

Migrant Learners in a COVID-19 Context: Exploring Strategies for School Leadership and Management

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on learners, as evidenced by disrupted and reduced learning, limited engagement with their peers, and halted sports and physical activities. This article accounts for the challenges of migrant children within the context of COVID-19 and learning disruptions. This conceptual paper draws from the Ethics of Care Theory and its discourses of ‘caring’, to explore the role of school management and leadership in better managing the physical, social, and psychosocial impact of the pandemic on migrant learners, many of whom are already subject to circumstances that are not of their choosing. This article concludes with strategies, supported by examples from around the globe, on how school leadership and management can better respond to the particular challenges of migrant learners. The Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all requires that the experiences of migrant children, in particular, are acknowledged and included in achieving this vital goal.

Keywords: migration, COVID-19, school leadership, education, children,

1 Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for every child. This right is outlined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and embedded in many constitutions. The United Nations (UNDESA 2018) also places emphasis on the importance of inclusive and equitable education as one of

its 17 sustainable development goals in ensuring a better life for all. However, migrant and refugee children remain side-lined in its implementation. Their exclusion significantly hinders their opportunity to receive an education. Before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, migrant children already faced a wide range of challenges, namely: sporadic or low enrolment in educational institutions; lack of resources from their parents and guardians to attend school and cover school needs; experiences of prejudice, stereotyping, and stigma by their peers and school officials and in some cases, they have even been exposed to violence (UN 2020; UNESCO 2020d; and UNICEF 2020b).

The gaining momentum of xenophobia and the Black Lives Matter movement has seeped into educational institutions, impacting learners. Looking at xenophobia as an example, after experiencing past instances of verbal abuse and bullying, a 10-year-old female Congolese student was injured by her classmates in a xenophobic attack, resulting in her hospitalisation for nine days in South Africa's Western Cape Province (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2020a). A study on migrant learners in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa showed that their bullying experiences were shaped by xenophobic feelings of dislike of foreign nationals (Isseri *et al.* 2018). The Black Lives Matter movements in the United States has had significant effects in schools. Annamma and Stovall (2020) argue that the Black Lives Matter movement has resulted in schools becoming prison nations defined by 'pathologizing mindsets rooted in labelling, surveillance, and punishment, which criminalise black students'. Schools are therefore becoming a reflection of the society at large. They have become defined and shaped by violence, instability, and tensions rather than being a place for positive, social, and constructive learning.

The pandemic led to the closure of schools all across the world, further impeding access to education. It has had a significant impact on migrant children, particularly those in primary and secondary learning institutions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2020d) estimated that a total of 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries (94% of the world's student population) were affected by school closures across various countries. The United Nations (UN 2020) notes that the pandemic impacts children in four main areas: poverty, survival and health, learning, and safety. When it comes to poverty, migrant parents are at a higher risk of job loss, and their families are less likely to

benefit from economic recovery initiatives which are geared towards locals, for the most part (You *et al.* 2020). This loss of income limits parents from being able to pay school fees and provide necessities for their children.

Regarding survival, health and safety, many migrant children already live in unsafe conditions characterised by poor hygiene, overcrowding, inadequate sanitary conditions, and limited or no access to health services (UN 2020). In these conditions, COVID-19 precautionary measures such as social distancing and the washing of hands become very difficult to achieve, putting them at a higher risk of contracting the virus. Also, undocumented migrant children and families shy away from obtaining health assistance because of their immigration status (You *et al.* 2020). The COVID-19 induced economic lockdown of critical sectors such as tourism and construction has had a tremendous effect on migrants in Africa. With limited protection under the host country's labour laws, migrant parents are more vulnerable due to job insecurity, inconsistent salary payments, exclusion from social assistance, and heightened exposure to the novel coronavirus (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) 2020a). The pandemic has also limited the flow of remittances used to send children to school (UNECA 2020b). The case of Trinidad and Tobago shows that most migrant children live in circumstances that exacerbate their condition, namely: limited access to national education, health care and child protection programmes; high levels of informal employment; precarious job situations: low wages and poor job security; exclusion from government COVID-19 relief programmes; and insecure residential status, discrimination and xenophobia (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2020b). These circumstances have limited migrant children in obtaining an education.

This paper answers the following research questions:

- a. What are the challenges of migrant learners within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and disrupted learning?
- b. What strategies can school management and leadership use to address these challenges?

The paper's purpose is threefold: *Firstly*, it explores the experiences of migrant children and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their

education and learning. *Secondly*, it examines the relationship between school management, leadership and migrant learners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Thirdly*, it focuses on the broader issue of migrant children's rights, not just in terms of education but also their general wellbeing. The Ethics of Care Theory is highly appropriate for exploring how school leadership and management can better address the issues faced by migrant children in their institutions. The article concludes with strategies on how these leadership structures can apply care ethics to mitigate the challenges faced by migrant learners.

Data collected from unaccompanied children entering Europe showed the need for education as the most cited reason for their decision to move to the continent (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR 2019). Education is vital because it empowers migrant children and contributes significantly to how they view and engage in society. Likewise, Isseri *et al.* (2018) argue that the experiences of migrant children in schools are significant in developing their identities and how they will transition or integrate into the school. Particularly for the most vulnerable children, such as migrants and refugees, education is lifesaving. In prioritising responses to these educational challenges faced by migrant children, initiatives like the global fund Education Cannot Wait (ECW 2020) focuses on funding education in emergencies by ensuring that children living in threatening environments like protracted conflict and vulnerability to COVID-19 have access to education through various learning alternatives. What these examples and cases show is that education is indeed very important and requires various resources in ensuring that it is available to migrant children.

2 Methodology and Positionality

This article employs a review of existing literature on migrant learners, school leadership and management and the Ethics of Care Theory. This systematic literature review focuses on examining relevant research to analyse the pandemic's effects on migrant children and school leadership and on management's role in mitigating these challenges. In undertaking a conceptual study, this article examines and analyses existing literature to explore the Ethics of Care Theory and how it applies to school leadership and management and their mitigation of migrant learner challenges.

The author's interest in this subject is founded on the significance of

child migrants and their security. The article's broader intention is to contribute to academic research on the nexus between human security and migration, focusing on migrant children. A human security approach focuses on migrant learners and how their challenges, in this case, disrupted learning, can be mitigated. Various studies have established the nexus between human security and migration, with evidence that migration affects the security of not only migrants but citizens of receiving countries (Campbell 2003; and Mawadza 2008). According to Khalid Koser, executive director of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund migrants, refugees and asylum seekers face several human security challenges as they flee from their host countries, in transit and in host communities (Alfred 2017). Vietti and Scribner (2013) examine international migration from a human security perspective and point out that migrants can be protected when host countries, employers and civil society support their integration into receiving communities. In protecting and empowering vulnerable and unaccompanied refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant youth and children in Morocco, a United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) programme in collaboration with the government and with the implementation of the Immigration and Asylum strategy is focused on 'fostering social integration and cohesion and better responding to the health, education and employment needs of this vulnerable group, empowering them to rebuild their lives and realise their aspirations by becoming active participants in their host communities' (UNTFHS 2019: 3). Education becomes essential in empowering migrant children to actively contribute to their host communities while also giving them the tools to enhance their lives considerably.

3 Roles and Challenges of School Management and Leaders: COVID-19 and Migrant Learners

COVID-19 has impacted the education sector globally, and school leaders and management have had to adapt to these new dynamics. Consequently, the pandemic has increased the complexities and responsibilities of school leadership and management as they respond to new institutional, teaching and learning demands and priorities, placing a significant strain on individuals in these positions. Citing Davis *et al.* (2005), Tobin (2014: 3) highlights the roles school principals are increasingly expected to play – 'teacher, psychologist, social worker, facilities manager, assessment expert, educa-

tional visionary, diplomat, mentor, PR [public relations] director, coach, and cheerleader'. These complex roles are further expounded in the COVID-19 context as they are responsible for providing effective leadership to the school as the pandemic evolves.

Different norms exist on what effective school leadership and management entail. Leithwood *et al.* (2008) present four categories of leadership qualities that result in the high performance of staff and consequently students, this being school principals who: build the vision and set the direction of the school; understand and develop their staff; redesign the institution and manage the teaching and learning programmes. Le Clear (2005) describes a strong school principal leader as an individual who has knowledge of the teaching and learning process and can motivate team members to work for the common good of the institution. In the context of COVID-19, effective management and leadership involve the following: overseeing the new and revised teaching and learning programme; ensuring the continued high performance of all learners; building staff capacity and hiring more staff if needed; overseeing and ensuring the successful flow of the daily school programme within the new COVID-19 regulations, while focusing on the future of the institution and how it can meet its vision and goals.

These expectations are set in a context where schools have limited resources. School leadership and management in developing countries have historically faced more challenges than those in the developed world. For instance, in South Africa, schools in the township areas struggle with poor infrastructure, insufficient staffing capacity, large class sizes and insufficient teaching and learning resources. In addition to the limited resources, school leaders and management have to resolve the administrative hurdles related to new teaching styles and approaches. These include rotational attendance and different timetables for various learner groups which has significant implications for staffing and teaching capacity. In the context of disrupted learning, Harris and Jones (2020) note that school leaders have to deal with unplanned changes in their staff workforce, increasing pressure on their remaining staff, and higher workloads. School leaders and management are also affected by external factors that impact their schools significantly. New variants of the novel coronavirus, which are deemed potentially more destructive than previous variants (Nkgadima 2021), pose a new challenge for school leadership as it places learners and staff at risk.

The absence of effective school leadership and management has a significant impact on students' and teachers' performance as the pandemic continues. Without effective school leadership and management, the learning process is impeded for all students and much more for migrant learners (Harris & Jones 2020). Efforts to finish the teaching programme on time leaves disadvantaged learners behind and negatively impacts their progression to higher grades. The following challenges could arise in the absence of effective and strong school leadership and management: unsafe conditions leading to the spread of the virus; mismanagement of already restricted funds to cater to the new demands of the COVID-19 learning environment; failing or underperforming learners; and inadequate and untimely communication to parents, teachers, learners, and other stakeholders. Without effective school leadership that is both flexible and adaptable, the pandemic could negatively impact learning further. Flexibility and adaptability are necessary, as school leaders have to work within the confines of evolving directives, policies, processes, and protocols in the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Jones 2020).

4 Migrant Children and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Child¹ migration is a rising trend globally as both accompanied and unaccompanied children move from one country to another. As of 2020, UNICEF (2020a) put the number of international child migrants at an estimated 36 million from 24 million between 1990 and 2002. The rising number of migrant children will have an effect on host government's social and educational policies and programmes on migration and integration. Janta and Harte (2016) posit that the increasing numbers of births of children to migrant-born mothers abroad will significantly impact their integration into Europe's education systems and the broader society. Consequently, their increasing numbers and presence in various countries' educational institutions require that school managers and leaders be aware of their experiences and backgrounds and be prepared to create spaces in which they can thrive. Furthermore, migrant children come from different countries and have diverse identities and experiences. Schools reflect these diversities and

¹ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005), states that children include anyone below the age of 18 years.

should cater to individuals from different racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. Thus, this article supports the argument of Janta and Harte (2016: 3) that,

... needs of migrant children are diverse and based on a number of individual and cross-cutting factors, such as ethnic background, socio-economic background, age, age at migration, country of origin, length of stay in host country, and the migrant generation (whether one is a first-, second- or higher-order-generation migrant).

Migrant children include refugees and asylum seekers who have left their country of birth because of persecution, armed conflict, and violence (UNHCR 2019; and UNICEF 2020a). Children also independently migrate as they search for work or educational opportunities to advance their education and careers in foreign countries. Others migrate to join their families who have gone ahead or when there is uncertainty in family relationships due to a loss or for other reasons (Statistics South Africa 2020). Others are born to professional expatriates in foreign countries. Some migrant children are stateless resulting from a lack of birth registration documents, being born to stateless parents, being unaware of their nationality, and unfair laws preventing them from accessing their nationality (Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa 2020). Many migrant children also experience physical violence, exploitation, and abuse while in transit. What complicates the case of migrant children is that the migration process disrupts their learning, and the deep psychosocial and physical scars limit their ability to continue their education.

The educational challenges of migrant children begin before leaving their home countries, continue while in transit, and remain even when at their final destination. Data on refugees and migrant children coming to Europe show that a third of children from Nigeria, The Gambia and Guinea did not have any formal education level in their home countries (UNHCR 2019). More than half of the Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Iranian children interviewed reported that they had been out of school for about one or two years prior to migrating (UNHCR 2019). Challenges faced by migrant learners in Europe include language barriers, psychosocial issues, limited catch-up classes, lack of information on enrolment processes, and lack of transportation to attend classes from remote asylum locations (UNHCR

2019). In some instances, there are no legal provisions on assessing or assigning the education level of migrant children (UNHCR 2019).

Various efforts have been made to assist and support migrant learners since the rise and spread of the pandemic. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), governments, and other stakeholders continue to champion the education rights of migrant children and provide support for them. For example, the Three2Six Refugee Children Education Project provides bridging classes in English, Mathematics, and Life Skills for migrant children in Johannesburg, South Africa (Ho 2020). The UNHCR (2020) outlines a wide range of support programmes and initiatives for refugee children in the COVID-19 context, namely: the distribution of educational materials and resources in Niger; handing out self-study packs in South Sudan; providing e-readers and TVs to refugees in Ghana; the use of instant messaging and video-conferencing applications in Indonesia; and the use of radio and television broadcasts to support home-based learning in Kenya.

With the return to schools, it is imperative to understand the constraints and limitations that migrant learners face as they traverse this new education system. Migrant learners will return to school where modes of teaching have changed. They are already lagging due to inadequate access to materials and online resources. In some instances, their parents do not have the resources to send them back to school and provide for their learning needs. Furthermore, they have to deal with the impact of disrupted learning on their overall education, as schools try to complete the school year.

5 Educational Challenges Experienced by Migrant Children

5.1 Low Enrolment and the High Dropout Rate

According to UNESCO (2020d), an estimated 23.8 million learners from primary to tertiary learning institutions will drop out of or not have access to schools due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The highest dropout rates will be at the tertiary level, followed by pre-primary, secondary and then primary school children (UNESCO 2020d). Subsequently, COVID-19 has contributed to low enrolment and increased dropout rates of migrant children. This is due to their family's exhausted savings, job losses of income earners, and the need for migrant children to find work and contribute to the family income. While increases were generally reported in refugee enrolment rates before the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee children were still twice as likely to be out

of school than other children (UNESCO 2020c). According to You *et al.* (2020), with the pandemic still raging, displaced children will now have limited or no education at all. The gender dimensions of education are glaring as well. Approximately 20% of the refugee girls in secondary schools face a high risk of not returning to school after the COVID-19 disruption (UNESCO 2020c).

5.2 Lost Learning Time

Migrant children would have lost critical learning time in the classroom as a result of the pandemic. You *et al.* (2020) note that this will increase their risk of falling even further behind. Lost learning time has significant implications for a student's ability to catch up. According to teachers who work in refugee and host communities, catching up on lost years, for refugee children, leads to losing the drive and desire to learn and creates a high risk of being distracted (Save the Children 2018). Therefore, *'the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return and the harder it will be for them to catch up'* (Save the Children 2018: 5). This is the case in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries like France and Norway, where the pandemic and school closures have resulted in the disengagement of migrant children as they get discouraged by the challenges and difficulties (OECD 2020a). Creating alternative options to make up lost time is a challenge as well. For example, in Burkina Faso, making up for lost learning time in rural areas would exclude children who had to assist their families cultivating crops (HRW 2020b).

5.3 Poor Access to Online Learning Tools

Access to online-based learning tools is a challenge for migrant children because of their location and other limitations. The shift to online learning significantly impacts migrant learners, particularly those in displacement centres, refugee camps, and informal settings where these online learning tools are out of their reach (You *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, unstable electricity supply limits online learning for these groups (You *et al.* 2020). Refugees are further disadvantaged due to the shift to home-based, distance and online learning and the lack of the necessary hardware to participate in these new forms of learning activities and teaching (UNHCR 2020). Migrant

children are less likely to have access to a computer or internet connection at home or even have a quiet place to study than their peers with native-born parents (OECD 2020a). Many migrant families have poor job security and low wages, which limits their purchasing power significantly. Therefore, they have fewer resources than native-born parents to help their children with homework (OECD 2020a). According to a survey conducted in Thailand, migrant students cannot watch online lessons as they do not have cell phones. In contrast, increasing debts have forced them to drop out and help their migrant families earn an income, further exposing them to domestic violence (Ratanapaskorn 2020). Their limited access to online learning tools has resulted in disrupted learning, failure to enrol or re-enrol in school, or dropping out; all of which impede their efforts to obtain an education.

5.4 Language Barriers

Language barriers are a common challenge for migrant and refugee children, as reflected in their performance. Poor understanding of the local language impacts how migrant children understand the curriculum and the education system. For example, in Europe, proficiency in the host country's language is usually average for migrant children (Janta & Harte 2016). This low language proficiency is also a result of the poor language skills of migrant parents (Janta & Harte 2016). According to a policy brief by the OECD (2020a: 2), '40% of native-born children of immigrants do not speak the host-country language at home'. In some instances, children of migrant farmworkers in the United States of America (USA) have to act as translators for their parents when it comes to school matters (Romanowski 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic exposes these language barriers further as they contribute to delayed learning for migrant children. As Person (2020) notes, these language barriers are more pronounced during a crisis as the most readily available learning resources are used, some of which are not in the languages understood by migrant children. Thus, for migrant children, the pandemic presents 'a real risk of regression' due to their weak foundations in reading, mathematics and languages before the pandemic (ECW 2020).

5.5 Psychological and Psychosocial Stressors

Psychological and psychosocial stressors significantly limit refugee and mi-

grant children's ability to concentrate and learn in class. Migrant children primarily experience anxiety, stress, and trauma in their countries of origin, while in transit or in the destination countries (UNHCR 2019). Migrant children of farmworkers in the USA are challenged with withdrawal from other learners; feelings of instability; low levels of commitment to their education; reluctance to engage in sports and other extracurricular activities as they have to move around frequently; and experiences of bullying, ridicule, and discrimination (Romanowski 2003). In educational institutions, migrant learners experience feelings of isolation, exclusion, or prejudice, resulting in an emotional state of unimportance, hopelessness, and indifference (Janta & Harte 2016). A study on high-achieving migrant learners in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa highlighted their experiences of marginalisation, oppression, and vulnerability, with five out of six learners being bullied because of their nationality, language, culture, accent, and physical appearance (Isseri *et al.* 2018). Stereotypes and judgment can lead to bullying, discrimination, and prejudice, where migrant children are treated differently, which further disadvantages them in the learning process (UNHCR 2019). All of these trigger psychological stress which linger and impact their current state of being. These also lead to poor performance and higher dropout rates (Janta & Harte 2016). COVID-19 related stressors such as not having enough, as others do, and being left behind in class could further stir feelings of not belonging. The pandemic also poses significant risks to children's mental health and wellbeing, increases anxiety about the pandemic's adverse effects, and creates uncertainty about the future (UN 2020). For children, acute stress can have long-term mental health issues and impair cognitive development (UN 2020).

5.6 Poor Nutrition

Migrant children have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the area of nutrition. At home, lost income from reduced remittances, layoffs, the economic lockdown, disruptions to trade, and illness, limits income for purchasing food (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO) 2020). French *et al.* (2019) found that lower-income households tend to purchase fewer healthy foods like fruit and vegetables, choosing cheaper,

less nutritional foods instead. In schools, the disruption of feeding programmes has already affected refugee children and youth as they do not have access to school provided meals which many rely on because of limited food at home (UNHCR 2020). The slow reopening of schools and the lack of funds could limit or halt these feeding programmes. According to the United Nations, it is important to prioritise child-centred services that focus on equity of access include schooling and nutrition programmes (UN 2020). In poorer countries, children rely on these meals, as they may be their only sure meal of the day (UN 2020).

6 Ethics of Care Theory

This paper examines the care ethics theory to interpret school leadership and management's role and response in mitigating the educational challenges of migrant learners. This theory is relevant as it promotes individual and communal feelings of humanity and the need to care for the dependent and vulnerable groups in society, including those in the school environment. Care ethics has been applied to various political, social, educational, and global contexts by authors like Noddings (1984); Held (2006); Slote (2007); and Nguyen (2016). This paper argues for the relevance and suitability of this theory in shaping and defining appropriate leadership responses to the particular needs of migrant children in schools.

Care ethics promotes morals and attitudes that individuals should possess as they engage and interact in society. For instance, Noddings (2010: 104) writes that citizens should be educated to 'develop empathy, negotiating skills, generosity of spirit, and commitment to caring'. Her point of departure is that everyone desires to be cared for and that care is part of our human existence (Noddings 2002). Slote (2007: 67,71) also writes that care ethics emphasises 'connection, relationship and empathy'. These values are essential in building a culture of care in society, including educational institutions.

Noddings (1984) presents two stages of caring, namely caring for and caring about. The former refers to the practical acts of caring, while the latter focuses on the ideas and intentions that drive caring. Nguyen (2016) notes that the notion of caring about focuses on concern, invested interest, sensitivity, awareness of the other's needs, and understanding the position of the other while caring for, focuses on caring in action and addressing the

needs of the other through practical and actionable ways. These two stages of caring for and caring about pose a critical question about migrant children in educational institutions. The question is, how can school leadership and management show care for and care about migrant children? A first response grounded in the ethics of care is that they need to understand the plight, perspective, and experience of migrant children. Nguyen (2016) explains that caring is significantly evident and stronger when one understands the other party's needs and point of view, which in this case would be those of migrant children.

The paper argues that caring for migrant children begins with school leadership and management that supports an environment of care. According to a UNHCR (2019) report, improving children's learning will require a supportive school environment. This supportive environment becomes more poignant in a COVID-19 context as students return to school already facing considerable stress and challenges due to the pandemic's effects. The culture of care is necessary in and out of the classroom, as challenges faced outside impact migrant learners' performance in the class. Ideas around support for migrant students can be situated within caring for and about. This article identifies the following by UNHCR (2019: 11) as critical actions that promote caring for migrant learners: 'developing mentoring and cultural mediation schemes, making adequate resources available to address socio-economic disadvantages, providing information about the school environment, engaging with parents, ensuring additional language support, and strengthening anti-discrimination legislation'. Following on from these, the next section discusses key strategies which could be employed by school leadership and management.

In summary, the ethics of care applies very much to school leadership and management and can successfully shape their response to migrants' needs. In understanding and applying empathy, connection, and relationship, coupled with a personal commitment to caring, school leadership and management can mitigate the challenges of migrant learners. Isseri *et al.* (2008) observe that pastoral structures are also important sources of care, help, and support to migrant children while also challenging those who discriminate and oppress migrant children. These structures can support school leadership and management in providing care to migrant children.

7 Strategies for School Leadership and Management

Coined as the ‘largest education disruption in history’ by UNESCO (2020b), the COVID-19 pandemic poses new challenges for school leaders and management. While the following strategies are essential in addressing all students’ needs, this section zooms in on migrant learners.

7.1 Practice and Encourage a Culture of Care and Sensitivity

School leadership and management play a pivotal role in shaping a positive culture in schools. In their study of 30 school staff members in South Africa’s Free State Province, Niemann and Kotzé (2006) observe that a school’s culture is inherently shaped and driven by its management and leadership. This positive school culture is one that promotes care and sensitivity to migrant learners. Sensitivity requires an awareness and understanding of the COVID-19 experiences of migrant learners. A culture of care responds to their mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. Isseri *et al.* (2008) provide ideas on how to practise a culture of care and sensitivity such as going the extra mile, staying behind after school to assist learners and contributing to their self-confidence and self-efficacy. This paper posits that a culture of care prevents identity clashes, xenophobic sentiments, and an ‘us versus them’ mentality from seeping into educational institutions. Harris and Jones (2020) maintain that while pedagogy and technology are imperative in ensuring effective learning, it is the human dimension inherent in effective teaching that produces a profound change. This view is in line with Nguyen’s (2016) observation that care is integral to good teaching.

Practising a culture of care leads to positive outcomes and results for migrant learners beyond just creating a safe and positive teaching environment. As Nguyen (2016) points out, teachers (and in the case of this study, school leadership and management) in embracing and practising a culture of care will instil that same culture in learners. Consequently, a culture of care for migrant learners by school leadership, management, and teachers will result in a caring student population. Instilling care in the student body is achieved by experiencing it in school leadership and management and their treatment of migrant learners. Slote (2007) provides some practical ways of instilling care for other identity groups through literature, films, and television programmes that educate learners on the challenges and predicaments of migrant children. It allows them to use their

imagination and the personalisation of these experiences helps to build their sensitivities to their fellow migrant learners.

7.2 Promote and Implement Inclusive Approaches

School leaders and managers play a vital role in the inclusion of migrant learners in their institutions as schools return to their teaching programmes. Inclusivity involves meeting the needs of the marginalised, particularly those whose learning progress may have been affected by the pandemic. According to the draft declaration by various Heads of States from the Global Education Meeting on Education Post-COVID-19 (UNESCO 2020a), inclusivity is vital in reopening plans. Authors like You *et al.* (2020) also note that schools must be inclusive for all children, including migrants and displaced persons. Isseri *et al.* (2018: 49) believe that the school's culture and ethos are vital to creating an inclusive, welcoming school context for all learners, irrespective of differences.

School management and leadership can achieve inclusivity through additional support structures and programmes, as the following examples show. The UNHCR (2019) notes the value of targeted education and social inclusion measures such as language classes, homework assistance, and psychosocial support in improving the resilience and academic performances of migrant learners. Jante and Harte (2016) observe that inclusivity could be in the form of smaller classes and a larger teacher-student ratio which ensures that children get individual assistance and teachers address their particular needs (language proficiency development as an example) and the use of homework centres where migrant or marginalised students receive homework assistance by teachers or volunteers. A survey by the OECD (2020b) on the COVID-19 impact on student equity and inclusion found that enhancing immigrant and indigenous learners' language skills improves their access and increases their engagement with the learning material.

7.3 Support Diversity

In creating a positive environment for migrant learners as schools reopen, school managers and leaders can welcome their learners' different cultural backgrounds and languages. Leadership support of diversity is exemplified in various ways, including creating a welcoming environment for all learners

and encouraging positive relationships and mutual respect. Tebben (2017) notes that school management and teachers should be culturally aware, enabling them to recognise the cultural differences in their classrooms. They also need to be aware of the varying impacts of the novel coronavirus on these learners. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state that principals must consider culture, migrant status, economic status, physical and mental disabilities, and different learning capacities in responding to the increased diversity of their students. Hannas (2016) notes that migrant children feel included when identifying themselves in the curriculum and the school ethos. There are benefits to creating a school culture that acknowledges and includes these diversities. Person (2020) highlights that integrating the culture and language of displaced children in the classroom brings about social-emotional and cognitive benefits. Romanowski (2003) observes that teachers' use of the cultural background of migrant students can enhance their self-concepts and increase their academic success.

7.4 Engage Regularly with Migrant Parents

The involvement and support of migrant parents positively influence their children's academic performance (Tobin 2014; Jung & Zhang 2016; and Tebben 2017). Hence, parental involvement is critical as schools reopen. Building frequent communication with migrant parents is central to understanding migrant learners and the challenges of COVID-19 in their home life. It also helps school leadership, teachers, and migrant parents better respond to the impact of COVID-19 on the learners. Various factors account for why migrant parents have restricted themselves from engaging in their children's schools. Tebben (2017) notes that immigrant parents feel alienated from their children's schools and feel uninvited. Jana and Harte (2016) note that in Europe, a poor command of the host country's language has restricted migrant parents from engaging in parent-teacher associations and contributing to school activities.

In applying notions of 'caring about', honesty, effective listening, interest and concern, empathy, and understanding the position and background of migrant parents are essential in building positive relations. In line with 'caring for', some practical steps can be taken by school leaders and management in including and engaging migrant parents. Tebben (2017) proposes using a language translator for meetings; sending out notifications

and documentation in English and native languages; informing migrant parents about how to communicate with the school and how the school system works and conducting regular meetings at suitable times when migrant parents can attend. Romanowski's (2003) views on teacher responses to their migrant learners can also be applied to school management and leadership: they can provide information sessions for migrant parents at convenient times to discuss and address their personal and unique issues; educate them about their responsibility to their children's education; discuss the school's expectations, modes of communication with the school and their COVID-19 needs as migrant families. School Governing Bodies (SGBs) – which should include migrant parents – can prove useful in addressing the teaching and learning needs of migrant learners. Cerna (2020) promotes a holistic approach to education, which brings together school leadership, staff, parents, other learners and the broader community, in responding to migrant children in the post-COVID-19 context.

7.5 Create an Environment for Innovative and Flexible Teaching Approaches

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that educational institutions must adopt innovative and flexible approaches to catch up and implement online and distance learning. Innovative and flexible teaching approaches ensure that migrant learners can settle in and catch up. School leaders and managers need to be aware of the implications of this for the teaching and learning programme in terms of extra capacity and professional development initiatives. Teachers will also need to be flexible and creative, according to UNESCO (2020b). Consequently, the use of tailored approaches and curricula is vital in responding to the diverse learning needs of migrant learners. Innovation can emerge through the use of these approaches and curricula (Janta & Harte 2016).

Setting up alternative teaching sessions can help address language gaps among migrant learners. Hanna (2016) proposes music, photography, picture books and dance as means to make new migrants feel included and which do not require a strong understanding of the school's language. While acknowledging the demanding school environment for teachers and learners, she argues that using these creative tools can increase the confidence and comfort of the learners (Hanna 2016). Cerna (2020) highlights a wide range

of resources, namely: no-tech and low-tech alternatives to assist vulnerable migrant learners such as weekly homework packages, access to websites that provide language support, provision of internet hotspots, video chats, sharing closed caption videos, provision of translated material and engaging with families and guardians of learners. These flexible teaching approaches will need to be in line with COVID-19 safety measures. For example, in the Northern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), John Aimé Mozokombo has been teaching over 600 refugee students from the Central African Republic (CAR) outside their homes in the Inke refugee camp since the start of the pandemic and with the closure of schools. Each class was limited to six students to ensure proper physical distancing as they prepared for the national primary education final test (Grandi 2020). Ultimately, innovative teaching approaches are essential for making up lost time and ensuring that vulnerable and marginalised learners do not drop out.

7.6 Use of Transformational and Democratic Leadership Styles

School principals can adopt a wide range of leadership styles to enhance teaching and learning programmes. There are different leadership styles: invitational, authoritarian, bureaucratic, transformational, transactional, democratic, and instructional. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these in detail; however, this paper argues for democratic and transformational leadership styles as highly appropriate and relevant in the context of school managers' and leaders' response to COVID-19 and migrant learners.

Also referred to as participative leadership, the democratic leadership style is defined by Gastil (1994: 953) as 'distributing responsibility among the membership, empowering group members and aiding the group's decision-making process'. In distributing responsibility, the democratic leader fosters and encourages the maximum involvement of every member in decision-making and in meeting objectives; in empowering members, a democratic leader commits to developing the skills of members to equip them to tackle the task at hand; and in aiding group decision-making, democratic leaders commit to and actively create spaces and processes for inclusive deliberation, broad consultations and constructive participation (Gastil 1994). In applying these ideas and norms to migrant children and COVID-19, the following are essential: school principals need to share

decision-making responsibilities with teachers who deal more directly with migrant learners. This process is to determine the kind of support migrant learners require to catch up with their peers. School leadership and management should devote time to consulting and communicating with teachers, support staff and migrant parents on resolving challenges of migrant learners as they return to school.

This leadership style places great emphasis on the participation of others in addressing teaching and learning needs. Parents and teachers tend to know and understand their migrant learners best, so school management and leadership will benefit from including them in decisions that affect them. This style of leadership requires high levels of transparency, honesty and flexibility. The democratic leadership style accounted for learners and teachers' high performance in select primary schools in Tanzania (Machumu & Kaitila 2014). Makgato and Mudzanani's (2018) study on high and low performing schools in South Africa's Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, found that democratic and transformational leadership styles contribute to learners' high educational performance. The democratic leadership style can be linked to ideas in the Ethics of Care Theory. It highlights honesty and transparency and implies the need for empathy, connection, and relationship. Gastil (1994: 960) notes that democratic leaders must show 'genuine care and concern for members'.

Transformational leadership is defined by Le Clear (2005: 8), as one 'that inspires and motivates followers to demonstrate a commitment to a shared vision'. A transformational leader brings change by fostering collaboration, sharing decision-making responsibility and empowering staff (Le Clear 2005). This leadership style is defined by communication between school principals and their teaching staff to ensure an effective and productive teaching environment. Teachers are deemed as experts on the subjects and learning content and can actively contribute to decision-making. In collaboration with teachers, school principals can devise solutions to the learning needs and gaps of migrant learners. Transformational leaders welcome and create opportunities to utilise and include innovative and creative teaching styles. The ethics of care calls for transformational leadership as school principals that use this style tend to possess the following traits: kindness, honesty, trustworthiness, empathy, high levels of morality, genuineness, cultural empathy, and open-mindedness (Homrig 2001; Van Woerkom & de Reuver 2009; Basham 2012; Thorn 2012; and

Simmons 2016). This leadership style is also useful in facilitating diverse groups and multicultural environments (Simmons 2016).

7.7 Capacity Building

Psychosocial and psychological stressors of migrant children impact their learning. While teachers need to be aware of and understand this, it is not always the case. In some instances, the UNHCR (2019) reports that teachers are not equipped in encouraging multiculturalism and open-mindedness to diversity. Teachers are also unequipped to recognise and support at-risk and traumatised children (OECD 2020b). For example, Romanowski (2003: 28 - 29) found that teachers were oblivious to their own beliefs about migrant learners and their stereotypes shaped their actions.

Capacity-building initiatives can help teachers acknowledge their stereotypes, increase their understanding of cultural diversities, and examine how this relates to their role as teachers. Capacity-building takes different forms and approaches. In one case, teacher training materials have been developed in French, English and Dutch on refugees, asylum seekers and migration and how to teach refugee children in the classroom, particularly those in Europe with stress and trauma symptoms (UNHCR 2019). This paper argues that capacity-building can involve reflection to adjust and improve teaching and learning programmes. Han (1995: 228) describes critical reflection as ‘the ongoing process of critically examining and refining educational practices, taking into careful consideration the personal, pedagogical, societal (including the social, political, historical and economical) and ethical contexts associated with schools, classrooms, and the multiple roles of teachers’. Romanowski (2003) finds that teachers and school administration should engage in critical reflection processes to identify and understand their stereotypes, how these influence their teaching and behaviour; while considering the cultural background of migrant students and how the education system and process could discourage or hinder them. The examples above are in line with the ideas of caring for others, which focuses on school teachers’ and leaders’ work and action to show care for their migrant students.

Critical reflection helps school leadership and management evaluate and change teaching methods, review school policies and programmes, and mitigate migrant learners’ educational challenges. School leadership and

management's efforts help ensure that the shortage of trained and qualified teachers is resolved and that capacity development in digital and pedagogical skills is provided (UNESCO 2020a). With the impact of COVID-19 on learning, teachers require support as schools have reopened and various learning alternatives are explored. School leadership and management should provide a safe working environment. Teachers surveyed in the European Union needed support like free resources from educational technology companies, direction from their Ministries of Education, and capacity development on teaching online (OECD 2020b). School leadership and management play a significant role in ensuring that teachers can meet new and existing migrant learners' needs.

7.8 Decentralised Leadership

This paper also argues that a decentralised leadership is necessary for addressing the specific or particular needs of educational institutions. Authors like Harris and Jones (2020) and Bredeson *et al.* (2020) posit that context-driven leadership is of utmost importance in schools. Decentralised leadership refers to the devolution of decision-making to other members of the school community. As a form of decentralisation, devolution is shifting authority and responsibility from actors external to the school (district boards, local councils) to the local level (principals). Steinberg (2013) notes that principals are now responsible for making decisions on a wide range of issues, including staff capacity and career development, school safety and security measures, budgeting, curriculum, and schedules.

Decentralised education is beneficial for migrant learners because they are geographically closer to their decision-makers and leaders. Steinberg (2013) finds that decentralised education has gained traction due to the need for highly responsive education to families' and students' needs. Therefore, school leaders have the power to make decisions on curriculum, staffing needs, and the needs of their student body, including migrant learners. This gives them the freedom to make decisions on new programmes, and innovative ways to address their learners' needs without being influenced by external factors that are far removed from the school and the student body. In decentralising, school principals can better shape the institutions' teaching and learning programmes while enhancing relationships between staff and students.

8 Conclusion

Education is essential for migrant children as it empowers them; however, their educational challenges have become more pronounced since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of learning. Many migrant parents have lost their jobs, closed down their informal businesses, and in many instances cannot benefit from relief assistance due to their migrant status. The challenges faced by migrant children include low school enrolment and a high dropout rate, lost learning time, poor access to online learning tools, language barriers, psychological and psychosocial stressors, and poor nutrition.

The aforementioned comes with the realisation that many governments and educational institutions are already burdened in addressing the needs of non-migrant learners, many of whom are in dire socio-economic circumstances because of the pandemic. Governments and school management have created various programmes and initiatives to meet online learning needs in more developed countries. In developing nations, this is the opposite due to infrastructural gaps and the lack of resources, particularly in public schools. It is up to school leadership and management to work within these confines. Their role is central to providing education for migrant learners.

The key premise of this article is that school leadership and management need to act caringly towards migrant children. This responsibility becomes more of a necessity as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. This article has outlined key strategies which school leadership and management can use to better respond to the educational needs of migrant children. These include practising and encouraging a culture of care and sensitivity; promoting and implementing inclusive approaches; supporting diversity; regularly engaging with migrant parents; creating an environment for innovative and flexible teaching approaches; employing transformational and democratic leadership styles; calling for decentralised leadership and capacity building. The theory of care ethics was used to identify key strategies to build meaningful relationships between school management and leadership and migrant learners and their parents. While achieving the above, it is crucial that school leaders and managers engage in self-care and it is critical to provide relevant support and resources from various education ministries for this.

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