UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, local NGOs, universities, and community organisations to strengthen municipal capacity.
8. Frame educational inclusion as a social cohesion and local stability measure that benefits both Libyan and non-Libyan communities.

Conclusion

Municipal agency represents a critical mechanism for promoting educational inclusion in politically fragmented and migration-affected environments. In Libya, municipalities stand at the practical front line of migration, education, social cohesion, and child protection. Although they cannot replace national ministries or international protection frameworks, they can make inclusion visible and actionable at the local level.

This paper has argued that local-level educational inclusion requires more than removing duplicated barriers to enrolment. It requires a coherent governance system that connects access, participation, support services, and outcomes. The proposed Municipal Educational Inclusion Model offers a framework for organising this work. Its value lies in clarifying that inclusion is a shared responsibility requiring coordination across schools, families, municipal authorities, national ministries, civil society, and international partners.

For Libya, strengthening municipal inclusion is both an educational and national development priority. It can help protect vulnerable children, reduce social tensions, support community stability, and align local practice with international commitments to inclusive and equitable quality education. Future research should test the proposed model through municipal case studies, interviews with school leaders and families, and comparative analysis across Libyan regions.

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