

Education at the Margins: Transformative Learning for Migrant Communities in India and Turkey.

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Abstract

This paper explores how education functions at the margins for migrant communities in India and Turkey, with a particular focus on its potential for transformative learning. The objective is to analyze how systemic barriers such as language, documentation, economic precarity, caste, and gender shape migrants' access to education, and how alternative practices may reframe learning as a space of empowerment. While much existing scholarship documents exclusion, the research gap lies in examining education not simply as access but as a transformative process that can cultivate resilience, agency, and solidarity. Methodologically, the study employs a comparative theoretical approach, drawing on secondary literature, policy documents, and critical frameworks including Freire's critical pedagogy, Mezirow's transformative learning, and intersectional postcolonial theory. The findings show that state-led education in both contexts tends to reproduce inequalities by positioning migrants as deficient, while grassroots and community-driven initiatives demonstrate possibilities for multilingual, flexible, and culturally responsive practices. The paper argues that transformative learning, when rooted in critical reflection and dignity, offers a pathway for migrant learners to negotiate belonging and resist exclusion. By placing India and Turkey in dialogue, the study underscores the urgency of reimagining education as a site of justice in contexts of displacement and mobility.

Keywords: Migration, Transformative Learning, Critical Pedagogy, Refugee Education

Pendidikan di Pinggiran: Pembelajaran Transformatif bagi Komunitas Migran di India dan Turki

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana pendidikan berfungsi di wilayah pinggiran bagi komunitas migran di India dan Turki, dengan fokus khusus pada potensinya sebagai sarana pembelajaran transformatif. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menganalisis bagaimana hambatan sistemik seperti bahasa, dokumentasi, kerentanan ekonomi, kasta, dan gender membentuk akses migran terhadap pendidikan, serta bagaimana praktik-praktik alternatif dapat membingkai ulang pembelajaran sebagai ruang pemberdayaan. Meskipun banyak kajian sebelumnya mendokumentasikan eksklusi, celah penelitian terletak pada pengkajian pendidikan bukan semata-mata sebagai persoalan akses, melainkan sebagai proses transformatif yang mampu menumbuhkan ketahanan, agensi, dan solidaritas. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan teoretis komparatif dengan merujuk pada literatur sekunder, dokumen kebijakan, serta kerangka kritis yang meliputi pedagogi kritis Freire, pembelajaran transformatif Mezirow, dan teori poskolonial interseksional. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan yang diprakarsai negara di kedua konteks cenderung mereproduksi ketimpangan dengan memposisikan migran sebagai pihak yang mengalami kekurangan, sementara inisiatif akar rumput dan berbasis komunitas memperlihatkan kemungkinan praktik pendidikan yang multibahasa, fleksibel, dan responsif secara kultural. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pembelajaran transformatif, ketika berakar pada refleksi kritis dan martabat

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manusia, menawarkan jalan bagi pembelajar migran untuk merundingkan rasa memiliki dan melawan eksklusivitas. Dengan mendialogkan konteks India dan Turki, studi ini menegaskan urgensi untuk membayangkan kembali pendidikan sebagai ruang keadilan dalam situasi perpindahan dan mobilitas.

Kata Kunci: Migrasi, Pembelajaran Transformatif, Pedagogi Kritis, Pendidikan Pengungsi

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INTRODUCTION

Migration, both internal and cross-border, has become a defining feature of global social transformation. India, with its large-scale rural-to-urban migration and displacement, and Turkey, positioned as a critical transit and host country for refugees and labor migrants, present unique but comparable challenges in the domain of education. Migrant communities in both contexts frequently encounter exclusion from formal education systems due to linguistic barriers, lack of documentation, economic precarity, and cultural marginalization. Education, however, holds the promise of enabling resilience and fostering social mobility, if designed and practiced inclusively. This paper examines how transformative learning—understood as a process of critical reflection that leads to empowerment and action—can reframe educational engagement for migrants.

Due to its geopolitical location and being situated between the regions of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, Turkey has historically experienced significant migration movements for various reasons, including economic, religious, war, conflict, famine, and epidemics occurring in neighboring countries ([Akyüz Orat, 2008](#)). This study will focus on the changes, difficulties, and structures within the education system caused by the humanitarian crisis resulting from the civil war that began in Syria in 2011, particularly for Turkey. In 2014, with the implementation of the temporary protection law issued by Turkey for immigrants and within the framework of Turkey's open-door policy, according to official records from the Directorate General of Migration Management of the Turkish Ministry of Interior, 3,737,369 Syrian immigrants arrived in Turkey in 2021 ([Ministry, 2025](#)). Such a large influx of immigrants has naturally had a profound impact on education, and this sudden wave of migration caught Turkey unprepared. Migration in India is overwhelmingly an internal phenomenon, shaped by poverty, agrarian distress, and regional inequalities that compel millions to move from rural to urban areas or across state borders in search of livelihoods. The Census of India (2011) identified more than 450 million people as migrants, reflecting the scale of mobility within the country. Unlike Turkey, which is characterized by the cross-border arrival of refugees, India's migration is largely circular and seasonal, involving workers from economically disadvantaged states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh who travel to cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Bangalore to work in construction, brick kilns, domestic service, and informal manufacturing ([Deshingkar & Akter, 2009](#)). For children of such migrants, education becomes precarious, often marked by discontinuity, exclusion, and invisibility in state policy. The inability to provide residence proof, caste certificates, or school transfer records prevents many from enrolling in government schools ([Srivastava & Epari, 2020](#)). Moreover, linguistic diversity in India intensifies barriers, as children moving across state lines may not understand the medium of instruction, leading to alienation and dropouts ([Smita, 2008](#)). Thus, migration in India generates a distinct educational crisis: while education is constitutionally recognized as a fundamental right, migrant children remain among the most marginalized within the system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on migration and education highlights systemic barriers faced by marginalized communities. Studies in India emphasize child labor, limited school access, and cultural dissonance ([Deshingkar & Akter, 2009](#); [Srivastava, 2012](#)). Research in Turkey foregrounds challenges faced by Syrian refugees and undocumented labor migrants, where schooling often reproduces exclusion through language hierarchies and nationalist curricula. Critical pedagogy ([Freire, 1970](#)) provides a foundation for rethinking education as liberatory rather than assimilatory. Transformative learning theory ([Mezirow, 1991](#)) extends this by focusing on adult migrants' capacity for critical reflection and agency. Postcolonial and intersectional analyses ([Spivak, 1988](#); [Crenshaw, 1991](#)) further show how education is entangled with power relations, where migrant identities are simultaneously silenced and made hyper-visible. While much of the literature documents barriers, fewer studies examine how transformative practices within migrant communities themselves create spaces of learning, solidarity, and resistance. Research on education and migration in India reveals a complex intersection of poverty, labor exploitation, and systemic neglect. Deshingkar and Akter ([2009](#)) show how seasonal and circular migration disrupts children's education, with many accompanying parents to work in brick kilns, stone quarries, and agricultural fields, resulting in prolonged absence from school. Smita ([2008](#)) highlights that despite the implementation of the Right to Education Act (2009), migrant children remain excluded because schools demand identity and residence documents that migrant families cannot provide. Studies also emphasize the intersection of caste, tribal identity, and migration, where Dalit and Adivasi children suffer compounded discrimination, facing both socio-economic exclusion and prejudice within schools ([Nambissan, 2009](#)). In states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka, surveys indicate that migrant children are overrepresented in the category of "out-of-school children," with girls particularly vulnerable due to gender norms and expectations of domestic labor ([Srivastava, 2012](#)). Programs like seasonal hostels, residential bridge courses, and NGO-led learning centers have attempted to mitigate these barriers, but their reach is limited and uneven ([Kumar et al., 2017](#)). Overall, the literature suggests that while structural reforms have been attempted, systemic exclusion rooted in poverty, caste, gender, and mobility continues to define the educational experience of migrants in India. Regarding education, the Republic of Turkey, both in its constitution and within its own mission, provides education to all individuals, regardless of whether they are foreign or domestic, with equal opportunities for everyone. Among the mass migrants from Syria, this situation has been important for Turkey in terms of education for those who will receive integration training. In other words, great importance has been given to education to increase participation in social life, contributing to the Turkish economy in the future, and reducing social conflicts ([Duman 2019: 347](#); [Heyneman 2000: 177](#); [Kantzara 2011: 47](#)).

In 2014, Turkey issued a circular on education and training services for foreigners, emphasizing that individuals can receive education in all types and levels of schools, whether they are affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, private schools, or state-affiliated schools. Many opportunities were provided to immigrants, such as free textbooks, special education, and free courses ([Savar & Kedikli, 2019](#)).

According to the study by Kırdar M.G., Koç İ., and Dayıoğlu M. ([2023](#)), forty-seven percent of immigrants coming to Turkey are under 18 years old, and one-third are of school age. Initially, education was provided in the Syrian curriculum at camp schools. Later, temporary shelters were established where education continued, and eventually, they were able to enroll in all state schools and receive an education. In this study, the number of those receiving education at the camp was significantly higher compared to those receiving education outside the camp in other provinces. According to the research, this rate has

decreased in other provinces due to factors such as child labor and early marriage of children ([Kırdar M.G., Koç İ. & Dayıoğlu M.,2023](#)).

Of course, the educational process for immigrants is not limited to the mere transfer of information, but is also directly related to identity, belonging, social adaptation, and transformative learning practices. The re-meaning of immigrants' identities, belongings, and cultures, along with their adaptation to the environment they came from, has been a phenomenon that accelerates the integration process, especially when combined with transformative learning practices. With this phenomenon, the initial goal was to teach Turkish to individuals because the native languages of immigrants are different. In addition, one of the most common problems faced by Syrian immigrants has been the language barrier. To this end, Turkey has tried to break this barrier by providing both Arabic and Turkish language training. Additionally, this study was not only applied to children and students, but also to immigrants of all ages ([Açıkalın, Dağhan&Olgun,2021](#)).

Additionally, pedagogical practices, specifically in the areas of language, cultural responsiveness, and informal learning, including translanguaging applications for language-focused approaches in Turkey, have supported learning by allowing strategic transitions between students' native language and Turkish. This has been observed to increase students' sense of belonging in the classroom. However, the cultural deficiencies of the teachers providing education and their professional training needs still pose a serious obstacle ([Johnson,2025](#)). According to another study, it has been argued that heritage education and active learning should be promoted in Turkey to improve the integration of Syrian immigrants in the places where they have migrated, with the aim of developing society and encouraging diversity. Through heritage education, it aims to help children receiving education to embrace Turkish culture and history. Along with active learning, it not only facilitates learning but also helps individuals develop their self-awareness and frameworks, making it easier for them to adapt to a different society ([Greaves M., Öz Toprak A., Yegen G.,2023](#)).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts transformative learning theory as its central framework, drawing on Mezirow's emphasis on critical reflection and Habermas' communicative action. Situated within Freirean critical pedagogy, transformative learning highlights how marginalized learners can reframe assumptions and develop new ways of engaging with the world. Additionally, postcolonial theory informs the critique of assimilationist educational practices, underscoring the need to value subaltern voices. Intersectionality deepens the analysis by recognizing how class, gender, ethnicity, and legal status shape educational exclusion and potential transformation. Together, these perspectives construct a theoretical lens to examine how education at the margins may become a site of empowerment for migrants. The case of India can also be examined through transformative learning theory and critical pedagogy. Migrant education, often treated in policy as a problem of "deficiency" to be corrected, requires instead a framework that values migrant children's lived experiences and cultural resources. Freire's ([1970](#)) notion of education as a practice of freedom provides a lens for rethinking classrooms not as sites of assimilation but of dialogue and empowerment. Building on this, Mezirow ([1991](#)) emphasizes the role of critical reflection in enabling learners—both adults and children—to challenge dominant structures and redefine their agency. Postcolonial critiques, particularly Spivak (1988), remind us of the dangers of silencing subaltern voices in education, where migrant children are seen only as objects of intervention rather than active subjects with knowledge of their own. In India, intersectional perspectives ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)) are crucial, since gender, caste, class, and linguistic identity interact to produce layered exclusions. For instance, a Dalit girl from a migrant family faces very different barriers compared to a boy from an upper-caste migrant background. Trauma-sensitive pedagogy is also relevant, as many migrants are displaced not only by

poverty but also by communal violence, natural disasters, and land dispossession ([Sharma, 2015](#)). Together, these frameworks underscore the need for education in India to move beyond mere access and towards practices that foster dignity, participation, and critical consciousness among migrants.

From a theoretical framework perspective, it is necessary to first evaluate immigrants coming to Turkey after 2011 in terms of trauma-sensitive and socio-emotional learning perspectives. Because the incoming immigrants fled war and were forced to migrate, this created psychosocial effects on the immigrants. At the same time, these effects have directly impacted individuals' cognitive processes, attention, and learning motivation. ([Cengiz, 2017](#)). Subsequently, Turkey focused on transformative learning and took necessary steps to facilitate the development of individuals in terms of language, multilingualism, and cultural modernity. Turkish language courses are offered free of charge both in schools and by civil society organizations, making them widely accessible.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a theoretical method of comparative analysis, drawing on secondary literature and critical theory to juxtapose India and Turkey as case contexts. Rather than empirical fieldwork, the approach maps conceptual intersections between migration, marginalization, and education. The method involves three steps: (1) reviewing scholarship on migrant education in both contexts, (2) applying transformative learning and critical pedagogy as interpretive lenses, and (3) generating theoretical insights on how transformative educational practices may operate across differing cultural and political terrains. This study adopts a comparative theoretical methodology, drawing on secondary literature, policy documents, NGO reports, and critical theory, rather than on direct fieldwork or mixed methods. The choice of method is deliberate and shaped by both the scope of the research questions and the vulnerabilities of the populations under study.

While ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participatory action research are valuable for capturing the lived experiences of migrants, they present significant ethical and political challenges in the contexts of both Turkey and India. Migrant communities are often marked by precarity: Syrian refugees in Turkey live under a temporary protection regime where legal status is fragile and participation in research can generate risks of exposure, mistrust, or retraumatization. Similarly, in India, seasonal migrants—particularly children working in brick kilns or informal construction sites—face exploitation and irregular employment. Entering these contexts as a researcher raises serious concerns about informed consent, safety, and the risk of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities ([Smita, 2008](#)). Mixed-methods approaches, combining surveys with qualitative case studies, could in principle capture both the scale and lived dimensions of migrant education. However, such methods require substantial logistical resources—tracking mobile populations across multiple sites, overcoming language barriers, and negotiating bureaucratic permissions. In politically sensitive environments like Turkey, where migration has become a polarizing public issue, researchers may also face restricted access to refugee communities and state institutions ([Sertkaya Dogan & Gokburun, 2021](#)). In India, the sheer diversity of migrant groups—spanning caste, tribal, regional, and gendered identities—would make representative sampling exceedingly difficult within the limits of a single study ([Srivastava, 2012](#)).

Furthermore, trauma-sensitive methodologies require specialized training and support systems for both participants and researchers. Engaging directly with refugee children in Turkey or displaced tribal children in India would demand long-term relational trust and psychological safeguards, which fall beyond the scope of this study. Without such support, there is a danger of reproducing harm or extracting stories without giving back to communities. For these reasons, a comparative theoretical method—anchored in critical pedagogy, transformative learning, and postcolonial theory—provides an ethically responsible and intellectually rigorous alternative. By focusing on secondary sources, the study is able to

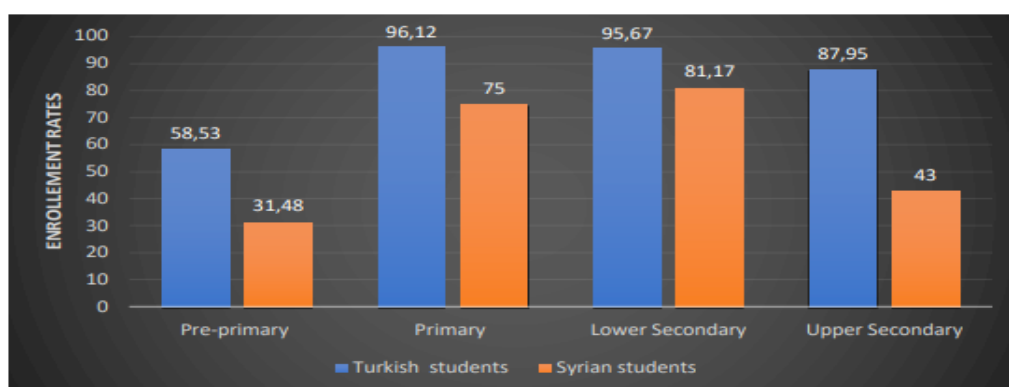
synthesize the wealth of existing empirical research while maintaining sensitivity to the precarious realities of migrant populations. The comparative approach allows structural parallels to be drawn: for example, how documentation requirements in India mirror legal precarity in Turkey, or how language-based exclusion plays out differently in each context but with similar consequences for belonging and identity. This choice of methodology is further justified because the study is not attempting to measure enrollment statistics or evaluate individual interventions, but rather to theorize education at the margins as a site of both exclusion and transformation. Critical pedagogy ([Freire, 1970](#)), transformative learning ([Mezirow, 1991](#)), and postcolonial intersectional perspectives ([Spivak, 1988](#); [Crenshaw, 1991](#)) offer tools to interrogate how educational practices are framed, who is included or excluded, and how alternative practices can foster empowerment. These theoretical resources make it possible to engage with the political and cultural stakes of migrant education without requiring direct data collection in sensitive and fragile environments. While ethnographic or mixed-methods research might provide more granular accounts, this study's comparative theoretical design ensures both ethical responsibility and conceptual depth. It privileges the voices already documented in scholarship, reports, and case studies, and reframes them through transformative learning theory to generate new insights. This allows for a broad, critical, and contextually grounded understanding of how migrant education unfolds in India and Turkey, without compromising the dignity and safety of vulnerable communities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis reveals three key insights. First, state-driven educational models in both India and Turkey tend to reinforce systemic inequalities by framing migrants as deficient subjects in need of integration. Second, grassroots and community-led initiatives demonstrate transformative potential by valuing migrants' lived experiences, using multilingual pedagogy, and fostering collective agency. Third, transformative learning is not a uniform process but one shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities—such as gendered restrictions on mobility in India or legal precarity among refugees in Turkey. Education at the margins thus becomes a contested yet generative space where critical reflection, solidarity, and resilience are cultivated, though always in tension with structural exclusions.

While the existence of all these educational efforts seems positive, restrictive factors also persist. While the enrollment rates of native Turkish children in schools are in the nineties, the enrollment rate of Syrian children is in the sixties. The most important reason for this is that the majority of immigrants coming to Turkey are women and children, and therefore, a significant portion of the children have to work to support their families ([Cetin, 2022](#)).

Figure 7: Enrollment Rates of Syrian and Turkish students by Educational Level in 2021⁵



Source: MoNE 2021 and HBÖGM-GADDB, 2021

Adapted from Access to education report by Ç. Ç. Çetin, 2022, Refugee Council of Turkey (p. [page number]).

<https://turkiyemultecikonseyi.org/uploads/TMK%20YAYINLARI/ACCESS%20TO%20EDUCATION%20REPORT-FINAL.pdf>

Education for migrant communities in India and Turkey remains deeply entangled with systemic inequalities, yet transformative learning offers a pathway to reimagine its possibilities. By shifting the focus from assimilation to empowerment, education can support migrants in negotiating belonging while resisting exclusion. The analysis underscores the importance of community-based practices, multilingual approaches, and participatory pedagogy. Future research should explore how theoretical insights can be translated into practical interventions that are contextually grounded and migrant-centered. Education at the margins, when aligned with transformative principles, holds the potential to become a site of dignity, solidarity, and social justice. Despite sharing the same Islamic faith, Syrians hold different understandings, and since child marriage is normal among them, five percent of refugee children do not continue their education due to marriage. Especially, female migrant children are not sent to school or work by their families for this reason. Another limiting factor is the issue of *ekrak* and documentation. Most people faced problems with disruptions to their education because the process of obtaining documents was prolonged due to them fleeing the civil war (Kirdar M.G., Koç İ. & Dayioğlu M., 2023).

Another reason is that although the initial slow influx of refugees was welcomed by the public, the local population's reaction to the subsequent acceleration of this migration flow has also increased. A portion of the local population has developed a negative perception of Syrian immigrants. This negative attitude of the local population also affected local children attending school, leading to conflicts between Syrian and local children in educational institutions (Sertkaya Dogan, O., & Gokburun, I., 2021). When comparing the Indian and Turkish cases, it becomes evident that the vulnerabilities shaping migrant education are not uniform but intersectional, shaped by factors such as class, caste, gender, and legal status. In India, gendered restrictions on mobility and the prevalence of child labor among seasonal migrants disproportionately affect girls, who are often withdrawn from school to help with household duties or subjected to early marriage (Smita, 2008; Srivastava, 2012). In Turkey, although the state has formally guaranteed equal educational opportunities, the legal precarity of refugees under temporary protection and the bureaucratic hurdles of documentation produce similar forms of exclusion (Kirdar, Koç & Dayioğlu, 2023). These differences demonstrate that transformative learning cannot be applied as a universal formula; rather, it must be context-sensitive, adapting to the specific social and political terrains in which migrant learners are embedded.

Fourth, the analysis highlights the critical role of language and cultural negotiation in shaping migrants' educational experiences. In Turkey, programs that introduced translanguaging practices—strategically allowing shifts between Arabic and Turkish—have increased students' sense of belonging in classrooms and reduced alienation (Acıkalın, Dağhan & Olgun, 2021). Similarly, in India, community-led initiatives and NGO-supported bridge schools have experimented with multilingual pedagogy to accommodate children migrating across linguistic regions (Chowdhury, 2018). Yet both cases reveal that mainstream schooling systems remain heavily assimilationist, privileging dominant national languages and erasing migrants' cultural capital. This suggests that the promise of transformative learning lies not only in increasing access but also in reconfiguring pedagogy to validate and leverage the diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires that migrant learners bring with them.

Finally, the findings underscore that transformative education at the margins is inseparable from broader struggles for social justice. Migrant children's access to learning is mediated not only by school policies but also by structural conditions labor exploitation, gender discrimination, xenophobia, caste

hierarchies, and fragile legal protections. While grassroots initiatives in both India and Turkey show the potential of education as a site of resilience, solidarity, and empowerment, their reach is limited without systemic reforms. Critical pedagogy ([Freire, 1970](#)) and transformative learning ([Mezirow, 1991](#)) provide valuable frameworks for reimagining education, but their impact depends on whether states and societies are willing to confront the deeper inequalities that migration exposes. Thus, education at the margins is best understood as a dynamic field of negotiation, where empowerment is possible but always constrained by persistent exclusions.

CONCLUSION

The comparative exploration of migrant education in India and Turkey reveals not simply two parallel case studies but a broader insight into how societies negotiate belonging, justice, and human dignity through their educational systems. Migration—whether across borders or within national territories—disrupts the neat categories on which schooling is usually built: fixed residence, standardized curricula, and uniform linguistic frameworks. When populations are constantly on the move, or when they arrive with different languages, memories, and identities, education is forced to confront questions it often prefers to sideline: *Who counts as a learner? Whose knowledge is legitimate? What does it mean to be included?* These questions, often treated as technical or administrative in nature, are deeply political, shaping the possibilities of coexistence in increasingly diverse societies.

This study shows that education at the margins must be understood not only as a service but also as a site of struggle over recognition and power. For migrants, classrooms are not neutral spaces; they are places where identity is negotiated, where the traumas of displacement encounter the demands of assimilation, and where the potential for solidarity coexists with the risk of alienation. The central contribution of this analysis is to reframe migrant education through the lens of transformative learning. This perspective insists that education is not merely about access to schools or completion rates but about cultivating the capacity for critical reflection, enabling learners to interrogate dominant narratives, and creating conditions for agency in the face of marginalization. In both India and Turkey, grassroots and community-based initiatives demonstrate how such transformative possibilities can be realized, but they also highlight the fragility of these efforts when broader systemic inequalities remain unaddressed.

Looking beyond the two contexts studied here, the implications are far-reaching. In an era of intensifying migration—driven by conflict, climate change, and uneven development—the question of how education responds to mobility will only become more urgent. The experiences of India and Turkey underline the necessity of moving away from models of education that assume stability, uniformity, and assimilation. Instead, what is required are pedagogies of movement: flexible systems that can travel with learners, curricula that embrace plurality, and teaching practices that are trauma-sensitive, multilingual, and culturally responsive. Such approaches not only benefit migrants but also enrich the societies that host them, fostering resilience, empathy, and new forms of collective knowledge.

Finally, this study underscores that education at the margins is not peripheral to the mainstream; it is, in fact, where the future of education is being written. By attending to the experiences of migrants, we gain insight into the hidden fractures of our systems but also into their transformative potential. If policymakers, educators, and communities are willing to reimagine education as a space of dignity, dialogue, and justice, then the margins can become laboratories for more inclusive futures. Far from being a story of deficiency or crisis, migrant education, when aligned with transformative principles, holds the promise of teaching all of us how to live together in an unequal yet interconnected world.

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