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SHADOWS OF EDUCATION: THE STRUGGLES OF MIGRANT YOUTH IN LIBYA

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Abstract

This paper explores the educational struggles of migrant youth in Libya and argues that education should be treated as a central component of protection, social inclusion, and national stability. Libya's position as a destination and transit country has placed migrant children and young people within complex social, legal, and humanitarian conditions. Many experience interrupted schooling, poverty, linguistic barriers, insecurity, discrimination, limited documentation, and weak access to learner support. These challenges are intensified by political fragmentation, uneven municipal capacity, and pressure on public schools and social services. Drawing on social inclusion theory, human capital theory, the capability approach, and educational equity frameworks, the paper develops a critical conceptual analysis of migrant youth education in Libya. The study uses a qualitative literature-based design, synthesising recent data from IOM and UNHCR, international policy reports, and refugee education scholarship. It identifies five key areas of struggle: access to schooling, continuity of learning, language and curriculum inclusion, psychosocial wellbeing, and transition to future livelihoods. The paper proposes a Migrant Educational Inclusion Model for Libya, structured around recognition, access, participation, support, progression, and governance. The model emphasises that migrant youth should not be viewed only through the lens of border control or humanitarian vulnerability, but as learners with capabilities, rights, and potential contributions to society. The discussion highlights the implications for Libyan education policy, including flexible enrolment, accelerated learning pathways, teacher training, municipal coordination, digital learning, protection-sensitive data systems, and partnerships with international organisations. The paper concludes that inclusive education for migrant youth is not a secondary issue; it is a strategic investment in social cohesion, human development, and long-term stability.

Keywords:

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

Introduction

Migration is one of the defining educational challenges of the twenty-first century. Across the world, schools are increasingly required to support learners whose lives have been shaped by displacement, mobility, conflict, economic hardship, and uncertain legal status. Education systems do not only transmit knowledge in such contexts; they also provide safety, routine, belonging, language development, social connection, and hope for the future. For migrant youth, access to education can determine whether displacement becomes a period of exclusion or a pathway towards dignity and participation.

In Libya, the educational experiences of migrant youth are shaped by a particularly complex national environment. Libya is located at the intersection of African, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern mobility routes. It is a country of work, transit, refuge, and return. Migrant and displaced young people may arrive from neighbouring countries, from Sub-Saharan Africa, or from conflict-affected settings such as Sudan. Some intend to remain in Libya; others hope to move onward; many are uncertain about their future. This uncertainty directly affects schooling, because families may lack documents, stable housing, income, safety, and information about education rights.

The phrase “shadows of education” captures the situation of learners who are physically present in communities but remain partially invisible to formal systems. Some may never enrol. Others may enrol but attend irregularly, struggle with language, experience discrimination, or leave school early. These shadows are not caused by one factor. They emerge from the interaction of legal status, poverty, fragmented governance, weak data, school capacity, social attitudes, and the trauma of displacement.

This paper addresses the following research question: What are the main educational struggles facing migrant youth in Libya, and what conceptual model can guide a more inclusive educational response? The paper argues that migrant youth education should be understood as a matter of educational equity, child protection, human development, and national security. Excluding young people from learning increases vulnerability to exploitation, irregular labour, marginalisation, and social tension. Including them strengthens resilience, community stability, and future capability.

Migration and Education in the Libyan Context

Libya's migration context has become more complex since 2011 due to political instability, conflict, labour market disruption, border insecurity, and regional crises. The country continues to host large numbers of migrants while also experiencing internal displacement and pressures associated with humanitarian emergencies. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix estimated that 936,134 migrants were present in Libya during January and February 2026. This confirms that migration is not a peripheral issue for Libyan policy; it is part of the social reality faced by municipalities, schools, and communities.

The arrival of Sudanese refugees has added further urgency. UNHCR reported in March 2026 that large numbers of Sudanese had fled to Libya since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in 2023. Many displaced families arrive with urgent needs for shelter, protection, health care, and schooling. Children and adolescents may have lost months or years of education, and some may have experienced violence, family separation, or dangerous journeys. These experiences shape their readiness to learn and their need for support.

Education provision for migrant youth in Libya is affected by the broader condition of the national education system. Schools may face shortages of teachers, limited infrastructure, overcrowding, gaps in learning materials, and uneven digital access. These difficulties affect Libyan learners as well as migrant learners. However, migrant youth often face additional barriers: lack of identity documents, language differences, fear of authorities, poverty, discrimination, inability to pay indirect school costs, and uncertainty about whether their previous learning will be recognised.

The educational inclusion of migrant youth therefore requires a balanced approach. It must protect the rights and dignity of non-Libyan learners while also recognising the pressures experienced by Libyan schools and communities. A sustainable response should not create competition between groups. Instead, it should strengthen school capacity, teacher training, local coordination, and targeted support so that inclusion improves the system for all learners.

Literature Review

The literature on migration and education shows that displaced learners often experience barriers at multiple levels. At the system level, legal status, documentation, language policy, curriculum recognition, and financing determine whether education is formally

accessible. At the school level, teacher expectations, classroom language, assessment practices, and peer relations influence participation. At the family level, poverty, housing instability, work pressures, and fear of authorities shape attendance and continuity. These levels interact, meaning that one supportive policy may be undermined by other unresolved barriers.

UNESCO's 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report on migration and displacement argues that education systems must build bridges rather than walls. This idea is especially relevant to Libya because migrant youth may otherwise remain separated from formal learning and wider society. UNESCO's 2020 report on inclusion further stresses that "all means all", meaning that inclusion must address learners excluded because of background, ability, displacement, language, poverty, and social status. Inclusion is not only about allowing children into school; it is about transforming education systems to respond to diverse learners.

Refugee education scholarship highlights the importance of continuity and future orientation. Dryden-Peterson (2016) argues that refugee education is shaped by uncertainty and by the limited alignment between present schooling and future opportunities. For migrant youth in Libya, this issue is critical. A young person may not know whether they will remain in Libya, return to a country of origin, or move elsewhere. Education systems should therefore offer transferable learning, language development, psychosocial support, and pathways that preserve future options.

Cerna's work for the OECD proposes a holistic model of refugee student integration that includes learning, social and emotional needs, language support, and family engagement. This is useful for the Libyan context because educational struggles are rarely academic only. Learners may need remedial education, but they may also need safety, trust, counselling, health referrals, transport, and community acceptance. Schools cannot meet these needs without partnerships.

The literature on multicultural and citizenship education also provides guidance. Banks emphasises that education should prepare learners to participate in diverse societies, while social inclusion theory stresses belonging, recognition, and access to institutions. If migrant youth are treated only as temporary outsiders, their educational motivation and social participation may weaken. If they are recognised as learners with capabilities, schools can become spaces of dignity and mutual understanding.

Libyan educational research points to the importance of context-sensitive reform. Salem's (2018) research on technology use in Libyan EFL classrooms showed that educators may support innovation while being constrained by infrastructure, training, and institutional limitations. The lesson for migrant youth education is clear: policy recommendations must be practical. Inclusion requires investment in teachers, schools, digital resources, governance, and data, not only rhetorical commitment.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on four complementary perspectives: social inclusion theory, human capital theory, the capability approach, and educational equity frameworks. These perspectives help explain why migrant youth education matters and how it can be organised.

Social inclusion theory focuses on access, participation, recognition, and belonging. In the context of migrant youth, inclusion means that young people are not merely present in a territory but are able to participate in education, build relationships, communicate with institutions, and imagine a future. Exclusion is produced when learners are denied access, treated with suspicion, or left without support.

Human capital theory emphasises the role of education in developing knowledge, skills, and productive capacity. From this perspective, educating migrant youth is not only a humanitarian responsibility; it is also an investment in future social and economic contribution. Young people who acquire literacy, language skills, digital competence, vocational orientation, and civic understanding are better able to support themselves and contribute to communities.

The capability approach, associated with Sen and Nussbaum, shifts attention from formal access to real freedom. A learner may have nominal access to school but still lack the practical capability to learn if they are hungry, traumatised, discriminated against, or unable to understand the language of instruction. This approach is useful because it asks what learners are actually able to be and do within their educational environment.

Educational equity frameworks emphasise fairness in opportunities and outcomes. Equity recognises that learners facing greater barriers may require additional support. In Libya, equity may involve flexible documentation, accelerated learning, language bridging, psychosocial services, teacher training, digital resources, and protection-sensitive referral

systems. The combined framework suggests that migrant youth education should be rights-based, capability-oriented, and grounded in practical support.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative conceptual research design based on document analysis and literature review. It does not present primary interview or survey data. Instead, it synthesises official reports, international policy documents, and scholarly literature in order to develop a coherent analysis and proposed inclusion model.

The analysis focused on sources related to migration in Libya, refugee and migrant education, social inclusion, educational equity, and education in crisis contexts. Official sources such as IOM, UNHCR, UNESCO, UNICEF, and OECD were used to understand current policy and humanitarian contexts. Peer-reviewed scholarship was used to frame the educational and theoretical analysis. Salem's (2018) doctoral research was included as a Libyan educational reference relevant to reform capacity, institutional constraints, and technology-supported learning.

The study followed a thematic analytical approach. Repeated themes across the literature were grouped into five areas: access, continuity, language and curriculum, wellbeing, and transitions. These themes were then used to design the proposed Migrant Educational Inclusion Model for Libya. The paper acknowledges the limitation that more empirical research is needed, particularly interviews with migrant families, school leaders, teachers, municipal authorities, and youth themselves.

Educational Struggles of Migrant Youth in Libya

The first struggle is access to schooling. Migrant youth may face unclear enrolment rules, lack of identity documents, fear of authorities, poverty, or distance from schools. Even where formal policy allows enrolment, families may not understand procedures or may be unable to meet indirect costs such as transport, clothes, materials, or examination fees. Access should therefore be understood as a practical process rather than only a legal permission.

The second struggle is continuity of learning. Many migrant youth have experienced interrupted schooling due to conflict, movement, poverty, or family instability. Some learners may be several years behind their age group; others may have partial literacy in another

language; some may have never attended formal school. Without accelerated learning or remedial pathways, such students may be placed in inappropriate grades or may leave school due to frustration.

The third struggle concerns language and curriculum. Arabic may be unfamiliar to some migrant learners, while others may speak different dialects or languages at home. Curriculum content may not reflect their experiences or previous learning. Teachers may have limited training in multilingual classrooms or culturally responsive pedagogy. This can lead to silence, low participation, and underestimation of learners' abilities.

The fourth struggle is psychosocial wellbeing. Migrant youth may carry memories of conflict, detention, dangerous travel, loss, discrimination, or family separation. These experiences affect concentration, attendance, behaviour, and trust. Schools need pathways to support wellbeing rather than interpreting distress only as poor discipline or low motivation.

The fifth struggle is transition to the future. Adolescents and youth need pathways to secondary education, vocational training, language certification, digital skills, and employment preparation. If education does not connect to future opportunities, young people may become vulnerable to informal labour, exploitation, trafficking, or social marginalisation. For this reason, migrant youth education should include career guidance, technical and vocational pathways, and transferable skills.

Findings and Proposed Migrant Educational Inclusion Model for Libya

The analysis suggests that migrant youth inclusion in Libya requires a model that is both rights-based and practical. It must address immediate school access while also supporting learning, wellbeing, progression, and local coordination. The proposed model contains six dimensions: recognition, access, participation, support, progression, and governance.

Table 1: *Migrant Educational Inclusion Model for Libya*

Dimension	Core Question	Key Interventions	Policy Value
Recognition	Are migrant youth seen as learners with dignity, rights, and potential?	Rights-based communication, anti-discrimination guidance, community awareness, learner identity recognition.	Reduces stigma and creates a foundation for belonging.
Access	Can learners enter school despite documentation, poverty, mobility, or language barriers?	Flexible enrolment, information campaigns, transport support, school placement coordination, fee-cost mitigation.	Increases enrolment and reduces invisibility.
Participation	Can learners attend, communicate, and engage in classroom life?	Language bridging, peer support, culturally responsive pedagogy, family liaison, safe reporting mechanisms.	Improves attendance, classroom engagement, and school belonging.
Support	Are academic, psychosocial, health, and protection needs addressed?	Remedial learning, accelerated pathways, counselling referrals, health links, child protection pathways.	Reduces dropout and strengthens wellbeing.
Progression	Can learners move towards future education, skills, and livelihoods?	Certification, vocational pathways, digital skills, career guidance, transferable learning records.	Supports human capital and reduces vulnerability.
Governance	Who coordinates inclusion and monitors outcomes?	Municipal education inclusion committees, national standards, ethical data systems, partnerships with UN agencies and NGOs.	Improves accountability, planning, and sustainability.

Discussion

The proposed model has several implications for Libyan educational policy. First, it shows that migrant youth education should be integrated into mainstream planning rather than handled only as an emergency or charitable activity. When migration is treated as temporary, education systems remain reactive and inconsistent. When it is treated as a structural feature of the local context, schools and municipalities can plan more effectively.

Second, the model challenges the assumption that inclusion is achieved through school enrolment alone. A learner who is enrolled but cannot understand lessons, feels unsafe, lacks transport, or has no progression pathway remains educationally excluded. Genuine inclusion requires participation and outcomes, not only access.

Third, the model highlights the importance of teachers. Teachers are central to whether migrant learners feel welcomed, supported, and challenged. Yet teachers cannot be expected to manage multilingualism, trauma, mixed-age learning, and social tensions without professional development. Training should include inclusive pedagogy, language-sensitive teaching, formative assessment, psychosocial awareness, and anti-discrimination practices.

Fourth, digital learning should be used carefully as a supportive tool. Technology can provide remedial learning, language practice, flexible resources, and continuity during disruption. Salem's (2018) work reminds policymakers, however, that positive attitudes towards technology must be matched with infrastructure, training, and institutional support. Digital inclusion should therefore be designed as part of a wider educational strategy, not as a substitute for teachers or schools.

Fifth, policy must address the relationship between education and national security. This does not mean treating migrant youth as a threat. On the contrary, exclusion creates vulnerability and instability, while education supports protection, social cohesion, and responsible participation. Inclusive education can reduce the risks associated with marginalisation, misinformation, exploitation, and social isolation. It is therefore a preventive and developmental approach.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Libyan policymakers and education partners should consider the following measures:

1. Adopt a national policy statement affirming the educational rights and protection needs of migrant, refugee, and displaced children and youth.
2. Create flexible enrolment procedures and guidance for learners who lack documentation or records of previous schooling.
3. Develop accelerated learning and remedial programmes for youth with interrupted education, including literacy, numeracy, Arabic language, and digital skills.

4. Train teachers in inclusive pedagogy, multilingual classrooms, trauma-informed practice, anti-bullying strategies, and formative assessment.
5. Establish municipal coordination mechanisms connecting schools with health, child protection, psychosocial support, civil society, and international partners.
6. Provide language support and family liaison mechanisms to improve communication between schools and migrant households.
7. Introduce protection-sensitive data systems to track enrolment, attendance, dropout, and learning needs without exposing learners to harm.
8. Use digital learning platforms and community learning spaces to support continuity, especially for learners who move frequently or have missed schooling.
9. Develop progression pathways linking education to vocational training, certification, employability, and lifelong learning.
10. Frame inclusion as a social cohesion and national stability measure that protects children and benefits Libyan communities as well as migrant families.

Conclusion

Migrant youth in Libya live within complex educational shadows created by displacement, poverty, legal uncertainty, language barriers, fragmented governance, and uneven school capacity. These struggles cannot be solved through simple statements of access. They require a coherent and well-resourced inclusion strategy that recognises migrant youth as learners with rights, capabilities, and potential contributions.

This paper has proposed a Migrant Educational Inclusion Model for Libya built around recognition, access, participation, support, progression, and governance. The model connects educational equity with social inclusion, human capital development, and the capability approach. It also highlights the importance of municipalities, schools, teachers, families, civil society, and international partners working together.

For Libya, inclusive education for migrant youth is not merely a humanitarian concern. It is connected to social cohesion, national stability, child protection, and future development. A society that allows young people to remain outside learning creates risks for everyone. A society that brings them into education creates possibilities for peace, dignity, and shared progress. Future research should build on this conceptual paper through fieldwork with

migrant youth, parents, teachers, school leaders, municipal officials, and policy actors across different Libyan regions.

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