



Education of Migrant Labourers' Children (MLC) in Kerala: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Migrant workers constitute a significant portion of Kerala's labour force. The children of migrant labourers in Kerala are likely to be denied their basic human rights, including the right to education, as they live in a different social and cultural environment far from their native state. This study intends to understand the educational status of these children and the problems and challenges they face in schools. The objectives of this study include (1) to understand the problems and challenges faced by MLC in school, (2) to find out the factors influencing their education, (3) to know the behaviours and approaches of classmates and teachers towards them, and (4) to explore any form of stigma or discrimination experienced by them in schools. The researcher conducted the study in various educational institutions of Eraviperoor Grama Panchayat using the Case study method. Qualitative Data was collected from eight children (age group 10 to 16 years) and their two caregivers employing Semi-structured In-depth interviews using Purposive Sampling. The interviews were transcribed, coded, generated themes, and concluded. This study brings out various problems and difficulties these children face in school, such as avoidance, isolation, change of parents' workplace, economic problems, and language barriers. Educators and

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Government authorities have been trying to take appropriate measures to overcome the struggles faced by MLC and to provide financial and psychological support to fulfil the educational needs of children of migrant workers.

Key Words: *Children, Migrant labourers, Education, Influencing Factors, Discrimination*

Introduction

Many children in developing nations are impacted by the temporary labour migration crisis. Living in a family with at least one parent away for long periods is part of the usual childhood experience for many children in these nations (Nobles, 2013). Children who are left behind or who relocate with their parents encounter various challenges when it comes to education and health care. They suffer from numerous psycho-social difficulties and are subject to exploitation (Bakker, Elings-Pels, & Reis, 2009). Education is one of the major challenges as the scope of opportunities for these children is reduced (Smita, 2008). Migrant children are greatly disregarded so much so that there is minimal authoritative information about them. In the 2011 census, 455 million persons were migrants based on the place of their last residence, which constitutes about 37% of the total population of the country. This figure indicates an increase of around 44% from 2001 (314 million) and 97% from 1991 (231 million). Some of the main determinants of migration have been identified as high population density, a surplus of the labour force, high employment rates, meagre incomes, dissatisfaction with housing, demand for higher schooling, rural-urban wage differentials, the distance between village and city, pattern of land possession, and the prior migration patterns (D. Singh & Biradar, 2022).

Every year, millions of people relocate across state lines, looking out for work. Most of them come from the poorest states in the country - Bihar, UP, Orissa etc., and go to rich ones like Delhi, Karnataka, Chennai, and Kerala. A significant number of people move to cities inside their home states in pursuit of work. But their travel is rarely linear or long-lasting – as possibilities in one location dry up, they wander to another for a living. At the onset of the agricultural season, those who work as agricultural labourers or marginal farmers relocate from the city to their hometown. They frequently leave their

jobs during emergencies like natural disasters or unforeseen circumstances like the most recent demonetization drive and head back to their hometowns. Such transient or seasonal migration comprises a major share of internal migration in India.

Seasonal migrants frequently come from poor backgrounds and are more prone to take up informal low-paying occupations in construction, domestic work, hotels etc. They often reside in slums, footpaths and worksites. Their young children frequently fail out or never begin school, as they relocate from place to place. It is a key concern in the field of migration studies but not many researchers have addressed this particular issue (Ann Whitehead, Hashim, & Iversen, 2007), particularly in the context of internal migration. Because of their migratory lifestyle, it is challenging to determine an exact figure for the number of children who are abandoned or travel with their migrant parents.

Empirical data, however, indicates that a significant number of children are impacted by migration. For example, 18 - 40% of children in Bangladesh, 50 - 60% in Tanzania and 80% in Mali have been identified as living in migrant homes in rural areas (A Whitehead & Hashim, 2005). Roughly one million in Indonesia and half a million youngsters in Thailand have been left behind by parents working overseas (Bryant, 2005). Wives and children are left behind in villages in the majority of rural out-migrant households in eastern India ((Roy, 2011; Sajjad, 1998; S. N. Singh & Yadava, 1981).

Similarly, lots of children move with their temporary labour migrant parents. According to an estimate by (McKenzie & Yang, 2015), four out of five immigrant children between the ages of twelve and fourteen relocate with their parents. About 27.3 million children, or nearly 10% of the country's total kid population, participated in internal migration with their parents in 2008 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2010). When parents go to work in another state or place to maintain a higher standard of living, the biggest impact is on their children. Children's mental health and physical health are affected both negatively and positively. It is like a coin with two sides. They face a lot of discrimination, problems, and neglect from their educational institutions and sometimes they need adequate support from external sources. So, they face a lot of difficulties at the beginning of education, but no one can take the initiative

to solve such problems for children of migrant workers. The paper gives us an understanding and insight into the challenges and prospects related to the education of Migrant labourers' children. It assesses the effectiveness of schools, problems challenges and influencing factors of their education.

Review of Literature

The evidence from the available literature implies that the association between parental migration and education for children is also gendered. The dominant narrative is one in which girls are more disadvantaged, relative to boys, when investments are made in domains of education. In Ghana, research reveals that girls are more prone than boys to adjust for shortfalls in household work, and they change their households more often when parents migrate (Ann Whitehead et al., 2007).

According to a study by Kumar (2011), the children of migrant workers frequently stay back in their home villages. Of children staying in Kerala, language barriers pose issues in availing the educational opportunities here. A few single teacher schools have been formed under the national school education project viz., Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The challenge to recruit teachers with understanding in languages like as Oriya, Bengali or Assamese is one of the problems associated to the education of MLC. Furthermore, the study indicates that language hurdles prevent interstate migrants from preserving their rights and from receiving medical care.

Krishnakumar (2013) states that the migrant groups are “very well integrated into the host economy but not into the host culture or society.” He says that “the migrant labourers are often deliberately kept at bay, to ensure not only their social insularity but also to disempower them from asserting their rights as citizens and labourers. This systematic exclusion works to the advantage of the host society in various ways: to keep the wage levels low, rent levels high, services cheap, and to maintain a labour force that is at their beck and call, one that can be absorbed and driven out at will.”

Manoj & Viswanath (2015) conducted an extensive evaluation of the socio-economic circumstances surrounding migrant labourers and concluded that there are two main categories of migrant unskilled workers: those employed

under contract and those individuals looking for daily employment. While the former works under a contractor or an agent for a definite amount of time, the later waits for the employer mostly every day in some of the labour marketplaces. The key reasons for labourers migration to Kerala are; (1) greater employment possibilities and higher earnings available in Kerala, (2) non-availability of employment opportunities and resultant difficulties in the home states.

Smita (2008) discusses the challenges of seasonal migration and its effects on the migrants, as well as the many efforts made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in different regions of India to integrate them into the larger community. One of the issues experienced by the marginalised rural people of India is the increasing phenomenon of distressed seasonal migration. These migrating families also bring their children with them, which interrupts their education and compels them to join the workforce. An estimated 9 million children under the age of 14 are migrants in India. These migrants find themselves in a peculiar scenario as they do not belong to either their hometown or their ultimate destination. Smita has also highlighted the lack of comprehensive data on the hardships faced by seasonal migrants, which in turn results in deficiencies in policy-making. Due to the lack of a comprehensive database documenting the scope and magnitude of seasonal migration caused by hardship, as well as its effects on families and communities, this issue is currently not considered in policy discussions and planning frameworks.

Behera et al. (2012) conducted a study on the protection, nutrition, and educational opportunities for children of migrant workers. The findings indicate that children accompany their parents on most family migrations in Odisha and spend half of their lives at work. Of all the youngsters, 41 percent did not attend any formal school in their own villages, with 22 percent of them being girls. After they reach class VII, the dropout rate among children of migrants reaches its peak. 84% of the children do not have access to formal schooling when they arrive at their job sites. Fifty-seven per cent of them are girls. Similarly, a staggering 84 per cent of youngsters lack access to the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) system at their current location. Of the children who could have attended school, forty per cent never did, and eighty-four per cent of those who did drop out.

Haberfeld et al. (1999) explored the determinants and impact of seasonal migration and found that seasonal mobility among rural labourers is widespread. This migration increased their well-being by both decreasing the impact of miserable circumstances and improving household income. It was also revealed that these migratory households are characterized by educational backwardness and agricultural income.

Lewis (1993) tried to calculate the degree to which immigrant children in the UK with special education needs are integrated. Children have the right to be assisted in acquiring the greatest possible degree of autonomy and integration in society. Despite the government's repeated declarations of support for children's social integration, the study found that there had only been a slight improvement.

Regular remittances from migrant parents improve the family's financial well-being. The financial and in-kind resources increase the socioeconomic level and well-being of children by encouraging investments and their progressive social mobility. In Mexico, research reveals that children in migrant households are economically better than children in non-migrant families (Morooka & Liang, 2009) China. Specifically, we compare the school enrollment of children from emigrant households with those from non-emigrant households. The data are drawn from the 1995 China 1% Population Sample Survey. We find consistent evidence that emigration affects the educational opportunity of the left-behind children in a positive way. First, children from emigrant households are more likely to be enrolled in schools than children from non-emigrant households. Second, emigration also has positive consequences in reducing the gender gap in education. While girls from non-emigrant households still experience a lower enrollment rate, the overall school enrollment for boys and girls from emigrant households has been approaching convergence.”,container-title”:”Asian and Pacific Migration Journal”,DOI”:”10.1177/011719680901800302”,ISSN”:”0117-1968”,issue”:”3”,journalAbbreviation”:”Asian and Pacific Migration Journal”,language”:”en”,license”:”http://journals.sagepub.com/page/policies/text-and-data-mining-license”,page”:”345-370”,source”:”DOI.org (Crossref).

Moreover, research from China reveals that children in migrant homes with a better socioeconomic level have better educational performance (Wen & Lin,

2012). In many countries, parental migration was found to improve educational expenditures, with favourable benefits on children's academic performance, educational aspirations, and school enjoyment (Cebotari, 2020).

Drawing on the above-mentioned literature, this study investigates different factors affecting the education of children of migrant workers, the challenges and problems they face from educational institutions, the behaviour and attitude of students and teachers, and any discrimination they face from educational institutions.

Methodology

The researcher conducted the study in various educational institutions of Eraviperoor Grama Panchayat using the Case study method. Qualitative data was collected by using semi-structured in-depth interviews with the eight migrant labourers' children (MLC) belonging to the age group 10-16 and their two caregivers using Purposive Sampling. An Interview Guide consisting of ten questions focused on the objectives of the study. Consent was obtained from the respective individual for the purpose of data collection. The participants were ensured the confidentiality of the information given by them. The researcher transcribed interviews then coded, generated themes, and summarized them. Qualitative data were analyzed by using QDA Miner Lite v1.0, a free qualitative data analysis software.

Interview Guide for Children/Caregivers

1. What are the various educational services available for you?
2. What are your needs regarding education? Are they fulfilled? If yes how? If not, why?
3. Do you attend classes regularly? If not, why?
4. Do you feel any difficulty in your studies? If yes, what are they?
5. How is your school environment? Are you satisfied? If not why?
6. Do you get enough support from teachers and classmates? If yes, how is it, and if not, why is it not available?
7. Do the school authorities provide any kind of support for improving your academic performance or educational difficulties?

8. Do you feel any kind of discrimination in school, from the teachers, students, and other staff?
9. What are your dreams and expectations in life?
10. How do you assess/evaluate your school education? Any improvement? Any benefit?

Results

Qualitative analysis

The thematic analysis of case studies of the respondents resulted in generating four themes. Figure 1 depicts the frequency distribution Pie chart of the code-influencing factor, and Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution bar diagram of the code. The themes are summarized as follows:

a) Influencing factor

At all times we see many factors affecting education. Over time, the factors affecting education are also changing, but if we take the MLC when we look at other children, there are many problems experienced by the children of the migrants as well as there are many factors that affect their education and psychological well-being. Those various influencing factors are language, social background, economic status, lack of study material and the child and parent's overall perception of the educational institution.

Among these mentioned factors, the most affecting factor in their education is language as well as economic problems. Most of the migrant workers' children are from Bangladesh, Bihar, and Odisha regions, so they mostly use the Hindi language. But when it comes to schools, mostly the teachers use and take classes in Malayalam, the mother tongue. Even if the child studies well, the children of migrant workers generally get low marks in Malayalam. Due to the lack of knowledge of the Malayalam language, many venues have been lost to the children.

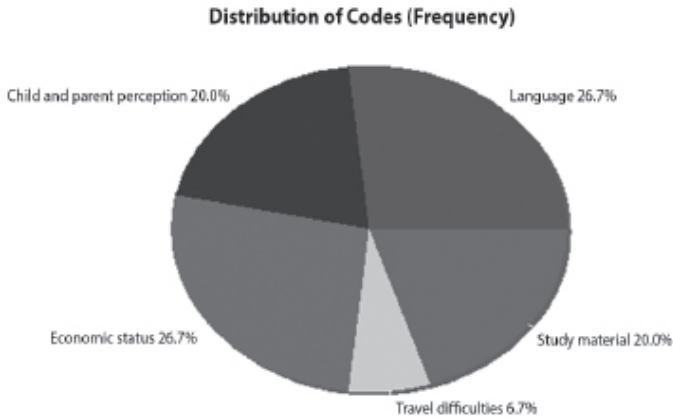


Figure 1 Pie-chart of Frequency Distribution of the Code influencing factor of education

One of the respondents said “I am not able to understand in many classes because I do not know Malayalam well”

He felt that “Sometimes we feel incapable of learning”

Need to organize special classes for Malayalam and provide them with a proper assessment of whether those classes are reaching them properly. There is an urgent need to provide adequate support to children who are considered incapable of learning by their teachers and classmates.

Every child comes to the school from families earning only 500 and 600 daily wages, and therefore, the immediate demands of the school cannot be met due to lack of money or economic problems.

One of the respondents said that “ At the beginning of each school year, we receive school kits from the school. We are very happy to receive those school kits. Because we wish to support our parents financially. We even think that their suffering will be less”.

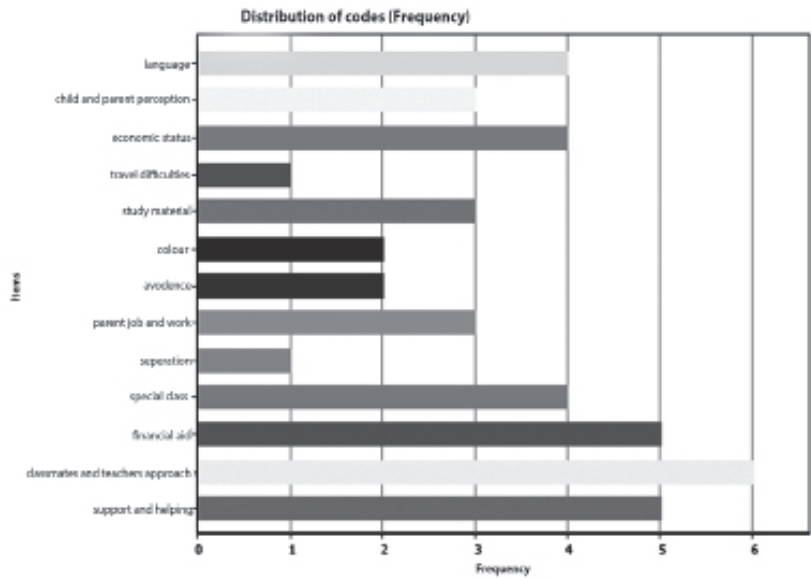


Figure 2: Frequency Distribution Bar Diagram of the Codes

Schools, in collaboration with the government, voluntary organizations, or private institutions, should do their best to provide educational materials and financial support to economically disadvantaged children. If you try to reach the children who need it, it will be of great help.

b) Discrimination/ Stigma

Migrant worker’s children face various types of stigmas or discrimination from the school and classroom at the beginning of their studies and continue. It can be direct or indirect offensive remarks or comments made by staff, teachers, or classmates towards them because of their learning difficulties, ethnicity, colour, gender, parental occupation, religion, language, or any other protected status. It may lead to the exclusion or avoidance of such children.

“Aren’t we humans too?? My parents are doing work according to their abilities, and we still do not understand why everyone is making fun of it”.

Most of the migrant workers are employed in brick companies, cleaning houses, garbage work, outside housework, maid climbing coconuts etc. The

public still considers these jobs to be dishonourable ones. That is why they exclude the children of parents who do such jobs.

“I have heard many people say that he is a Hindi guy so don’t play with him”

Children of migrant workers face discrimination from schools based on parent jobs and colour, but if brought to the attention of the authorities, such trends can be curbed to some extent. But the main reason why migrant workers’ children do not complain to teachers is because they think we are not natives, so steps need to be taken in schools to make them see us as one of us and take responsibility from schools to convince them that they are an important person here.

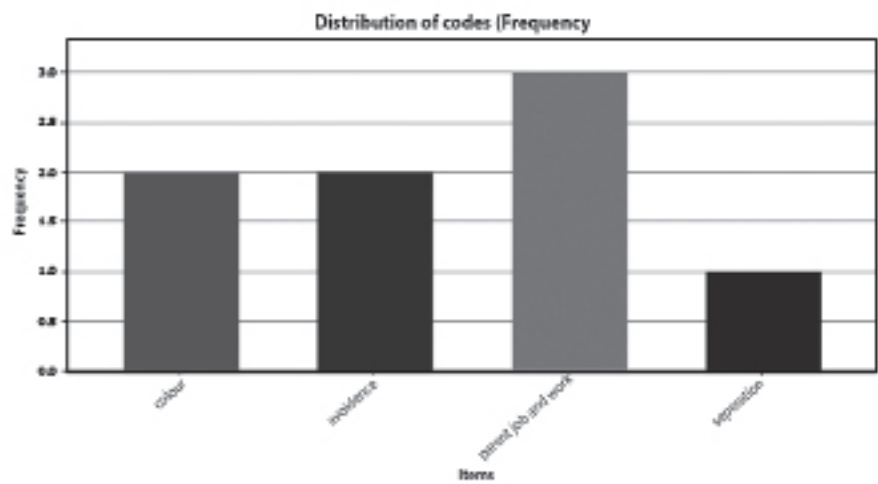


Figure 3 Bar diagram of Frequency Distribution of the Code- Discrimination/stigma

c) Perspective

33% of children of migrant workers face neglect, exclusion, and discrimination from different schools and on the other hand, a good percentage of them are supported by teachers as well as classmates. For children who do not know Malayalam very well, some institutes provide Malayalam special classes under the guidance of Hindi teachers. If we look at it as a positive aspect, it would be ideal to take steps to extend these types of programs and schemes to other schools as well.

"I realized that if education is not in our hands, we will not get any respect"

The migrant workers commented that it was only after coming to Kerala that they were able to provide a good education to their children. After enrolling their children in school, migrant workers tend not to come back to the school, interact with teachers or inquire about their children's needs, leaving parents unaware of the progress as well as defects in their children's education. So, the parents also take the initiative for the betterment of their child and give enough support from the home. and not discourage the children from studying. If the child reports any kind of difficulty from school to the parents, the parents should take steps to find out what their problem is at school. Support and encouragement from both family and school are always a fundamental factor in a child's educational growth. The perspective focuses on the attitudes of peers and teachers and their approaches to children of migrant workers, including their support, help and care.

d) Needs and Challenges

Every living being must address needs and challenges in their life and in different situations of life. Similarly, when the children of migrant workers come to study in our place from their native land, they face many needs and challenges, particularly in the field of education. Difficulty of language is the problem that affects them the most and therefore one of their biggest needs is to adopt alternative methods to overcome the language difficulty.

Most of the guest workers work for very low wages, and therefore, they do not have enough money to fulfil most of their needs in life. Often migrant worker parents cannot find enough money to devote to their children's education. Therefore, it is generally seen that many children drop out of school midway and then return to their parents' path and do the same jobs as they left. Two of the biggest challenges faced by children of migrant workers studying in Kerala are language problems and financial difficulties. These two issues are their greatest wants and needs.

In this study, all the students unanimously said that their biggest challenge was the language problem, as well as the need for financial support, as their parents worked for very low incomes and their families were not properly managed by that income.

Other Findings

- 22.2% of children are experiencing discrimination based on colour
- 66.7% of children get good responses and attitudes from their teachers and classmates and give them proper support
- 11.1% of children face travel difficulties to reach school
- All respondents live in rented accommodation.
- 33.3% of children face a deficiency of study materials which affects their education
- All respondents study in government schools
- The mean age of the respondents is 14.37 years
- 85% of the respondents are Hindus
- All respondents' mothers' job is maid
- 62.5% of the parents (respondents) were earning less than Rs 600/ day.

Conceptual Framework

A variety of factors like language, social background, economic status, lack of study material and the child and parent's overall perception of school are considered the influencing factors of education of MLC. Sometimes they are subjected to exploitation and discrimination from classmates and teachers. The educational needs of migrant workers' children primarily address special classes for the Malayalam language, economic support, and a cordial relationship between teachers and classmates. Challenges in this context constitute the problems that MLC encounter while studying in school, classes, languages, attention, financial issues and technological problems, which affect their learning negatively. The figure below (Figure 4) shows a conceptual understanding of the needs and challenges, as well as influencing factors related to the education of children of migrant labourers.

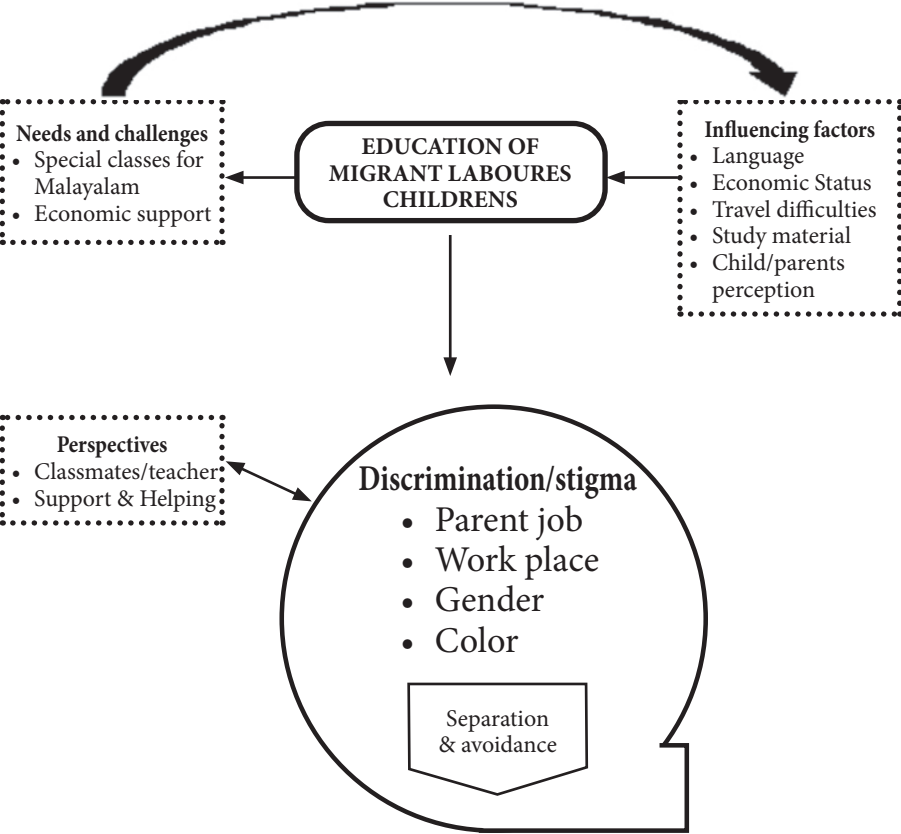


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework

Discussion

The current study examines the education of MLC in Kerala, emphasising the various complex issues they encounter. It brings attention to the considerable barriers they confront in their educational pursuits. A significant number of migrant children in Kerala communicate in languages such as Oriya, Bengali, or Assamese, which are not commonly spoken in the region. This linguistic barrier impedes their capacity to actively participate in the educational programme, comprehend classroom instructions, and effectively interact with both classmates and teachers. Kumar’s (2011) study highlights the challenges

encountered by migrant children in obtaining educational opportunities because of linguistic barriers.

Migrant families frequently encounter financial challenges, resulting in irregular school attendance and limited access to educational services. This discovery is consistent with the findings of Behera et al. (2012), who documented a higher incidence of student dropout among migrant children because of economic constraints. Financial limitations also compel children to contribute to the household income, causing additional disruption to their schooling.

The study uncovers cases of social isolation and discrimination experienced by migrant children, originating from both their classmates and teachers. The experience of being socially excluded can have a significant negative effect on their self-esteem as well as motivation to go to school. Krishnakumar (2013) examines how migrant labourers become integrated into the host economy but remain socially separated, which maintains a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

The study identified occurrences of bias and unfair treatment, which have the potential to demotivate youngsters from engaging in classroom activities and impede their academic advancement. Lewis (1993) highlighted similar problems experienced by immigrant children in the UK, underlining the necessity for inclusive educational systems.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Implementing language support programs, such as customised Malayalam lessons, can help overcome the communication gap for migrating children. Schools should employ teachers skilled in the languages used by migrant communities to assist in greater understanding and learning.
- Providing economic support to migrant families can ease economic stress, helping children to focus on their schoolwork. Scholarships, subsidised school supplies, and midday meal schemes can be helpful strategies to support these families.
- Creating an inclusive learning environment is vital for the social integration of migrant children. Sensitization workshops for students

and their educators can help minimise stigma and develop a culture of empathy and acceptance. Schools should develop anti-discrimination policies and provide counselling services that support affected children.

- Working with migrant communities can provide significant insights into their needs and issues. To involve migrant parents in their children's education, schools should create communication channels with them. In addition, community-based support networks like mentorship programmes can offer further emotional and educational assistance.

Recommendations

1. To increase the school enrollment of MLC in Kerala, the government should seriously monitor the activities of all migrants in Kerala.
2. More instructors with proficiency in North Indian languages could be employed at schools located near migrant labour settlements. Conduct frequent training sessions for teachers to sensitize them to the unique issues faced by migrating children and equip them with techniques to build an inclusive learning environment.
3. The government should take immediate steps to register all the migrant labourers in Kerala.
4. The Education department should take urgent steps to collect the complete data of migrant children in Kerala. This is a basic prerequisite for developing and implementing welfare measures for them.
5. Encourage the engagement of authentic NGOs in their Welfare programmes.
6. Introduce targeted financial support programs for migrant families to ensure children have the appropriate financial resources for their education.
7. Create peer mentorship programmes where students from the community may assist immigrant children in settling in and making friends at their new school.

Conclusion

This study examines the educational landscape of migrant workers' children (MLC) in Kerala, uncovering both their prospects and challenges. Currently, there is limited tracking of MLC and little data on their educational status, hampering focused interventions. The study cites numerous significant issues influencing MLC education, including language barriers, financial hardship, travel challenges, access to study materials, and attitudes toward schooling by children and parents.

Teachers in host cities often lack the essential training for effectively dealing with students from varied language backgrounds, underlining a need for increased psychosocial care. The biggest problems identified by MLC were language barriers and financial constraints, hurting their school experience greatly. MLC endure numerous sorts of discrimination, marginalization, and isolation in schools and among peers, based on both racial prejudice and their parents' employment. However, the research also notes proactive initiatives by a considerable percentage of schools aiming to strengthen MLC education.

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Conflicts of interest: Nil

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