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Education of Migrant and Refugee Children: A Study of the Global Challenges of Inclusion, Equal Opportunity and Educational Justice

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ABSTRACT

Migration and forced displacement have become major global educational challenges in the twenty-first century. Children who migrate voluntarily with their families, flee conflict or persecution as refugees, seek asylum, or experience repeated displacement frequently encounter interruptions in schooling and unequal access to educational opportunities. Education plays a critical role in protecting displaced children, restoring stability, supporting psychological well-being, developing language and social skills, and facilitating participation in host societies. Nevertheless, migrant and refugee children continue to experience serious educational inequalities arising from legal status, documentation requirements, language barriers, poverty, interrupted schooling, discrimination, trauma, disability, gender inequality, inadequate school capacity, unrecognised qualifications, teacher shortages, and insufficient international financing. UNHCR's 2024 Refugee Education Report estimated that 14.8 million refugee children were of school age and approximately 7.2 million, or 49 per cent, were out of school. The broader global crisis is even larger: Education Cannot Wait estimated in 2025 that 234 million crisis-affected school-aged children required urgent educational support, of whom 85 million were out of school. The present study critically analyses the education of migrant and refugee children through the concepts of inclusion, equal opportunity and educational justice. It adopts a qualitative narrative-review and policy-analysis approach based on recent UNHCR; UNESCO, UNICEF and Education Cannot Wait publications, international frameworks, and relevant research literature. The paper argues that formal access to school is insufficient to achieve educational justice. Genuine inclusion requires participation in national education systems, language support, psychosocial assistance, recognition of previous learning, accessible education for children with disabilities, qualified teachers, protection from discrimination, flexible pathways, meaningful data inclusion and sustainable financing. The study proposes an Educational Justice Framework for Children on the Move based on legal access, material access, pedagogical inclusion, linguistic inclusion, psychosocial safety, social belonging and equitable educational outcomes. It concludes that migrant and refugee education should be treated not as a temporary humanitarian service but as an integral responsibility of national education systems and the global commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education.

KEYWORDS: Refugee Education, Migrant Children, Educational Inclusion, Educational Justice, Equal Opportunity, Forced Displacement, Children on the Move, Education in Emergencies, Social Inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and displacement are increasingly defining features of the contemporary world. Armed conflict, persecution, political instability, economic insecurity, environmental disasters, climate change and family migration have resulted in millions of children living outside their places of origin. These children represent highly diverse groups.

Some children migrate internationally with their families in search of employment or better opportunities. Others across international borders because of conflict or persecution and receive or seek refugee protection. Some are asylum seekers whose legal claims have not yet been determined. Others are internally displaced within their own countries. Although their legal circumstances differ, many share a common educational challenge: movement can interrupt the continuity of learning. For a child, migration or displacement can mean leaving behind not only a house and community but also a school, teachers, friends, textbooks, familiar language, certificates, routines and expectations for the future.

Education in such circumstances performs functions far beyond academic instruction. A functioning school can restore routine after displacement. It can provide physical protection, peer interaction, trusted adults, language acquisition, psychosocial support and a pathway toward future employment and social participation. Yet educational access for refugee children remains far below that of the general population.

UNHCR's 2024 Refugee Education Report estimated that there were approximately 14.8 million school-aged refugee children worldwide, of whom about 7.2 million, or 49 per cent, were out of school. The barriers identified included insecurity, insufficiently inclusive policies, limited capacity and language difficulties.

The challenge is particularly severe beyond primary education. UNHCR's current education data report average gross enrolment rates of approximately 42 per cent at pre-primary level, 67 per cent at primary level and only 37 per cent at secondary level among reporting refugee-hosting countries. These figures demonstrate that the global issue is not simply one of school access. It is a question of educational justice.

2. UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT AND REFUGEE CHILDREN

- The terms migrant, refugee, asylum seeker and internally displaced child should not be used as if they were identical.
- A refugee child is generally a child who has crossed an international border and requires international protection because of persecution, conflict or circumstances recognised under applicable refugee law.
- An asylum-seeking child has sought international protection but may still be awaiting determination of legal status.
- An internally displaced child has been forced to leave home but remains within the borders of the country of origin.
- The broader term migrant child can include children moving internationally or internally for economic, family, educational or other reasons.
- UNICEF increasingly uses the broader concept children on the move to reflect the diversity of children affected by migration and displacement. Its 2026 Global Programme Framework stresses access to learning and basic services, ending discrimination, strengthening social cohesion and supporting long-term inclusion.
- These distinctions matter because legal status can influence access to public education, documentation, welfare services and certification.
- However, from a child-rights and educational-justice perspective, a child's opportunity to learn should not depend entirely upon immigration category.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the educational situation of migrant and refugee children globally.
2. To analyse major barriers that prevent their participation in formal education.
3. To distinguish between educational access, inclusion, equality and educational justice.
4. To analyse language-related challenges faced by migrant and refugee learners.
5. To examine the consequences of interrupted schooling, trauma and displacement.
6. To analyse the effects of poverty, documentation and legal status on educational opportunities.
7. To examine gender, disability and other intersecting inequalities.
8. To assess the importance of including refugee children in national education systems.
9. To analyse the role of teachers, host communities and international organisations.
10. To propose a conceptual framework for educational justice for children on the move.
11. To suggest policy measures for governments and educational institutions.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative analytical, narrative-review and policy-analysis approach.

The analysis draws primarily upon:

- UNHCR refugee-education reports;
- UNESCO work on refugee inclusion;
- UNICEF reports on children on the move;
- Education Cannot Wait global estimates;
- international refugee-education frameworks;
- research on migration, education and inclusion; and
- literature concerning language, psychosocial well-being, discrimination and educational justice.

Recent evidence published between 2022 and 2026 was prioritised where available, while foundational international frameworks were included where conceptually necessary. The literature was analysed under major themes of access, national-system inclusion, language, interrupted schooling, psychosocial needs, gender, disability, discrimination, documentation, data, financing and educational outcomes.

5. SCALE OF THE GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

- Refugee education forms part of an even wider global education-in-emergencies crisis.
- Education Cannot Wait's 2025 Global Estimates reported that approximately 234 million school-aged children and adolescents affected by crises required urgent support to access quality education, an increase of about 35 million over three years.
- Of these, approximately 85 million were out of school.
- Refugees, internally displaced children, girls and children with disabilities were identified among the groups most seriously affected. The same report estimated that fewer than one in five crisis-affected children reaching the end of primary school achieved basic reading proficiency.
- These figures reveal two dimensions of injustice.
- The first is access injustice: children are unable to enter school.
- The second is learning injustice: even when children enter school, many do not receive education of sufficient quality to acquire foundational skills.
- Therefore: **School Enrolment ≠ Educational Inclusion ≠ Educational Justice**
- These concepts must be distinguished.

6. FROM EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

Equality means that children are formally offered the same opportunity. Equity recognises that children begin from different circumstances and may require different forms of support. Educational justice goes further by examining whether educational structures themselves unfairly advantage some groups and disadvantage others. For example, a host country may legally permit refugee children to attend public schools. This represents formal equality. However, suppose enrolment requires a birth certificate that a displaced family lost while fleeing conflict. The legal right exists, but practical access does not. Similarly, a refugee child may be enrolled in a classroom where all teaching occurs in an unfamiliar language without additional support. The child is physically present but not educationally included.

Educational justice therefore requires attention to:

Rights + Resources + Participation + Recognition + Learning Outcomes

7. INCLUSION IN NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

One of the most important contemporary policy shifts in refugee education is movement away from long-term parallel schooling systems toward inclusion in national education systems. UNHCR's primary education strategy emphasises equitable and sustainable inclusion of refugee, asylum-seeking and stateless children in national systems. The Global Compact on Refugees similarly calls upon states and other stakeholders to expand the inclusiveness and quality of national education systems so that refugee and host-community children can access primary, secondary and tertiary education. It also states that efforts should minimise the time refugee children remain out of education, ideally to no more than three months after arrival. National-system inclusion is preferable to permanent parallel systems for several reasons.

It can:

- Provide recognised qualifications;
- Support curriculum continuity;
- Improve long-term sustainability;
- Facilitate social interaction;
- Reduce educational segregation;
- Strengthen host-country systems;
- and benefit both refugees and host communities.

However, formal national inclusion requires investment. If thousands of refugee children enter an already overcrowded education system without additional teachers, classrooms, materials and funding, both refugee and host-community learners may suffer. Thus, inclusion must be resourced inclusion.

8. DOCUMENTATION AND LEGAL BARRIERS

Documentation is one of the most avoidable barriers to refugee education.

Displaced families may lose:

- Birth certificates;
- Identity documents;
- School certificates;
- Examination records;
- Transcripts;
- Residence permits.

If school enrolment depends rigidly upon documents that children cannot reasonably produce, administrative procedures become instruments of exclusion. UNHCR's recommendations for refugee education call for allowing refugees to enrol under conditions equivalent to nationals and enabling access even where documentation or educational certification is unavailable. They also stress access to national examinations and recognised qualifications. Flexible admissions procedures are therefore essential. Schools need mechanisms for placement through age, interviews, diagnostic assessment or recognition of prior learning rather than automatically excluding undocumented learners.

9. LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER TO INCLUSION

Language is one of the most important educational barriers encountered by children moving across national or regional boundaries. A learner may possess adequate knowledge in mathematics, science or history but be unable to demonstrate it because the language of instruction has changed. Without adequate language support, teachers may incorrectly interpret language difficulty as low cognitive ability.

Language differences can also affect:

- Friendship formation;
- Participation;
- Confidence;
- Assessment;
- Communication with teachers;
- Parental engagement.

UNHCR notes that newcomers may require many years to develop host-country language proficiency sufficient for comfortable learning across academic subjects.

An effective system should therefore provide:

- Intensive language support;
- Language-sensitive teaching;
- Bilingual materials where feasible;
- Peer-language programmes;
- Additional time in assessment;
- Teacher preparation for multilingual classrooms.

The educational objective should not necessarily be to erase a child's home language.

Multilingualism can be treated as a resource rather than a deficit.

10. INTERRUPTED EDUCATION AND LEARNING LOSS

Many refugee children experience repeated educational interruption. A child may stop attending school because of conflict. After displacement, the child may spend months in transit. The family may move several times before reaching a relatively stable location. By the time the child returns to school, age and previous educational level may no longer correspond. For example, a 14-year-old child may have completed only the academic content usually studied by younger learners. Placing such a child solely according to age without additional support can create serious frustration. Placing the child with significantly younger students can generate embarrassment and social isolation.

This is why refugee education frequently requires:

- Accelerated education;
- Bridging programmes;
- Catch-up education;
- Remedial support;
- Flexible pathways;
- Recognition of prior learning.

Education Cannot Wait's refugee programmes include catch-up classes, remedial learning, language classes, flexible pathways and life-skills development to support learners returning after interrupted education.

11. TRAUMA, STRESS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS

Migration and refugee status should never automatically be treated as evidence of psychological trauma. Refugee children demonstrate considerable resilience. Nevertheless, some children may have experienced armed violence, bereavement, family separation, insecurity, dangerous journeys, exploitation or prolonged uncertainty.

Such experiences can affect:

- Concentration;
- Memory;
- Trust;
- Emotional regulation;
- Classroom behaviour;
- Sleep;
- Relationships.

Teachers therefore need trauma-sensitive awareness without attempting to become therapists. UNHCR guidance explicitly notes that children experiencing serious stress or trauma may require qualified professional assistance. Teachers can recognise possible signs, provide supportive classroom environments and refer children to appropriate services, but should not perform specialist therapeutic roles for which they are unqualified.

This principle is important: Trauma-sensitive education should support children without defining them by trauma.

12. POVERTY AND THE HIDDEN COSTS OF EDUCATION

Public education may be legally free while remaining economically inaccessible.

Families may need to pay for:

- Transport;
- Uniforms;
- Books;
- School meals;
- Examinations;
- Digital devices;
- Internet connectivity;
- Supplementary materials.

Refugee and migrant families may simultaneously face unemployment, housing insecurity and restrictions on legal work. Under such conditions, adolescent children may enter employment to support the household. Girls may be expected to provide domestic care.

Therefore, a policy of “free tuition” may not create genuinely equal opportunity. Programmes supporting transportation, learning materials, uniforms, meals and targeted cash assistance can reduce such barriers.

13. GENDER INEQUALITY

Displacement can magnify existing gender inequality.

Refugee girls may face:

- Household responsibilities;
- Early marriage;
- Gender-based violence;
- Safety concerns during travel to school;
- Inadequate sanitation;
- Cultural restrictions;
- Economic prioritisation of boys' education.

Girls may therefore experience greater difficulty continuing into secondary education. The Global Compact on Refugees explicitly recognises the importance of strengthening the agency of women and girls and supporting their access to secondary and tertiary education. Gender-sensitive education policy consequently requires safe transport, appropriate sanitation, protection mechanisms and active prevention of school dropout.

14. REFUGEE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Disability and displacement can produce compounded disadvantage. Children with disabilities may experience all the barriers faced by other displaced children plus:

- Inaccessible buildings;
- Unavailable assistive technology;
- Insufficient special educators;
- Transportation difficulties;
- Discrimination;
- Inaccessible digital learning;
- Missing disability documentation.

The 2025 Education Cannot Wait estimates show that children with disabilities are disproportionately represented among crisis-affected out-of-school children; approximately one in five crisis-affected children who are out of school has a disability.

Educational justice therefore requires a dual approach:

Refugee Inclusion + Disability Inclusion

A refugee-education programme that is inaccessible to disabled children is not genuinely inclusive.

15. DISCRIMINATION, XENOPHOBIA AND BELONGING

School access alone does not guarantee social inclusion. Migrant and refugee children may encounter discrimination because of:

- Nationality;

- Ethnicity;
- Religion;
- Accent;
- Language;
- Clothing;
- Legal status;
- Poverty.

Bullying and exclusion can lead to absenteeism, isolation and early dropout. Inclusive education should therefore deliberately promote social cohesion between host-community and displaced learners. UNICEF's 2026 Global Programme Framework for Children on the Move explicitly includes ending discrimination and strengthening social cohesion among its central priorities. This suggests that refugee inclusion is not only about adapting the child to the host school. The school itself must also adapt.

16. TEACHERS AS CENTRAL ACTORS IN INCLUSION

Teachers are among the most important factors determining whether a refugee learner experiences genuine inclusion.

Teachers require preparation in:

- Multilingual pedagogy;
- Culturally responsive teaching;
- Differentiated instruction;
- Identification of learning gaps;
- Trauma-sensitive classroom practice;
- Conflict-sensitive education;
- Anti-discrimination strategies;
- Communication with migrant families.

However, refugee-hosting schools may already suffer from teacher shortages and large classes. Expecting teachers to address complex inclusion needs without additional resources can create burnout and poor-quality support. Educational policy must therefore invest in teachers rather than simply issue inclusion directives. Where appropriate and legally possible, qualified refugee teachers themselves can be valuable educational resources because they may possess linguistic and cultural knowledge useful to displaced learners.

17. DATA INVISIBILITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE PROBLEM

A child who is not counted is easier to exclude. Refugee students are frequently missing or inadequately identified in national education data. UNESCO and UNHCR have highlighted that refugees are often not fully accounted for in education planning and data systems, making it difficult to measure enrolment, progression, learning outcomes and dropout. Their collaborative work examines inclusion across major refugee-hosting countries precisely because data gaps weaken educational planning. However, data collection also requires ethical safeguards. Refugee status can be sensitive information.

Education systems must therefore balance:

VISIBILITY FOR PLANNING

with

PRIVACY AND PROTECTION

18. FINANCING REFUGEE AND CRISIS-AFFECTED EDUCATION

- Educational inclusion requires sustainable financing.
- Humanitarian crises often receive emergency attention at the beginning but may remain unresolved for many years.
- Short funding cycles are poorly suited to a child's educational journey.
- The education needs of crisis-affected children are also increasing faster than available resources. Education Cannot Wait reported in 2025 that educational needs for crisis-affected children had reached 234 million while education-aid funding remained insufficient.
- This creates a fundamental contradiction.
- Refugee education is often treated financially as temporary even when displacement lasts for years.
- Funding must therefore connect humanitarian response with long-term educational development.
- This is the humanitarian-development nexus.

19. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: OPPORTUNITY AND NEW DIVIDE

Digital education can support migrant and refugee learners through:

- Remote learning;
- Translated educational resources;
- Digital certification;
- Language-learning applications;
- Educational continuity during displacement;
- Teacher professional development.

However, digital solutions can reproduce inequality if refugee families lack:

- Devices;
- Electricity;
- Internet;
- Digital literacy;
- Safe study environments.

Technology should therefore complement rather than replace inclusive public education.

A child without connectivity should never become invisible simply because an educational response has moved online.

20. WHY PARALLEL EDUCATION SYSTEMS ARE NOT A LONG-TERM SOLUTION

Temporary learning centres may be necessary during acute emergencies.

However, long-term parallel refugee systems may create:

- Inferior resources;
- Unrecognised qualifications;
- Segregation;
- Dependence on temporary humanitarian funding;
- Limited pathways to higher education.

UNHCR's global approach therefore increasingly prioritises national-system inclusion. Its educational advocacy argues that refugees should study under recognised national curricula and access examinations and qualifications.

The long-term model should therefore be:

Emergency Access → Transition Support → National-System Inclusion → Recognised Qualification → Further Education / Employment

21. PROPOSED EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

The present study proposes a seven-dimensional framework.

DIMENSION 1: LEGAL JUSTICE

Every child should have a real legal pathway to education regardless of migration or refugee status.

DIMENSION 2: MATERIAL JUSTICE

Families require access to transport, learning materials, food, devices and other resources necessary for participation.

DIMENSION 3: LINGUISTIC JUSTICE

Children need meaningful language support without unnecessary devaluation of their home language and identity.

DIMENSION 4: PEDAGOGICAL JUSTICE

Interrupted education should be addressed through differentiated, accelerated and remedial learning.

DIMENSION 5: PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SAFETY JUSTICE

Schools should provide physically and emotionally safe environments with referral pathways for children requiring specialist support.

DIMENSION 6: SOCIAL AND RECOGNITION JUSTICE

Children should experience dignity, belonging, non-discrimination and recognition of previous knowledge and qualifications.

DIMENSION 7: OUTCOME JUSTICE

Success should be evaluated through progression, learning, completion, recognised qualifications and pathways to further education rather than enrolment alone.

The framework can be expressed as:

LEGAL ACCESS

↓

MATERIAL ACCESS

↓

LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUPPORT

↓

SAFE AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

↓

RECOGNITION AND BELONGING

↓

SUCCESSFUL LEARNING

↓

RECOGNISED EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

22. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Migrant and refugee education is a major global educational-justice challenge.

2. Almost half of the school-aged refugee population identified in UNHCR's 2024 education report remained out of school.

3. Secondary education remains substantially less accessible than primary education.

4. Formal legal access does not guarantee practical educational access.

5. Documentation requirements can exclude displaced children from schooling.

6. Language barriers affect learning, assessment, participation and belonging.

7. Interrupted schooling requires flexible placement and accelerated-learning pathways.

8. Refugee children should not automatically be labelled as traumatised, but psychosocial support must be available where required.

9. Poverty and hidden educational costs contribute significantly to exclusion.

10. Refugee girls may face intersecting educational barriers.

11. Children with disabilities face compounded disadvantage in displacement settings.

12. National education systems provide more sustainable pathways than permanent parallel systems.

13. Inclusion must benefit host communities as well as refugees.

14. Teachers require specific professional preparation and institutional support.

15. Refugee learners need recognised examinations and qualifications.

16. Social belonging and protection from discrimination are components of educational inclusion.

17. Data gaps can make displaced learners invisible in policy planning.

18. Digital education can expand access but can also create a digital refugee divide.

19. Short-term humanitarian financing is insufficient for prolonged displacement.

20. Educational success should be evaluated through learning and progression rather than enrolment alone.

23. POLICY AND EDUCATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments should guarantee school access irrespective of documentation problems and establish flexible procedures for age placement and recognition of prior learning.
- Refugee children should, wherever feasible, be incorporated into national education systems under recognised curricula.
- Host-country schools enrolling large numbers of displaced children should receive additional teachers, infrastructure and financial support so that refugee inclusion does not reduce educational quality for host-community children.
- Language-support programmes should begin rapidly after arrival while valuing children's home languages.
- Accelerated and bridging programmes should support children who have missed substantial periods of education.
- Schools should provide referral mechanisms for professional psychosocial support while ensuring that teachers are not expected to function as therapists.
- Inclusive education policies should specifically address refugee girls and children with disabilities.
- Qualifications earned before or during displacement should be recognised through flexible certification and prior-learning systems wherever possible.
- School anti-discrimination policies should address xenophobia and refugee-related bullying.
- Governments and international organisations should include refugee learners in national education statistics while safeguarding privacy.
- Digital learning strategies should include offline and low-bandwidth alternatives.
- Long-term financing should support both displaced learners and host education systems.
- Finally, refugee and migrant children themselves should be included in decisions concerning educational programmes.
- Policy designed for children should increasingly also be designed with children.

24. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The present study is based on secondary literature and global policy evidence.
- Migrant and refugee populations are extremely diverse. Experiences differ according to legal status, country of origin, host country, age, gender, disability, language, socioeconomic status and length of displacement.
- Therefore, global patterns should not be interpreted as identical experiences for every migrant or refugee child.
- Data limitations remain substantial, particularly for undocumented migrants, internally displaced children and learners outside formal school systems.
- The number of displaced people and refugee learners also changes rapidly as conflicts and emergencies evolve.
- Future research should therefore expand longitudinal, child-centred and comparative evidence, particularly on learning outcomes rather than enrolment alone.

25. CONCLUSION

The education of migrant and refugee children represents one of the defining tests of global commitment to inclusive and equitable education. For a displaced child, education is not a luxury to be provided after food, shelter and security have been addressed. Education itself provides protection, routine, relationships, identity, language, hope and a pathway toward future independence. Yet the scale of exclusion remains profound. UNHCR's 2024 education

analysis estimated that approximately 7.2 million of 14.8 million school-aged refugee children were out of school. The broader crisis is even more severe. Education Cannot Wait estimated that 234 million crisis-affected school-aged children required urgent educational support in 2025, with 85 million out of school. The challenge therefore extends far beyond emergency classroom provision. True educational inclusion requires legal access, adequate resources, language support, skilled teachers, recognised curricula, flexible pathways, disability inclusion, gender equality, social acceptance, psychosocial safety and sustainable funding. Importantly, the goal should not be merely to place refugee children inside schools.

- A child can be enrolled and still be excluded.
- A child who cannot understand the language of instruction is not fully included.
- A child who is bullied because of nationality is not fully included.
- A child whose previous learning is ignored is not fully included.
- A child who completes an unrecognised programme without a usable qualification has not received educational justice.

This leads to the central proposition of the present study:

Access to School + Meaningful Participation + Quality Learning + Recognition + Belonging + Equitable Outcomes = Educational Justice

International policy is increasingly moving in this direction. The Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR's Education Strategy, UNESCO's work on national-system inclusion and UNICEF's 2026 Global Programme Framework all place increasing emphasis on inclusive systems rather than isolated temporary provision.

The future of migrant and refugee education should therefore be built around one fundamental principle:

- A child's right to education travels with the child.
- Crossing a border should not erase years of learning.
- Losing documents should not erase academic identity.
- Changing language should not erase intellectual ability.
- Displacement should not permanently determine educational destiny.

For governments and the international community, the most important transition is therefore:



Only when migrant and refugee children can learn alongside other children, progress through recognised education, feel safe and respected, and convert schooling into genuine future opportunities can the global promise of inclusive education be considered fulfilled.

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