

# **An Exploration Of The Experiences Of Migrant Secondary School Learners In Securing A Learning Place In The Manzini Region, Eswatini**

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## **Abstract**

*The main aim of the study was to explore the experiences of migrant secondary school learners in securing a learning place in the Manzini region of Eswatini. Its objectives were to explore the experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place, examine how socio-cultural issues support or inhibit migrant learners' inclusion in school activities, examine challenges faced by migrant learners in the educational settings, identify coping mechanisms used by migrant secondary school learners to overcome challenges and succeed academically and socially and suggest intervention strategies that may be utilised to best support migrant learners. The study employed the constructivist paradigm using a qualitative research method to collect data which included interview, focus group discussions, and field notes. The design of the study was a phenomenological and it used thematic approach to analyse data. Findings of the study revealed that migrant learners have administrative Gate-keeping challenges which enabled or obstructed their access to education, experience conflicts between school regulations and their socio-cultural beliefs and values leading exclusion and discomfort. Ultimately, learners encountered academic challenges due to the stringent linguistic demands of the curriculum. Learners adopted peer support as a pivotal coping strategy. The researcher concluded that cultural accommodation constitutes a pivotal domain where educational institutions can enhance their support for migrant learners. The study recommended that schools should develop policies and programmes that specifically address administrative gate keeping and create a supportive environment to bridge marginalisation and exclusions in schools and the provision of a flexible curriculum to ensure smooth transition from their home schools to Eswatini schools.*

**Index Words:** *Schooling Experience, Migrant learners, Administrative Gate-keeping*

Date of Submission: 23-04-2026

Date of Acceptance: 03-05-2026

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## **I. Introduction**

The phenomenon of human migration is as old as humanity itself. Throughout human history, people have moved from one place to another due to various reasons. These include searching for greener pastures, fleeing from conflicts or persecution, or simply to find new economic opportunities (McAuliffe & Ouncho, 2024). In recent times, the number of migrants moving from both within and across international boundaries has increased considerably. According to Blanc et al. (2024), the last decade has seen a significant increase in human migration, which is estimated at 281 million migrants across the world, of which 36 million were children under age 18. This indicates a 28 percent increase. This increase is partly attributed to globalisation and the improvements in communication and transport systems that, together, have made it easier for people to move from one place to another, regardless of the distance involved (Nnadozie, 2010).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought a plethora of new ways of doing things. Technology has significantly changed the way in which things are done. It has also affected human communication and human movement. This new trend makes travelling within national borders or outside borders easy. Some of these people travel with their families: spouses and children. With the increasing number of youths and children involved in cross border migration (UNICEF, 2021), the world has become more alert to the need to safeguard and advance the right to education for these youths (Adebayo & Heinz, 2022). As a result, countries have concentrated their energy and resources on improving education systems as they have accepted that economic

growth can be achieved through skilled human beings that can only be produced by a well-ordered education system (Hanushek, et.al. 2017). Eswatini is also one of the destinations of these international migrants who are bringing with them school going children. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to investigate the schooling experiences of the migrant secondary school learners in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

According to UNICEF (2021), the estimated number of youth migrants of (15 to 24 years) across the world rose from 22.1 million in 1990 to 31.7 million in 2020. Those who were 18 years and below accounted for 11.3 per cent of the total migrant population in 2020. This is a population of school going children. However, this does not suggest that all are in school. One must also note that there is difficulty in obtaining unified statistics owing to differences in definitions of “child migrants” and “youth migrants” by the United Nations (UN). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as a human being below the age of 18 yet youth means persons between 15 and 24 years of age.

This disparity leads to an overlap since persons between the ages of 15 and 18 years are counted as both children and youth. This, however, has no impact on the current study as its focus is on migrant secondary school learners, regardless of their ages. Therefore, the term “migrant learner” henceforth is used to refer to both children and youths who are in high schools in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

In 2018, out of the 109 million youths living in European Union (EU) countries, 5 percent were foreign born, with a bigger proportion arriving from countries outside of the EU (UNICEF, 2019). In terms of education, migrant youths in the EU are legally entitled to access the host country’s education system on the same terms as those that apply to nationals. Despite this legal position, UNICEF (2019) reports that children and youth born outside the EU are over-represented among those who leave early. Overall, early school leaving among children born outside the EU (including refugee and migrant children) is almost twice as high compared to native-born children (25.4% vs. 11.5%). This is attributable to issues such as poverty, language barriers and other socio-economic inequalities. A similar situation is reported in Romania by the Terre des hommes Foundation (2020) that migrant minors are still confronted with many obstacles in accessing their fundamental right to education, starting from issues with learning Romanian and recognition of their previous learning in their countries of origin amongst others.

The African continent has the largest share of children and youth among its migrant population, where one in every four immigrants in Africa is a child (Blanc et al., 2023). This is more than twice the global average. In 2017, at least 13.5 million children were on the move in Africa, including those living as refugees, migrants or internally displaced (Girault & Stille, 2023). The quantitative study by Girault and Stille (2023) revealed that more than half of the respondents (57%) reported that migrant children were not accessing childcare or education services. The main obstacle to accessing childcare or education for their children was reportedly the lack of financial resources (41%). West and East African countries house more than 40 percent of migrant youth, a majority of whom are not in formal school (UNICEF, 2017).

Literature search reveals that information on youth migrants in Eswatini and issues of their access to the country’s education system is very scanty. The country is known for receiving migrants from countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, India, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia who come mainly for economic reasons. Recently Eswatini has received a wave of Zimbabwean migrants, many of whom were highly qualified and skilled persons who were rendered unemployed by the politico-economic crisis that befell the country in the last decade (Nyamwanza, 2023). Eswatini has also received a large number of various Asian nationals from countries such as India, Pakistan, Taiwan and China who masquerade as investors and business people. Many of these foreign nationals came with their families including children. This has seen schools, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, become places where different races and cultures converge almost on every school day to get education. Demographic information on these observed patterns and how the immigrants were integrated into the different aspects of life, including access to basic education in Eswatini, is rather hard to find. Hence the decision to conduct this study to explore the experience of youth migrants in secondary schools in Eswatini.

Education is an important step in preparing all children to participate in socio-economic development and the labour market in their adult lives. With the continued rise in international migration (UNICEF 2021), the rights of migrant children to education is increasingly recognised in international frameworks, such as the 1990 Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their families and Education for All movement. At the centre of these frameworks sits the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which recognises education as a right for all people rather than a privilege to a few. The Convention of the Rights of a Child (1989), the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (1966) as well as the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) are other international frameworks that are aimed at promoting and protecting the right to education for all youths, including migrant ones. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 calls upon states to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. According to UNECSO (2020), education is one of the

fundamental rights for all as it is often regarded as ground leveller for all people irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, socio-cultural and economic representations.

In Eswatini, the right to education for all, including immigrants, is enshrined in the National Education and Training Sector Policy launched in 2011 and its revised version of 2018. This policy position is aligned to the UN 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 4. These goals deal with promoting an inclusive equitable educational setup which will ensure that all girls and boys complete free and quality primary and secondary education that lead to relevant and effective learning outcomes (Education & Training Sector Policy, 2018). The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini has committed itself to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This included goal 4 which says '*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'. The government of Eswatini in alignment with SDGs goal reviewed the Education Sector Policy (EDSEC) of 2011 in 2018 which aimed at the provision and access to relevant quality education at all levels for all learners in Eswatini with regards to issues of efficacy, equity and special needs (EDSEC, 2018). This means that migrant children and youths in Eswatini are eligible to inclusive, free and equitable education in Eswatini schools. It follows then that measures need to be taken to ensure that the "migrant" status does not subject them to experiences that may negatively affect their academic achievements.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Youth migration is undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues in contemporary societies. It has been estimated that there are 35.5 million children living outside of the country of their birth worldwide, making it an issue of global interest and concern (Hanna, 2023). The African continent reportedly has the largest share of its children who are part of the migrant population (Blanc et al. 2023) with about 13.5 million children in 2017 crossing national boundaries to join other countries (Girault & Stille, 2023) either with their families, care-givers or as unaccompanied children. The motivating factors of this mobility include extreme poverty, lack of employment, and desire to access quality education, search for sustainable development opportunities, political instability, conflicts and environmental problems amongst others (Blanc et al. 2023).

Several studies indicate that migrant children and youth on the move are vulnerable as they face uprooting, marginalisation, lack of economic and material resources, lack of access to basic services and an increased risk of different forms of abuse (Adebayo & Heinz, 2022; Nnadozie, 2010; Nyamwanza, 2023). This is despite having international and regional legal instruments that provide and safeguard their rights to education. Youth migrants in different countries are still facing various barriers in accessing public education systems of their host countries (Martin & Stulgaitis 2022). As a result of these challenges, migrant youths are reportedly more likely to remain out of school, drop out of school early or perform poorly than their native peers.

Although Eswatini has a small number of foreign migrant population, this number is phenomenally growing as they come mainly for reasons of education, work, marriage and family reunification (International Organization of Migration, 2023). This inherently means that migrant children are also a growing proportion of the school-going population, yet this important facet of migration and education research remains under-researched in Eswatini. Their lived experiences in the school system of Eswatini remain a crucial research area as existing literature reveals that there is a lack of empirical accounts on the experiences of schooling for foreign migrant children. This, therefore, attracted the researcher to carry out a study to explore the schooling experiences of migrant children in Eswatini, focusing on secondary schools in the Manzini region.

### **Aim of the Study**

The main aim of the study was to explore the experiences of migrant secondary school learners in securing a learning place in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study had the following objectives:

To explore the experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place in Eswatini secondary schools.

### **Main Research Question**

What are the experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place in Eswatini secondary schools?

### **Significance of the study**

It is hoped that the findings of this study may be used by stakeholders to make the integration of migrant learners into the local education system smoother so that their status does not have a negative impact on their academic achievements. Understanding their experiences may lead to the development of culturally responsive and diverse curricula and pedagogies that enhance such learners' academic performance.

### **Limitations of the study**

One of the limitations was that information was self-reported and the researcher could not have complete control over information participants choose to give or withhold. The research, however, triangulated the methods of data collection and sources to mitigate on this. Another limitation was that selected participants would be reluctant to take part in the study due to their illegal migration status. As a limitation mitigation measure, the researcher assured all participants that anonymity and confidentiality would be strictly observed when reporting on data collected.

### **Delimitations of the study**

This study was delimited to the Manzini region of Eswatini in exploring the experiences of schooling for migrant secondary school learners. It focussed on both documented and undocumented migrant secondary school learners within the region of Manzini.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) underpins this study. SIT, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, posits that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Islam, 2024). According to this theory, social groups represent a social way of understanding oneself. Social identity encompasses those aspects of the individual's self-image that result from the social categories to which the individual feels he or she belongs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The third process, social comparison, is the process by which people compare their group with other groups in terms of prestige and social standing. To maintain self-esteem, one must perceive their in-group as having a higher social standing than an out-group has. The theory aids in understanding how migrant learners are socially categorised within the school environment.

### ***Experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place***

The global increase in migration due to conflict, economic instability, and climate change has led to a growing population of migrant children and adolescents seeking education in the countries that host them. Realising children's right to education and making education accessible for migrant children is an important dimension to empowering them and breaking the cycle of poverty that often compels people to migrate in the first instance (UNESCO, 2019). Yet for migrant secondary school learners, securing a learning place in an educational institution is often riddled with challenges rooted in legal, socio-economic and systemic barriers (UNESCO, 2021).

One of the key barriers to securing a learning place for migrant learners is lack of financial resources. This is especially the case for people who engage in forced migration, wherein one has no opportunity to prepare for such a life-altering journey across national boundaries. As such, migrant families often struggle to afford school-related expenses, such as tuition fees, uniforms and other necessities (Crul et al., 2020). At times, the effect of the shortage of funds is felt when these migrants try to secure the identity documents or asylum permits, which are required by the education sector of the host country in order to join the education sector (UNESCO, 2021). Also, closely related to this matter is housing insecurity including homelessness and frequent unplanned relocations as most migrant families constantly look for economic opportunities to survive.

Literature reveals that language proficiency is an important factor in securing a learning place, as many schools especially in Europe and the USA require fluency in the host country's language. As a result of this, migrant learners who score low in language proficiency tests may be placed in lower grades or even excluded (Garcia & Otheguy, 2020). The downside of such language policies is that they often fail to account for the linguistic diversity of the migrant populations. McBrien et al. (2021) found that language support programs, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, are often underfunded or unavailable in schools with high migrant populations. In Canada, a study by Kanu (2022) highlighted the success of bilingual education programs in improving academic outcomes for migrant learners, but noted that such programmes are rarely implemented in low-income areas.

Many countries require proof of legal residency permits or citizenship for school enrolment, which excludes undocumented migrant children. Dryden-Peterson (2020) notes that such policies create an insurmountable hurdle for migrant families, leaving children without access to formal education. In some cases, inconsistent policies and their implementation between countries in the same region exacerbate the problem. Hamilton and O'Higgins (2020) noted that some countries in Europe offer inclusive policies while others impose restrictive measures, citing the European Union where the right to education for immigrants is enshrined in law yet the implementation varies widely. A study done in Germany found that migrant families often face bureaucratic hurdles, such as lengthy documentation processes, which delay enrolment and disrupt educational continuity for migrant children (Koehler & Schneider, 2021). The literature discussed above indicate that most of the studies were done in the other countries, thus leaving a knowledge gap on how the situation is in

Eswatini. This current study explored the experiences of migrant learners in finding a place in secondary schools in Eswatini.

This study was located within the Constructivist paradigm, a paradigm assuming that reality is subjective and constructed by individuals through their experiences and social interactions (Turin et al., 2024). Research located in the constructivist paradigm acknowledges that the experiences of a phenomenon are subjective and shaped by individual perceptions, beliefs, and social contexts of those from whom data are collected (Fodouop Kouam & Arthur William 2024). The constructivist paradigm was chosen because it allowed the researcher to build knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a secondary school migrant learner in Eswatini as constructed by and from the viewpoint of the migrant learners. This study adopted a qualitative approach. Qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Bandari 2022). It works where the researcher gathers in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research.

This study used the phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research is defined as a strategy of inquiry where the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals regarding a phenomenon, as described by the participants (Wertz, 2023). The phenomenological design was chosen for this current study because the study sought to describe the experiences of schooling for migrant learners. Such experiences may only be obtained from the migrant learners, as they are the ones living through the phenomena (being a migrant learner). As such, the phenomenological design is the most appropriate strategy that could allow the researcher to describe these experiences from the perspectives of the participants.

This study was conducted in the Manzini region of Eswatini. The researcher chose this area because it is the most preferred destination for migrants coming to Eswatini due to its alluring promises of a better future. It harbours the largest industrial estate (Matsapha) and main market town in the country (Manzini City). This, coupled with its proximity to the Capital city (Mbabane) forming what has come to be called the Mbabane-Manzini corridor make the region the economic hub of the country and, therefore, it is highly likely to receive a relatively higher number of immigrants in Eswatini

Target population in research creates a boundary for the scope of a study and affords the researcher a proper focus on the population of interest (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The target population for this study were migrant learners, regardless of age, who at the time of the study were enrolled for formal secondary school education within the Manzini region of Eswatini. The study used a purposive sampling technique to select participants. Purposive sampling, also called judgmental sampling, is a strategy in which the researcher deliberately selects cases that possess information that is not obtainable elsewhere (Teherdoost, 2022).

This study used a sample of 13 participants, all of whom were migrant secondary school learners in schools in the Manzini region. Seven participants were interviewed individually. The remaining six converged for a focus group discussion. An in-depth interview is a determined conversation which provides a unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information from the participants (Khan, 2014). In-depth interviews allow participants to answer pre-set open-ended questions. This study used semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews to collect data from secondary school-going migrant learners. A phenomenological study aims to answer research questions by relying on participants' understanding of events through lengthy face-to-face interviews (Taherdoost, 2022). The in-depth face-to-face interviews permitted the use of a voice recorder and field notes which allowed the interviewer to concentrate and pay attention on the responses given by school-going teenage fathers.

This study further used a focus group discussion (FGD) to collect data from the secondary school migrant learners. A focus group discussion (FGD) is a type of group interview that is used to identify trends in the different views of the participants (Daniel, 2016). This was for triangulation of data collection methods. The researcher arranged a focussed group of six participants guided by Gundumugula (2020) who argues that there are no general rules for the size of focus groups that a researcher may use in qualitative enquiry. The researcher also took field notes during interview sessions by jotting down elements that the researcher deemed interesting, relevant and worth noting down.

The researcher had two separate visits to the target schools in the region. The first visit was for identifying participants and creating rapport with them. This entailed formal introduction of the researcher where important details about the study, its academic nature and purpose were discussed with the potential participants. Appointments for the actual interviews were also made during the first visit. The second visit entailed a sit-down interview with the participants where the researcher led using an expert validated interview guide. The individual interview sessions were scheduled for about forty-five minutes each while the FGD lasted for two hours. All interviews were recorded using an electronic voice recorder to allow for transcription at a later stage. Permission to do voice recording was sought from the participants.

Data analysis is a process of inspecting, cleaning and transforming data with the aim of highlighting the patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2020). Data collected from the interviews and FGDs were analysed using the thematic analysis procedure following the theoretical approach as described in Braun and Clarke (2021). The

method was chosen for this study because it is a flexible method whose applicability is not limited by a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. *Trustworthiness in qualitative research is crucial for ensuring the credibility and validity of the findings.* Trustworthiness in qualitative research is typically assessed through criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Subedi, 2023).

Ethical considerations in qualitative research are crucial as they ensure that the rights, dignity, and welfare of participants are protected throughout the research process. The researcher considered informed consent, protection from harm, confidentiality.

## II. Findings

The data were gathered through in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions with migrant learners who provided first-hand insights into their educational experiences in Eswatini. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2021) six-phase framework, was used to identify, analyse and report themes which emerged from the data. Thus, the findings are organised around the themes that emerged during the data analysis process. Direct interview extracts from interviewees were included to support each theme. For each research question, the findings were summarised in a table first, then, a detailed report on the main themes and subthemes was presented thereunder together with carefully selected interview extracts to support them.

### Experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place

This study revealed that securing a space for learning within a formal public secondary school in Eswatini presents a myriad of challenges for migrant learners, many of which go beyond standard admission protocols. The participants reported that access to education, they did not only face challenges from institutional mandates but also by socio-economic, linguistic, and administrative dynamics. Migrant learners reportedly navigate intricate gate-keeping mechanisms marked by informal fees, discriminatory practices, and stringent documentation prerequisites. The study further revealed that, even after successful admission, some migrant learners encountered academic demotion, exclusionary attitudes, and delays that considerably disrupted their educational pathways. It emerged that, for some, the process was further compounded by language barriers that impeded communication and elicited cultural bias in decisions regarding school placement. The data collected further revealed that those who arrived in the middle of an academic year were particularly at risk of being left in prolonged periods of uncertainty before being placed. Thus, contributing to psychological distress and educational discontinuity. The table below categorised these findings into three principal themes: administrative gate-keeping, documentation hurdles, and academic downgrading. Table1 below presents these themes and related subthemes.

**Table 1**  
*Themes on experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place*

Objective	Theme	Sub-theme
Explore the experiences of migrant learners in securing a learning place	1. Administrative gate-keeping	a. Discriminatory fee structures b. Waiting in limbo c. Language at the door
	2.Documentation hurdles	a. Inaccessible official records b. Refugee-specific issues
	3.Academic downgrading	a. Placement below ability b. Curriculum mismatch c. Emotional impact

The theme of Administrative gate-keeping in this study emerged showing how uncontrolled institutional power became a barrier, and not a bridge to inclusive education for migrant learners. The findings revealed the influential role that school administrators occupy in either enabling or obstructing access to education for migrant learners. The participants reported that admission decisions were often swayed by informal practices, encompassing the solicitation of unofficial payments and the imposition of discriminatory fee structures targeting non-Swati families.

Participants revealed that such practices engendered unequal access, where more affluent or better-informed migrant families could occasionally "negotiate" their entry, while others found themselves excluded or redirected to institutions of (perceived or real) inferior quality. The study showed that there were insistences of upfront payment of fees, particularly from migrants, which epitomised a profound mistrust of non-local families and a protectionist mentality was also prevalent among certain schools. Such practices not only subverted fairness but also perpetuated structural inequalities within the educational system.

The following quotations demonstrate what some of the participants had to say about their experiences of seeking placement in some of the local secondary schools in Eswatini:

*Some schools in Manzini charge higher fees for non-citizens, which limited our options to less expensive schools that might not have been our first choice. (Participant H from Zimbabwe, Focus Group Discussion).*

*I actually had to buy a desk and even had to pay him extra money for the admission in school. (Participant J, FGD)*

The study also revealed that some of the administrative hurdles the migrant learners had to deal with were related to different official languages used by their home countries as compared to the English used in Eswatini. Participants reported that some school administrators could not read their documents which resulted in the learners remaining out of school for long periods while these were getting translated by officials in the home country. A migrant learner from Mozambique had the following to say:

*Since the documents were written in Portuguese, they had to be written again and translated into English, and this took additional time and money we hadn't planned to pay. (Participant A, from Mozambique, In-Depth Individual Interview).*

The study further revealed that the timing of one's arrival was a key determinant in gaining access to educational institutions. Students who commenced their educational journey mid-year encountered long periods of waiting. Several respondents indicated that schools typically entertained the admission of new students solely at the commencement of the academic year. The following quotations corroborate this:

*I was compelled to wait close to an entire term before undergoing proper assessment and being allocated to Form 2. (Participant C from Zimbabwe, In-Depth Individual Interview).*

The theme "Documentation Hurdles" encapsulates the myriad challenges encountered by migrant learners in satisfying the documentary prerequisites established by educational institutions. Participants revealed that the enrolment processes frequently require formal documentation, such as birth certificates, academic records, transfer notices, and immigration or refugee authorisations. The study revealed that for numerous migrant families, especially those escaping conflict or economic adversity, such documents were either incomplete, unavailable, or inaccessible. The participants reported that in certain instances, schools reportedly demanded original documents, even when the migrant learners carried certified copies or alternative forms of evidence.

The study further revealed that linguistic disparities compounded the issue, as documents from countries like Mozambique or the DRC were often written in Portuguese or French, rendering them challenging for school officials to interpret. The participants revealed that these bureaucratic impediments not only delayed their placement but also imposed financial burdens due to additional translation expenses and, in some cases, posed a risk of total exclusion from school. The research findings indicated that inflexible and rigid documentation policies frequently disadvantaged already vulnerable children, placing them at risk of educational exclusion.

Some participants had the following to say when commenting on issues relating to required documents:

*Some schools insisted on seeing original birth certificates, previous school reports, and residence permits, documents that refugee families often do not have complete sets of. My school eventually accepted a letter from UNHCR instead of some requirements. (Participant I, School A, from DRC, FGD 1).*

*The biggest problem was providing complete academic records from my previous school. Since the documents were written in Portuguese, they had to be written again and translated into English. (Participant M from Mozambique, FGD).*

*They asked me to go back to my country and bring the school reports and results because they were saying some people forge reports in order to get into schools here in ESwatini so we had to go back to our country and bring the reports to the Principal and I was supposed to stay in hostel since my parents do not stay in Eswatini and it was difficult to fit in the school since they talked in a language I did not understand. (Participant D: School B, from Pakistan, In-depth Interview).*

The theme talks about what migrant students go through when they are put into lower grade levels than they had achieved in their home countries. Participants revealed that they were either judged without formal tests or arbitrarily placed in lower grades because they lacked paperwork, struggled with the language, or were not familiar with the local school system. They reported that this often ignored what they had already learned, which left them feeling upset, uninterested, and like they were moving backward in their studies. The study revealed that some felt disheartened having to go over material they already knew well, which they believed held back their learning and personal growth. This theme captures an important issue in how schools support migrant students, whose past knowledge and skills are often not given the credit they deserve. One participant commented as follows:

*After securing admission, they wanted me to go back into Form 1 yet I was supposed to join in Form 4. After they had a few consultations, they finally settled on letting me join Form 2. This was embarrassing for me because I am the oldest in that class. (Participant E, In-Depth Individual Interview).*

It also emerged from the interviews that some migrant learners suffered downgrading due to curriculum mismatches as a key factor in misplacement. A participant stated:

*The fact that I had a different syllabus at home. My primary school syllabus is different from the one of the other learners follow in Eswatini, so it made it difficult for me to find a space without having to start at lower levels.* (Participant L School A, from India, FGD 1).

This was not only a drawback for migrant learners on an academic perspective, but also had an impact on the self-worth and confidence. A participant of Indian descent recalled as follows:

*Initially, I felt isolated because I was placed in a lower level than my age group due to curriculum differences. This affected my confidence, but after a term, teachers realised that I could handle more advanced work and adjusted my placement.* (Participant J, FGD).

### **III. Discussion Of Findings**

The study found that migrant learners face multiple systemic barriers when trying to access formal education. Beyond institutional policies, access is significantly shaped by socio-economic status, language proficiency, and administrative gatekeeping. Participants reported encountering informal fees, discriminatory attitudes, and rigid documentation requirements that complicated their school placement. These actions effectively positioned school leaders as gatekeepers whose personal discretion, and not official policy, determined the fate of numerous applications by migrant youth aspiring to join the local education system.

Language emerged as a critical challenge, not only in daily communication but also in how documents from their home countries were interpreted or dismissed. Documents not presented in English, Eswatini's official language, were frequently rejected, further delaying or denying access to school. The analysis also revealed that migrant learners were often placed in grades below their previous level of study. This placement was sometimes based on arbitrary judgments rather than formal assessments, with reasons ranging from missing documentation to limited fluency in English or lack of familiarity with the local education system. These experiences left many learners feeling disempowered, academically set back, and marginalized within the school environment.

The findings of the present study align with those of Koehler and Schneider (2021), who found that in Germany, migrant families frequently encounter bureaucratic obstacles such as prolonged documentation procedures that delay school enrolment and interrupt the educational progression of migrant children. This issue is not unique to Germany. According to UNESCO (2021), securing access to education remains a significant challenge for migrant learners globally, primarily due to legal, socio-economic, and systemic barriers that hinder smooth integration into host countries' education systems. The language barrier, in particular, was a prominent theme in the current study and resonates with the findings of McBrien et al. (2021) in the United Kingdom and Kanu (2022), who both observed that migrant learners often struggle with the language of instruction in their host countries. Although language support programmes exist in some contexts, these studies highlight that such programmes are frequently neglected or severely underfunded, leaving migrant learners without adequate support and exacerbating their difficulties in securing appropriate school placement.

When interpreted through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these experiences can be understood as threats to the learners' sense of belonging and identity. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group memberships, including national, ethnic, and linguistic identities. Migrant learners, who already navigate multiple cultural identities, may experience rejection or marginalization when they are denied full participation in the school community. Placement in lower grades or exclusion from mainstream classes signals that they are viewed as outsiders or "less capable," which can harm their academic self-concept and reinforce feelings of inferiority. This exclusion undermines their positive social identity and hinders integration into the new school environment. As such, the study illustrates how institutional practices may unintentionally reinforce social divisions and diminish the learner's sense of agency and self-worth.

### **IV. Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study it is concluded that uncontrolled administrative gate-keeping and institutional power becomes a barrier for migrant learners. It explains the influential role that school administrators occupy in either enabling or obstructing access to education for migrant learners. Documentation encapsulates challenges in satisfying the documentary prerequisites established by educational institutions. Enrolment processes frequently require formal documentation and linguistic disparities compounded the issue. Downgrading puts learners into lower grade levels than they had achieved in their home countries. This often ignored what they had already learned, which discourages and demotivates as they were moved backward in their studies.

The implications of the findings are two-fold: existing literature and the field of educational psychology. There is a limited literature on the schooling experiences of migrant secondary school learners in

the Manzini region of Eswatini. Most studies in the country focused on the reasons for learners to migrate. Hence, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on the experiences of migrant secondary school learners in the Manzini region of Eswatini. It seeks to increase an understanding of the challenges faced by migrant learners and provide insight on the intervention strategies to assist migrant

Implications of the study findings to the field of educational psychology are vast. The findings of the study may serve as a valuable reference for educational psychology professionals and researchers to better understand the issues that migrant learners get exposed to. It is evident that migrant learners are marginalised through cultural practice and language barriers in schools.

## V. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are made: the government of Eswatini should develop policies and programmes that specifically address administrative gate keeping to support migrant learners. These policies and programmes should include documentation protocols and socio-cultural inclusions and flexible curriculum. Secondary schools should provide support to migrant learners by offering a variety of extra-curricular activities. School administrators should also work to create a supportive environment to bridge marginalisation and exclusions in schools. Since the study is conducted in one region, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted in other regions to find out prevalent experiences of migrant learners in regions other than Eswatini and whether learners in those regions are going through the same experiences as those who are in the Manzini region. Future research should be conducted on the resilience of migrant learners in Eswatini since this study did not focus on resilience adequately.

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