

Educational Inclusion as Educational Continuity: Comparative Practitioner Perspectives among Migrants in India and the United States

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Abstract. Educational inclusion remains one of the most pressing global challenges, particularly for immigrant and at-risk youth who experience overlapping layers of socio-economic, linguistic, and emotional exclusion. This paper examines the interconnected issues of inclusivity and juvenile delinquency among marginalized children in both India and the United States. In the U.S., immigrant and refugee students often struggle with missing documentation, unstable housing, limited English proficiency, and fragmented family structures—especially in single-parent or estranged households. These conditions, compounded by poverty, discrimination, and exposure to drugs or gang activity, frequently push such youth toward academic disengagement and delinquent behavior. In India, parallel challenges manifest in the form of child labor, urban slum migration, and the neglect of out-of-school children from marginalized castes, tribal, and refugee backgrounds. Despite initiatives like the Right to Education (RTE) Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, systemic barriers—including stigma, inadequate counseling, and poor teacher training—continue to exclude vulnerable learners. Through a comparative analysis of both contexts, this paper investigates how trauma-informed pedagogy, bilingual and bridge-language education, and restorative justice programs can reduce delinquency and promote educational inclusion. It calls for a holistic model that integrates social-emotional learning (SEL), parental outreach, and community mentorship—treating at-risk children not as disciplinary problems but as resilient learners seeking belonging, stability, and hope.

Keywords: educational inclusion; educational continuity; migrant and refugee education; school engagement; social belonging

INTRODUCTION

Global migration is reshaping educational systems across both the Global North and Global South. International migration now involves hundreds of millions of people, while forced displacement has reached historically high levels. Children form a substantial share of displaced populations, making educational access and persistence central humanitarian and developmental concerns. Children face acute vulnerabilities in mobility crises, comprising 39% of the global refugee population [62] and nearly 49 million of all displaced youth [58]. This underscores the necessity of embedding educational persistence within humanitarian frameworks. Global migration and displacement have reached unprecedented levels, with approximately 304 million international migrants worldwide as of mid-2024 [39] and 117.8 million people forcibly displaced at the end of 2025 [62]. Broader research and international reporting on refugee and migrant education likewise document persistent barriers across access, participation, integration, and continuity [14], [40], [50], [61], [65], [67], [68].

Educational inclusion for immigrant and refugee children extends beyond enrollment. Relocation can disrupt schooling, language development, documentation, family income, social networks, and familiarity with curriculum and institutions. Schools can provide routine, support language acquisition and social integration, and help connect families to the host society. However, enrollment alone does not ensure meaningful participation: students may remain disengaged, isolated, frequently absent, or at risk of dropping out. Community- or bridge-based education can also sustain learning while children await entry into formal schools. This broader conception of inclusion is consistent with equity-oriented, developmental, culturally responsive, and intercultural approaches that treat schools as social as well as instructional environments [1], [8], [9], [15], [33], [34], [55].

This paper frames inclusion as a developmental process centered on educational continuity. It compares two practitioner-informed cases: Pakistani Hindu refugee children using community-supported bridge

education in India, and immigrant and other vulnerable adolescents in alternative educational settings in the United States. Although the cases occur in different institutional contexts and at different intervention points, both show how migration, poverty, family responsibilities, language transitions, and institutional barriers can weaken sustained participation in education.

Existing scholarship addresses refugee education, immigrant integration, language acquisition, trauma-informed and restorative practice, child labor, and educational access, but these literatures are often geographically separated and frequently examine either entry into education or performance after enrollment. Comparative research also gives less attention to practitioner knowledge: the recurring observations of teachers and community organizations that reveal how disengagement develops before it appears in administrative data [44], [79]. Comparative scholarship on immigrant and refugee education highlights substantial differences in how education systems respond to displaced and migrant learners [13], [6]. Research increasingly emphasizes that successful inclusion depends not only on institutional policies and resources but also on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and pedagogical practices [25], [80]. Studies of practitioner knowledge examine how teachers understand linguistic diversity, cultural differences, migration experiences, interrupted schooling, and the social-emotional needs of refugee and immigrant students [81], [53]. Comparative research is particularly valuable because it demonstrates how teacher preparation, national policy, school structures, and local contexts shape educators' capacity to support these students [81], [78].

This study asks how educational systems and community organizations in India and the United States support educational inclusion and continuity for immigrant and refugee children across different legal, institutional, and socioeconomic contexts. It examines barriers to participation, school and civil-society responses, shared patterns across both cases, and lessons applicable to other migration settings.

The paper presents inclusion as a developmental process rather than a condition achieved through enrollment. It identifies four connected dimensions—Administrative Access, Educational Engagement, Social Belonging, and Educational Aspiration—with Educational Continuity as their central outcome. It also introduces the Education–Survival Trade-off, explaining how immediate household needs may limit long-term educational investment even when families strongly value schooling.

2. Educational Inclusion: A Comparative Framework

2.1 Beyond Enrollment

Conventional indicators such as enrollment, attendance, grade progression, and completion remain indispensable, but they do not capture the full experience of inclusion [59]. Meaningful participation requires that children can enter an educational system, engage with learning, experience social membership, and see education as relevant to their futures [18], [79]. Research on school engagement and belonging has long shown that participation and attachment influence persistence [77], [23], [24], [51], [19]. The present framework brings these dimensions together specifically around migration and interrupted educational journeys [13], [44].

2.2 Four Dimensions of Educational Inclusion

Administrative Access concerns the ability to enter and be recognized within an educational system. Documentation, proof of residence, previous records, age verification, transfer certificates, legal status, and placement procedures can determine whether a child reaches a classroom at all. Flexible admission, assessment-based placement, and transitional education can reduce the damage caused by administrative delay [60], [63]. Within South Asia, bureaucratic insistence on structural proofs like Aadhaar cards, local residency certificates, and formal school leaving documentation systematically locks out internally displaced persons and cross-border refugee youth [86], [63].

Educational Engagement concerns sustained participation after entry: attendance, classroom participation, homework, academic progress, and connection to learning. Children with interrupted schooling may have learning levels that differ sharply from age-based expectations [10], [11]. Differentiated instruction, remedial support, adaptive technology, flexible assessment, and alternative pathways can help reconnect students to learning rather than treating uneven preparation as inability [10], [57]. Guidance on differentiated and technology-supported learning similarly emphasizes adapting pathways and tools to learner readiness and context rather than treating one delivery mode as universally appropriate [31], [66].

Social Belonging concerns whether students experience school as a safe and legitimate social space. Relationships with teachers and peers, cultural recognition, freedom from discrimination, family-school communication, and stability influence whether students remain attached to education [22], [78]. Belonging is therefore not merely an emotional benefit; it functions as a highly active educational resource that

directly cushions against institutional detachment and supports structural persistence [56], [83]. Research on school connectedness and peer relationships further supports the role of interpersonal ties in motivation, participation, and students' attachment to school [41], [74].

Educational Aspiration links present effort to future possibility. Children and families are more likely to persist when they can connect schooling to higher education, employment, independence, mobility, or a more secure life [84]. Aspiration, however, is not simply an individual trait. Poverty, uncertain legal status, repeated failure, or limited knowledge of educational pathways can make the benefits of schooling appear remote [26], [76]. Mentoring, career guidance, Career and Technical Education (CTE), technology exposure, and visible academic progress can successfully convert abstract aspiration into an attainable pathway [37], [72].

2.3 The Educational Inclusion Continuum

The four dimensions describe components of inclusion; the Educational Inclusion Continuum describes movement across time: Administrative Access -> Educational Engagement -> Social Belonging -> Educational Aspiration -> Educational Continuity.

The sequence is analytical rather than rigid. Children may move forward, stall, or regress following migration, family relocation, economic shock, school transfer, discrimination, or academic failure. Educational Continuity is therefore not uninterrupted attendance in a literal sense. It is the capacity of educational systems and surrounding institutions to keep children connected to learning despite disruption.

2.4 The Education-Survival Trade-off

Poverty is associated with educational disadvantage, but it does not fully explain the daily decisions that shape participation. This paper uses the Education–Survival Trade-off to describe the structural tension that emerges when immediate household needs compete with long-term educational investment. Children may work, care for siblings, assist with family businesses, translate for parents, or assume responsibilities arising from unstable housing and employment. Such decisions do not necessarily reflect low educational aspirations; rather, they may represent pragmatic responses to immediate economic and family pressures.

The trade-off can be particularly pronounced in migration contexts, where displacement may intensify financial and administrative insecurity. Educational disengagement can consequently develop incrementally through missed assignments, fatigue, irregular attendance, declining confidence, and slower accumulation of credits or competencies. By the time withdrawal is formally recorded as dropout, disengagement may already have developed over an extended period.

Research on child labor, adolescent caregiving, and immigrant youth similarly demonstrates how competing work and family responsibilities can undermine educational persistence [48], [56]. Bachman et al. [3], for example, found that intensive paid employment during the school year was associated with lower grades, although these patterns varied across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

The Education–Survival Trade-off therefore calls for schools to identify competing out-of-school responsibilities and reduce the practical costs of sustained participation through supports such as transportation, meals, flexible scheduling, tutoring, counseling, childcare, and community partnerships. The framework also intersects with Fredricks et al. [19] multidimensional model of student engagement. Within this study, Administrative Access and Educational Engagement primarily reflect behavioral and cognitive participation, Social Belonging corresponds to the emotional dimension, and Educational Aspiration captures students' future-oriented investment in education. Table 1 operationalizes these dimensions through observable indicators, warning signs of structural attrition, and corresponding data sources for field research.

Conceptual Framework Matrix

This matrix maps specific inclusion components to the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive realities of highly mobile learners.

Table 1: Theoretical Operationalization and Field Matrix for Mobile Learners

Dimension & Objective	Fredricks' Domain Alignment	Field Observation Indicators	Warning Signs of Institutional Attrition	Methodological Data Sources
Administrative Access Verify systemic entry and procedural accommodation.	Behavioral: Physical enrollment, compliance, and initial school entry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of alternative identity tracking systems. • Placement based on functional interviews, not rigid age criteria. • Speed of enrollment processing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial of entry due to lack of local identification cards (e.g., Aadhaar). • Extended gaps between arrival and physical classroom entry. • Forced grade retention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School registration ledgers. • Semi-structured intake interviews. • Legal policy audits.
Educational Engagement	Cognitive: Processing content, completing tasks, and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily attendance and classroom verbal/physical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent disengagement (sitting in class without 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct classroom

Dimension & Objective	Fredricks' Domain Alignment	Field Observation Indicators	Warning Signs of Institutional Attrition	Methodological Data Sources
Assess classroom cognitive and task participation.	self-regulated learning effort.	interaction. • Access to tailored, non-punitive remedial tracks. • Use of multimodal or translation aids.	participating). • Regular absenteeism. • High homework failure rates due to linguistic barriers.	observation logs. • Student work samples. • Teacher progress journals.
Social Belonging Measure emotional safety and relationship building.	Emotional: Feeling safe, validated, and valued by teachers and peers.	• Peer-to-peer collaboration in and out of the classroom. • Visible validation of student language and origin culture. • Regular, active family-teacher touchpoints.	• Bullying or social isolation during unstructured time (e.g., recess). • Overt or subtle discriminatory tracking practices. • Complete absence of parental communication.	• Student belonging sociograms. • Focus groups with community organizations. • School climate surveys.
Educational Aspiration Trace connection between current effort and future goals.	Long-term Cognitive: Investment in learning linked to personal identity and future value.	• Student participation in mentoring or technical education (CTE). • Articulation of concrete educational or professional goals. • Knowledge of available legal/educational pathways.	• Fatalistic expressions regarding legal status walls. • Expressed pressure to drop out for low-wage informal work. • Complete disconnect between school tasks and future utility.	• Aspiration Mapping Exercises. • Interviews with family units. • Career guidance attendance data.

3.1 Methodology

This study uses a comparative qualitative case-study design informed by practitioner experience and practitioner inquiry methods [7], [45], [75]. The purpose is not statistical generalization or ranking national systems, but an analytical comparison of how educational continuity is interrupted and restored in two contrasting geopolitical settings.

Methodologically, grounding comparative analyses in practitioner inquiry is crucial for capturing early-stage student drift. Teachers and community organizers operate as frontline ethnographers; their daily observations reveal the micro-level behavioral shifts and "silent disengagement" that materialize long before a child disappears from formal state administrative databases [44], [79].

3.2 Setting and Case Selection

The research design draws on two distinct case contexts to examine how educational systems respond to disrupted student mobility and interrupted schooling.

India Case: This case draws on CaresGlobal's field experience with Pakistani Hindu refugee families in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The context involves cross-border displacement and the use of interventions such as bridge education, remedial instruction, technology-supported learning, curriculum alignment, family engagement, and transition planning to facilitate movement toward formal schooling.

U.S. Case: This case draws on sustained practitioner experience in an alternative educational setting serving immigrant and other vulnerable adolescents. Students present diverse challenges, including interrupted schooling, language transitions, economic hardship, caregiving and employment responsibilities, historical trauma, and prior academic disengagement.

The cross-national comparison is informed by scholarship documenting the academic, linguistic, psychosocial, and family-related challenges experienced by students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), particularly in secondary settings [10], [11], [27], [82]. Observations from both settings are interpreted alongside relevant research and policy literature to identify common patterns as well as context-specific differences in educational inclusion and continuity.

3.3 Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. The two cases are not statistically representative of immigrant or refugee students in either country, and practitioner observations cannot establish population-level causal relationships. The study is instead conceptual and explanatory, using recurring patterns across two contrasting contexts to examine how institutional, social, and economic conditions shape educational continuity. These findings may provide a basis for future comparative, longitudinal, and empirical research.

4. Global Context

Refugee education remains a significant global inclusion challenge. UNHCR's Refugee Education Report 2025 estimates that approximately 12.4 million of the 31 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate are children of school age. Of these school-age children, an estimated 46% are out of school, with gross

enrollment rates considerably higher at the primary level (67%) than at the secondary level (37%) in reporting countries [69]. These disparities highlight that formal access to education does not necessarily translate into sustained participation or progression. Consistent with this concern, Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, including vulnerable populations, migrants, and children in vulnerable situations [87].

The two cases examined here represent different points within this broader challenge. In India, educational disruption may occur before or during entry into formal schooling as displacement, documentation barriers, poverty, and interrupted prior education affect children's ability to enter and participate in school. In the United States, legal access to public K–12 education is comparatively well established, including for undocumented children under *Plyler v. Doe* [52]; however, educational continuity may become more vulnerable after enrollment as students encounter language barriers, economic hardship, mobility, family responsibilities, and disengagement. The comparison therefore provides an opportunity to examine Educational Continuity as a common analytical lens across distinct institutional and migration contexts.

5. India: Educational Access and Inclusion under Conditions of Forced Migration

5.1 Migration, Minority Status, and Interrupted Educational Journeys

For many Pakistani Hindu refugee families, migration to India follows an already disrupted educational journey. Religious minority status, discrimination, poverty, and unequal access to schooling in Pakistan may leave children with learning gaps, interrupted attendance, and limited experience of formal education.

CaresGlobal community accounts describe exclusion from school activities and shared facilities based on religious identity, including restrictions on participation, drinking water, and toilets. Such conditions may affect children's safety, attendance, and sense of belonging, particularly for girls where poor sanitation creates additional barriers. Prior access to schooling also varies, with children from urban areas generally reporting more educational exposure than those from rural Sindh.

Although India may offer greater security, families still face housing, livelihood, documentation, and school-enrollment challenges. Schooling may be delayed while immediate survival needs take priority. Educational continuity therefore depends on Administrative Access, Educational Engagement, Social Belonging, and Educational Aspiration, rather than enrollment alone.

5.2 Administrative Access: From Arrival to Educational Entry

Administrative Access refers to the practical ability to enter recognized schooling after migration. Refugee children may lack documents, proof of residence, or school records needed for admission and grade placement. Consequently, arrival in India does not guarantee immediate educational integration.

The CaresGlobal Bridge Classroom Initiative supports children during this transition in refugee communities in Rajasthan and Gujarat. It provides learning support while families navigate settlement, documentation, and school-placement processes. Bridge classrooms therefore help prevent temporary delays from becoming long-term disengagement.

5.3 Educational Engagement: Rebuilding Learning after Interruption

After enrollment, children often require support to re-engage with learning. Students of the same age may differ widely in literacy, numeracy, language skills, scientific understanding, and familiarity with classroom routines because of unequal prior schooling.

Age-based placement alone may be unsuitable: students with foundational gaps may become frustrated, while those placed below their ability may lose motivation. CaresGlobal addresses this through foundational instruction in mathematics, language, and science. Educational recovery is therefore a gradual process of rebuilding skills and learning routines before or alongside transition into grade-level curricula.

5.3.1 Differentiated Learning and Technology

Mixed-age and mixed-ability classrooms require instruction that responds to varied learning levels. To address this challenge, CaresGlobal incorporated technology-supported learning, including platforms such as IXL, which allow students to practice at appropriate levels, receive immediate feedback, and progress according to individual needs rather than a single classroom pace.

Technology supplements rather than replace teacher expertise. Teachers use student performance data to identify learning gaps, clarify concepts, provide encouragement, and interpret progress within each child's educational context. This individualized approach is particularly valuable for students with interrupted schooling because learning gaps can be addressed as areas for recovery rather than as indicators of limited ability.

The program has also expanded learning beyond remediation through mobile science laboratories supported by the local nonprofit Agastya group and introductory computer education. These opportunities expose students to scientific inquiry, problem-solving, and digital skills, reinforcing the principle that educational recovery should lead toward full participation in mainstream education rather than a permanently reduced curriculum. In this sense, technology and experiential learning contribute to Educational Engagement by supporting both academic recovery and preparation for future educational and employment pathways.

5.3.2 From Remediation to State Curriculum Alignment

After approximately two years of remedial work in mathematics, language, and science, curriculum planning moved toward closer alignment with the Rajasthan State Board.

This transition is important. Bridge education achieves its purpose when it reduces the distance between interrupted learning and formal educational participation rather than becoming a parallel educational endpoint. Curriculum alignment provides clearer expectations for placement and progression while differentiated support can continue for children whose competencies remain below conventional grade levels.

The Indian case therefore demonstrates Educational Engagement as a progression from interrupted learning to foundational recovery, differentiated learning, curriculum alignment, and mainstream educational participation. This progression does not constitute a separate framework; rather, it demonstrates how the Educational Engagement dimension of the Educational Inclusion Framework operates in practice.

5.4 Social Belonging: Jati, Community Cohesion, and Educational Inclusion

Educational recovery occurs within a social environment as well as an academic one. For the Pakistani Hindu refugee communities examined in this study, Social Belonging is shaped not only by schools but also by the community networks surrounding children and families. Kinship, regional, and jati-based networks can provide forms of social capital through which newly arrived families access information, employment connections, housing assistance, and practical knowledge about navigating their new environment. Research on caste and community networks in India similarly demonstrates that such networks can facilitate information exchange, economic cooperation, reciprocity, and access to resources.

Migration does not necessarily eliminate these existing social relationships. Families may settle through connections with relatives, community members, or others who share familiar regional or jati affiliations. These relationships can function as informal social infrastructure during resettlement by connecting newcomers to people who have already navigated aspects of housing, employment, documentation, schooling, and everyday life in India. Such networks may therefore reduce some of the uncertainty associated with displacement and provide resources that formal institutions alone may not immediately offer.

For children, the significance of these networks extends beyond material assistance. Practitioner observations from CaresGlobal suggest that children often remain embedded in communities where families know one another and adults maintain relationships across households. These connections may provide peer relationships, informal supervision, mentoring, familiarity, and social accountability during the disruption associated with migration. From a social-capital perspective, these forms of bonding social capital can provide emotional and practical support within a familiar community, potentially reducing isolation and facilitating adjustment to a new educational environment.

Jati networks should not be viewed as uniformly inclusive. Although they can provide solidarity, information, reciprocity, and access to resources, they may also reproduce social boundaries and exclusion. In this refugee context, familiar community affiliations may nevertheless support resettlement by helping families access practical guidance and social support.

The bridge classroom operates within this wider social ecology of educational recovery. Connections among families, children, teachers, volunteers, and community members can support communication about attendance, documentation, and educational needs. Shared identity may also help children who experienced religious exclusion in Pakistan feel safer and more connected.

Community networks can strengthen parental engagement by helping families understand educational procedures and sustain expectations for schooling. Therefore, these networks form part of the social infrastructure of educational inclusion: they can promote Social Belonging and Educational Continuity, while remaining context-dependent and potentially exclusionary.

5.5 Educational Aspiration: From Immediate Survival to Future Possibility

The fourth dimension, Educational Aspiration, highlights a key tension in the Indian case. Practitioner interactions show that economically vulnerable refugee families often value education and view it as

essential to their children's future. However, insecure employment, documentation challenges, unstable housing, and household responsibilities may require children to work or provide caregiving, limiting time for schoolwork and rest.

This reflects the Education–Survival Trade-off: the challenge is not a lack of educational aspirations but the conflict between the long-term benefits of schooling and immediate household needs. Supporting aspiration therefore requires credible pathways from remedial education to recognized curricula, higher education, skills development, and employment. Curriculum alignment, STEM and technology exposure, visible academic progress, and family engagement can strengthen these pathways. Educational Aspiration thus connects present participation with future possibilities and can reinforce Educational Continuity.

5.6 The Education–Survival Trade-off as a Cross-Cutting Constraint

Although the four dimensions organize the case study, the Education–Survival Trade-off operates across all four rather than functioning as a fifth dimension. Economic insecurity can delay Administrative Access when documentation, settlement, and livelihood needs take priority over school enrollment. It can limit Educational Engagement when employment, domestic work, or caregiving compete with attendance, study, and rest. It may also weaken Social Belonging by reducing children's opportunities to participate in school and peer activities, while constraining Educational Aspiration when the immediate benefits of work appear more attainable than the longer-term returns to education.

Poverty, therefore, is not simply a background characteristic; it can shape how families move through each stage of educational inclusion. Community-based supports—including transportation, learning materials, bridge education, technology, family communication, and clear pathways into formal schooling—can reduce some of these pressures. The goal is not to discount families' economic realities but to lessen the extent to which immediate survival requires sacrificing children's longer-term educational trajectories.

5.7 From the Four Dimensions to Educational Continuity

The Indian case demonstrates that the four dimensions of educational inclusion are interdependent. Administrative Access provides an entry point, but children with interrupted schooling may require bridge classrooms to address learning gaps while documentation and settlement barriers are resolved. Educational Engagement is strengthened through foundational remediation and differentiated instruction that begins at each child's level and progressively aligns with the state curriculum.

Sustained participation also depends on Social Belonging, which is supported through family and jati/community networks, the bridge classroom, and relationships within the formal school. Educational Aspiration connects these immediate educational efforts to longer-term possibilities by helping children and families envision progression through schooling, skills development, and employment.

Educational Continuity therefore emerges from the interaction of these dimensions rather than from any single intervention. The bridge classroom is significant not as a separate theoretical model, but as an example of how one intervention can address multiple elements of the Educational Inclusion Framework and support movement from disrupted schooling toward sustained participation and progression.

5.8 Lessons from the Indian Case

Within the four-dimensional framework, successful transition requires more than formal access. Administrative Access creates the pathway into education; Educational Engagement addresses interrupted learning; Social Belonging connects children to family, community, and institutional relationships; and Educational Aspiration links current participation to future opportunities despite competing economic demands.

The case also shows that educational inclusion is supported by both formal and informal institutions. Family, jati, and community networks can provide social support during resettlement, while civil-society initiatives can help bridge the transition into mainstream schooling. This highlights an important distinction between educational access and Educational Continuity: access concerns entry into education, whereas continuity concerns the capacity of interconnected institutions and relationships to sustain a child's progression from interruption toward recognized educational advancement.

The U.S. case begins from a different institutional position. Public-school access is generally more established once immigrant children enter the system, but Educational Engagement, Social Belonging, and Educational Aspiration may become vulnerable after enrollment. Applying the same four dimensions across both cases therefore enables comparison of different configurations of a shared Educational Inclusion Framework, rather than treating the two contexts as separate models of immigrant education.

6. United States: Educational Continuity After Enrollment

6.1 Access Does Not Guarantee Inclusion

The U.S. case begins at a different point on the continuum. Public schools may not exclude children on the basis of immigration or citizenship status, a principle established by *Plyler v. Doe* and reflected in federal guidance [52], [64]. Yet legal access does not guarantee educational continuity. Language acquisition, interrupted prior schooling, housing instability, poverty, trauma, employment, caregiving, and repeated school transitions can weaken participation after enrollment. Current U.S. evidence demonstrates that English learners and newcomer students face significant linguistic, academic, and structural barriers to educational success. Nationally, approximately 5.3 million public-school students were identified as English learners in fall 2021, representing 10.6% of public-school enrollment [47]. Recent research on newcomer students further indicates that interrupted formal education, limited English proficiency, economic disadvantage, and refugee or asylum-seeker status can shape students' educational trajectories [36]. Attendance is also strongly associated with educational outcomes: research on newcomer students found that those missing 20 or more days of school had less than a 50% probability of graduating [32]. Federal resources on English learners, newcomer access, and chronic absenteeism further underscore the importance of language support, family engagement, and interventions addressing barriers to regular attendance [28], [30], [46], [73].

6.2 Disengagement as a Gradual Process

Practitioner experience in an alternative educational setting suggests that school disengagement among immigrant students is often a gradual process rather than a sudden decision to leave school. Language barriers, interrupted schooling, academic difficulties, family responsibilities, economic pressures, and limited social belonging can initially appear as absenteeism, incomplete work, reduced participation, or declining motivation. Over time, these experiences may weaken students' academic confidence, school attachment, and educational aspirations, increasing the risk of educational discontinuity or dropout. However, supportive teacher relationships, family engagement, school belonging, and meaningful career pathways can interrupt this process. Thus, disengagement should be understood as an accumulation of academic, social, and personal challenges rather than simply a student's choice, reinforcing the importance of early intervention to preserve educational continuity. Academic difficulty may therefore be a symptom rather than the original cause. Longitudinal and intervention research similarly treats attendance, early warning indicators, and school engagement as central signals in dropout prevention and graduation-pathway support [2], [4], [5], [17], [38], [54], [71].

These are some of very common struggles of our immigrant students:

A student may have completed several years of school in another country, but difficulties or delays evaluating the transcript can result in repeated coursework. This can make the student feel that their previous education does not count.

Some multilingual learners enter our alternative program. Although they were capable in mathematics, they struggled to demonstrate knowledge in English-heavy coursework which demotivated them and in turn affected their attendance. Language access affects both engagement and academic confidence.

Some students experience pressure to prioritize family responsibilities, employment, or helping parents navigate daily life. These expectations can compete with time needed for school.

6.3 Rebuilding Engagement Through Flexible Pathways

Individualized learning plans, targeted credit-recovery opportunities, flexible pacing, and differentiated instruction can reengage students with fragmented educational histories by preserving common academic expectations while providing multiple routes to achievement. Through individualized goal setting, mastery-based progression, targeted support for unfinished learning, and instructional adaptations responsive to students' readiness and circumstances, schools can help students regain a sense of agency, experience meaningful academic success, and advance toward graduation and postsecondary goals. Evidence on graduation supports and flexible learner-centered options also highlights the value of early-warning data, targeted intervention, and adaptable pathways for students at risk of disengagement [12], [21], [29], [42].

Alternative schools often serve students facing substantial academic, behavioral, attendance, mobility, or life-circumstance barriers. Their lower average four-year graduation rates therefore should not automatically be interpreted as program failure; they also reflect the higher level of risk and prior educational disruption among students enrolled. The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that alternative high schools have substantially lower four-year graduation rates than traditional schools, while also noting variation in how states measure alternative-school performance.

At the same time, research syntheses identify evidence that alternative high schools can improve completion among students at elevated risk of dropping out. One evidence review reported an average completion-rate increase of 15.5% among at-risk students, though that finding applies to the types of alternative-school interventions reviewed and should not be generalized to every alternative setting.

Evidence suggests that alternative education and credit recovery can help students who have experienced academic failure or disengagement reconnect with graduation pathways. Their effectiveness depends on rigorous instruction, individualized pacing, supportive relationships, and coordinated academic and nonacademic support. Although credit recovery can restore credits, recovered credits do not necessarily demonstrate durable learning. Credit recovery is therefore most effective when embedded in a broader, relationship-based and mastery-oriented re-engagement strategy rather than used as a rapid, stand-alone mechanism for replacing failed credits.

Blended delivery: Combining online content with regular face-to-face teaching, tutoring, and subject-specific support is more promising than fully online delivery.

Academic rigor: Programs should diagnose unfinished learning, require meaningful demonstration of mastery, and provide instruction tailored to the standards students missed—not simply allow students to progress rapidly through modules.

Small, subject-specific groups: Students benefit when teachers have relevant content expertise and can provide active instruction rather than merely supervise software use.

Progress monitoring: Teachers should use course data, check-ins, assessments, and attendance information to identify disengagement early and adjust support.

Careful student placement: Fully online recovery may be more appropriate for students who are near graduation, recovering only one or two courses, and able to work independently. It may be less appropriate for younger students, students with multiple failures, students reading below grade level, English learners, and students requiring special education accommodations.

Wraparound support: Students with multiple course failures and chronic absenteeism usually need interventions that address attendance, mental health, relationships, transportation, caregiving, housing, work responsibilities, and other barriers in addition to the missed course content.

This parallels the Indian case in one important respect: chronological age and formal placement do not necessarily describe a learner's actual educational starting point.

6.4 Relationships, Belonging, and Restorative Practice

Teacher relationships emerged in the practitioner account as a central mechanism of continuity. For adolescents whose lives may be unstable, a predictable adult relationship can provide encouragement, accountability, and a reason to return. Supportive relationships do not require lower academic expectations; trust can make challenge and corrective feedback more acceptable because students experience them within a relationship of respect.

This is where practitioner stories are especially valuable. One example is a student's question about whether I'd "leave in 6 months like previous teachers" reflects a documented crisis in schools serving marginalized populations. Research shows that high teacher turnover in alternative and high-need schools creates learning gaps that compound existing disadvantages from immigration, incarceration, or interrupted schooling. When students experience repeated teacher departures, they internalize abandonment, making it harder to trust adults or invest in their own education. Literature on exclusionary school processes also cautions that disciplinary removal is better understood as a process with antecedents and consequences rather than as an isolated event [43].

A parent was resistant to the fact that his daughters remain in school for one additional year because they had not passed the required English state assessment. As an alternative pathway to graduation, they would need to complete a CTE program, which would not be available to them until the following year. The students were very enthusiastic about enrolling in the Medical Assistant program, but their parent was opposed to this option. Through conversations with my students, I came to understand that the parent's primary concern was for his daughters to graduate as quickly as possible and begin working rather than remain in school for another year. The federal career and technical education framework provides the broader policy context for such pathways [70].

Within the alternative educational setting, dropout prevention and credit recovery, DOPR, is implemented as a restorative approach that encourages students to reflect on their actions, take responsibility, assume greater ownership of their academic decisions, and engage in constructive, restorative dialogue rather than primarily punitive responses. In Ohio, DOPR is an official designation/program structure for schools serving students who are behind academically or experiencing

circumstances that interfere with traditional schooling. The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce describes DOPR programs as providing personalized instruction, flexible learning, counseling, career support and other services to help students remain engaged and graduate. [Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. (n.d.)]. In this framework, its value lies in using restorative dialogue to strengthen student agency and belonging while helping students reconnect with their educational goals and remain engaged in their learning. Ohio's dropout-prevention and recovery framework provides the state-level institutional context for this model [49].

6.5 Language and Educational Identity

For immigrant students, English proficiency affects both academic performance and social participation. Students may possess knowledge they cannot yet express fluently in English, so equating language proficiency with intellectual ability can underestimate their capabilities. Additional inequities may arise for students who are both English learners and students with disabilities, as distinguishing language-acquisition needs from disability-related learning needs can be challenging, potentially leading to delayed identification, inappropriate placement, or inadequate access to language-development and special education services. [16]

Language status is not merely an instructional category; it can become an important component of students' educational identity. For immigrant and multilingual students, being classified as an English learner may provide access to essential language services, but the label may also position students through a deficit-oriented lens and influence how they perceive their own academic abilities and how they are perceived by educators and peers. Educational identity is therefore shaped not only by English proficiency but also by the interaction of language, culture, belonging, prior educational experiences, and institutional expectations [20], [85]. Research on heritage-language education similarly suggests that students' home languages can serve as important resources for identity development rather than being viewed primarily as barriers to English acquisition [35].

Language shapes educational continuity across four dimensions. In Administrative Access, language proficiency affects whether students and families can understand enrollment processes, communicate with schools, navigate systems, and obtain services. In Educational Engagement, it influences students' ability to understand instruction, participate in discussions, seek help, and demonstrate learning. In Social Belonging, language affects relationships with teachers and peers and whether students feel recognized as valued members of the school community. In Educational Aspiration, language experiences can shape students' confidence, perceptions of future opportunities, and belief that college or career pathways are attainable.

Schools should provide meaningful opportunities for participation while students are developing English proficiency. Students should not need to become fully proficient in English before they can access rigorous coursework, demonstrate competence, participate in class, or pursue career pathways. Integrating linguistic support into regular instruction, CTE, mentoring, and counseling makes language development part of inclusion rather than a separate remedial process.

For immigrant students, language barriers can affect far more than classroom learning. Difficulty communicating may limit participation, weaken relationships, reduce confidence, and discourage students from seeking support or envisioning academic success. These challenges may be intensified by interrupted schooling, employment, poverty, family responsibilities, or other household demands, contributing to the Education–Survival Trade-off.

A continuity-oriented approach views multilingualism as both a support need and an asset. By creating structures that support participation, relationships, rigorous learning, and future planning during language acquisition, schools can strengthen language development alongside engagement, belonging, aspiration, and sustained educational continuity.

6.6 Aspiration, CTE, and Future Pathways

Practitioner observations indicate that vulnerable students often retain aspirations for college, technical careers, stable employment, or independence even when their academic records show substantial risk. The challenge is making those futures credible. Accumulated credit deficits, employment, family obligations, and repeated setbacks can make graduation or postsecondary education appear remote.

Career and Technical Education (CTE), work-based learning, mentoring, apprenticeships, college planning, and individualized graduation pathways can help students see how their current efforts translate into tangible future opportunities although, a study identifies barriers including English-proficiency requirements, insufficient linguistic scaffolding, CTE teachers' limited preparation for multilingual learners, and credentialing requirements. It also identifies hands-on learning, career preparation, and renewed educational interest as potential benefits of CTE for multilingual EL students. The U.S. Department of

Education's Office of English Language Acquisition found that EL participation in secondary CTE increased from 520,167 students in 2019–20 to 638,299 in 2021–22. However, ELs were less likely than non-ELs to reach CTE concentrator status, suggesting that access to an initial CTE course does not necessarily translate into sustained participation or completion of a pathway.

Aspiration is strengthened when students experience progress and can identify a route from today's coursework to tomorrow's employment or education. Although these challenges are valid and well documented, my experience suggests a more positive pattern among many of our ELL students. A significant number choose Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, successfully complete their coursework, and pass the required state or national certification examinations. While some pursue other educational or career pathways after high school, others directly apply their certifications to employment and career opportunities.

6.7 Lessons from the U.S. Case

The U.S. case shows that enrollment alone does not ensure educational continuity. Students may gradually disengage through irregular attendance, incomplete work, social withdrawal, limited participation, or difficulty earning credits. These patterns can reflect unaddressed institutional, social, or economic barriers rather than individual motivation alone, making them important opportunities for early intervention.

Supportive relationships, restorative practices, flexible pathways, credit recovery, and academic and career planning can help students remain connected to school. For immigrant and multilingual students, support must also respond to mobility, employment, caregiving, household demands, and language-related challenges without reducing disengagement to English proficiency.

The U.S. and Indian contexts are complementary: India emphasizes restoring access and learning after disruption, while the U.S. highlights sustaining engagement after enrollment. Together, they demonstrate that educational continuity depends on schools' ability to provide the relational, academic, and structural conditions students need to participate, progress, and pursue future opportunities.

7. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The comparison identifies different routes into educational discontinuity but a shared underlying pattern: exclusion is usually cumulative rather than the result of a single event. In India, barriers such as migration, documentation requirements, poverty, and interrupted prior learning may delay entry into or participation in formal schooling. In the United States, access is generally more firmly established, but continuity may weaken after enrollment because of language transitions, mobility, employment, caregiving, trauma, and academic difficulty. In both settings, a temporary interruption can become long-term exclusion when schools do not identify and address barriers early.

A central cross-case finding is the education-survival trade-off. In India, students may work or take on domestic responsibilities that limit their capacity to attend school consistently. Similarly, adolescents in the United States may work, care for siblings, interpret for family members, or respond to housing and employment instability. Although the contexts differ, the mechanism is similar: immediate family needs can compete with the long-term benefits of education. This challenges deficit-based explanations that attribute disengagement to low motivation or weak aspiration; students' participation must instead be understood within the practical responsibilities shaping their daily lives.

Belonging functions differently across the two settings but remains equally protective. In India, bridge programs, parental involvement, community networks, and civil-society support may help students rebuild confidence during migration-related transitions. In the United States, relationships with teachers, mentors, counselors, and restorative-practice teams may restore trust after academic, behavioral, or social disruption. In both cases, belonging is not separate from achievement; it helps students remain engaged long enough to access instruction, recover learning, and progress toward completion.

Educational aspiration provides another important connection. Refugee parents in India and vulnerable adolescents in the United States may value education despite substantial structural and personal constraints. The challenge is therefore not simply to promote aspiration, but to convert it into feasible educational opportunities. In India, this may require curriculum alignment, bridge programming, language and documentation support, and clear entry pathways into formal schools. In the United States, it may involve flexible credit recovery, Career and Technical Education, mentoring, work-based learning, and individualized graduation plans. Aspiration matters most when institutions create realistic conditions for persistence.

Together, these findings support the argument that educational inclusion is developmental rather than binary. Enrollment alone does not demonstrate inclusion. A student may be enrolled but attend

inconsistently, remain disconnected from peers and adults, experience unresolved learning gaps, or lack a viable route to graduation. Inclusion develops through the interaction of access, attendance and engagement, belonging, academic progress, and future-oriented aspiration. Conversely, dropout, prolonged absence, and noncompletion often reflect earlier, unaddressed disruptions rather than isolated individual decisions.

This perspective also has implications for measurement. Enrollment remains important, but it should be supplemented by longitudinal indicators of educational continuity, including:

- Time between arrival and enrollment
- Periods of interrupted schooling
- Frequency of school transfers
- Attendance stability
- Credit, grade-level, or competency recovery
- Students' perceived belonging
- Educational aspirations
- Successful transitions between programs or schools
- Persistence toward completion

Finally, the cases show that belonging is produced through different social and institutional structures. In India, it may depend more heavily on family, jati, community, and civil-society networks. In the United States, it may be supported primarily through schools, including teacher continuity, restorative practices, individualized planning, and coordinated student-services teams. These differences reflect distinct histories, policies, and institutional capacities. Nevertheless, both cases demonstrate that social belonging is a core dimension of inclusion, even when the relationships and institutions that create it differ.

Accordingly, policies seeking to advance educational inclusion should prioritize not only school access, but also early intervention, flexible pathways, relational support, and longitudinal measures that identify disruption before it becomes permanent exclusion.

8. Policy Recommendations

Policy should prioritize educational continuity, recognizing that exclusion often develops through disruptions in enrollment, attendance, academic progress, belonging, and family stability. Interventions should occur before temporary difficulties lead to prolonged absence, withdrawal, or noncompletion.

Schools should reduce administrative barriers by offering provisional enrollment, diagnostic assessment, bridge programs, and individualized placement for students with incomplete records or interrupted schooling. These measures prevent students from remaining outside school or being placed in unsuitable programs.

Schools should also identify disengagement early through indicators such as unstable attendance, frequent transfers, declining performance, behavioral referrals, course failure, and credit deficiency. Early-warning systems must be paired with student and family outreach, counseling, mentoring, academic support, and referrals rather than relying on data alone.

Flexible pathways—including accelerated foundational instruction, language support, competency-based progression, credit recovery, flexible scheduling, and blended learning—can address varied learning histories. However, these options should maintain rigorous expectations, qualified instruction, regular feedback, and clear routes to graduation, further education, and employment.

Finally, policies should recognize that work, caregiving, transportation, food insecurity, and housing instability can compete with school attendance. Transportation, meals, counseling, childcare, flexible schedules, paid work-based learning, and coordinated social-service referrals can make continued participation feasible.

Implementation principle

Inclusion should be measured not only by enrollment, but by whether students are supported to remain engaged, recover from interruptions, and progress toward graduation and future opportunities. A student who is enrolled but cannot attend consistently, rebuild learning, form trusting relationships, or sees a credible path forward is only partially included.

Effective policy therefore requires a coordinated continuity strategy that combines accessible enrollment, academic recovery, relational support, and material assistance. In India, this includes flexible or

provisional enrollment for refugee children, assessment-based placement, bridge programs, and coordination among schools, families, community networks, and civil-society organizations to address documentation, language, transportation, and interrupted learning.

In the United States, priorities include sustained multilingual services, relationship-centered alternative education, early-warning systems for attendance and credits, flexible but rigorous graduation pathways, and connections to CTE, work-based learning, dual enrollment, and postsecondary education. Individualized graduation and transition plans are particularly important for students facing mobility, caregiving, employment pressures, or credit deficiencies.

9. Conclusion and Future Research: Reframing Educational Inclusion

This paper argues that migration requires educational systems to support children whose learning pathways are often interrupted, nonlinear, and shaped by social, economic, legal, family, and geographic circumstances beyond school. Educational inclusion, therefore, cannot be measured by enrollment alone.

The comparison between India and the United States shows that the two contexts intervene at different points in students' educational trajectories. The India case emphasizes access, educational recovery, and transition into formal schooling, while the United States case emphasizes retention, re-engagement, credit accumulation, and persistence after enrollment. Despite these differences, both reveal the same central challenge: sustaining students' connection to learning through disruption.

This paper proposes educational continuity as the central goal of inclusion. Educational continuity is a student's sustained ability to enter, participate in, progress through, and transition successfully within education despite mobility, displacement, interruption, economic pressure, or changing family circumstances. It rests on four interconnected dimensions:

Administrative access: timely enrollment, documentation support, and appropriate placement

Educational engagement: attendance, participation, learning progress, and academic recovery

Social belonging: relationships, trust, recognition, and support within educational communities

Educational aspiration: students' and families' belief that schooling can lead to meaningful future opportunities

The education-survival trade-off explains why students may disengage even when they strongly value education. Work, caregiving, housing or food insecurity, transportation barriers, household responsibilities, language brokering, and migration-related pressures can redirect students' time and energy toward immediate family needs. Educational interruption should therefore not automatically be interpreted as low motivation or weak aspiration; it may be a rational response to competing obligations and limited institutional support.

Together, these concepts move analysis beyond the binary question of whether a child is enrolled. They focus instead on the longer process through which access becomes participation, participation becomes persistence, and persistence becomes educational progression.

Future research priorities

The next research task is to operationalize Educational Continuity as a measurable and testable framework. Future studies could develop and validate an Educational Continuity Index or related multidimensional measure. Such a measure might include indicators of:

Time between arrival, migration, displacement, or referral and school enrollment.

Total months or years of interrupted schooling.

Frequency of school, program, district, or geographic transfers.

Attendance stability and patterns of chronic absence.

Grade-level recovery, competency mastery, course completion, or credit accumulation.

Academic progress following interruption.

Student-reported social belonging, school connectedness, and trust in adults.

Student and family educational aspirations.

Successful transitions into formal schooling, secondary education, graduation, training, work, or postsecondary education.

Persistence over time, including re-enrollment after interruption and completion of recognized credentials.

Future research should test whether these indicators measure separate dimensions of educational continuity or form a reliable overall index, and whether their relevance varies by student characteristics and circumstances, including age, migration or legal status, disability, language background, gender, family responsibilities, and the nature of interrupted schooling.

Longitudinal studies should examine recovery beyond school reentry by tracking attendance, academic skill rebuilding, credit accumulation, belonging, and progress toward completion. They could also identify which supports—such as appropriate placement, bridge programs, language services, mentoring, flexible scheduling, transportation, psychosocial care, credit recovery, and transition planning—best promote sustained recovery.

Research should further assess how the timing, duration, and accumulation of educational shocks, including migration, school transfers, housing loss, illness, and caregiving responsibilities, shape discontinuity. Compounding disruptions may create greater barriers to participation and completion than any single event alone.

Cross-national and program research

Cross-national validation is essential to determine whether the framework remains applicable when educational continuity is supported by different institutional and community structures. Future research should examine refugee, migrant, internally displaced, rural-to-urban mobile, and economically vulnerable populations across settings. Comparative studies could investigate how documentation requirements, migration patterns, school funding, labor expectations, language policies, disability services, teacher preparation, and community networks shape the relationship between educational disruption and continuity.

Technology-supported personalized learning and mobile educational models also warrant further investigation, particularly for mixed-age, mobile, or returning learners. Such approaches may provide flexible pacing, learning resources, family communication, and continuity across locations. However, research should distinguish technology that strengthens teacher-supported learning from approaches that simply shift students toward isolated, self-paced coursework. Effectiveness is likely to depend on reliable connectivity, device access, teacher guidance, language accessibility, timely feedback, and opportunities for social interaction.

Bridge education represents another important area for study as a form of transitional educational infrastructure. Research should examine which program designs most effectively support movement from interrupted or nonformal learning into accredited curricula. Key questions include appropriate program duration, assessment of prior learning, foundational and language instruction, curriculum alignment, and post-transition support within mainstream classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The central proposition of this paper is that educational systems should be evaluated not only by whether students gain access to school, but by whether they can sustain educational participation through disruption and transition. Enrollment is necessary but insufficient. Meaningful inclusion requires timely entry, consistent participation, supportive relationships, opportunities to recover interrupted learning, sustained educational aspirations, and pathways toward recognized educational and postsecondary opportunities.

As global mobility and educational inequality continue to shape students' trajectories, inclusion cannot be understood as an event occurring at the school gate. It is a continuing process of maintaining the possibility of learning, progression, and belonging.

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