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## TEENAGE MIGRANTS AND TRANSLANGUAGING BEHAVIOURS

**Abstract :** Teenager migrants are adept at creating translanguaging spaces in the classroom, in which they can work interactively and more effectively across multiple languages. This article presents illustrated examples of some of the ways that young migrants make use of their linguistic repertoires in language-of-schooling classes, in a comparative education study carried out in schools in France and Aotearoa New Zealand (Smythe, 2021). The translanguaging practices of 42 secondary students recently arrived as asylum-seekers, refugees or regular migrants were studied over 3 months in two schools in Bordeaux and Wellington. Patterns across the cohort show that young migrants are skilled in drawing on their home languages as they begin learning the language-of-schooling (French or English). They also dynamically and fluidly engage other languages in their repertoires for learning and communicative purposes. These findings suggest ways that teachers can adapt lessons to support the translanguaging behaviours that teenage migrants are already demonstrating are effective for their learning.

**Key words:** translanguaging, teenage migrants, language learning, teacher education.

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### INTRODUCTION

Almost every school teacher today will be faced with students with diverse learning needs. One group of students with particular learning needs are newly-arrived migrant teenagers who speak languages other than the language-of-schooling. Often multilingual on arrival, young migrants can be adept at mobilising their linguistic repertoires during the initial learning phase in the new schooling environment (Council of Europe, 2009; Cavalli & al, 2009). How do they make use of their existing plurilingual skills and knowledge in the classroom? What can teachers learn from this, in order to support young migrants, and to capitalise on their multilingualism at school?

Over the course of more than a decade as a high school teacher in New Zealand, I met migrant-background students who inspired me to go further into research on languages in learning. I was curious to find out how their languages and cultural backgrounds could be an important resource for supporting their learning in an unfamiliar language and cultural context. And how, as their teacher, I could help them make use of their existing linguistic skills, as part of the process of learning English as an additional language.

In this article, I therefore present some examples of young migrants navigating learning via their plurilingual resources in schools in France and Aotearoa New Zealand (see Smythe, 2021 for full study), and discuss how teachers can work with translanguaging to better support young migrants during the newly-arrived phase.

### **WHAT IS TRANSLANGUAGING?**

One definition of translanguaging is “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire, which does not in any way correspond to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages” (García & Klein, 2016: 14). In other words, bilingual and multilingual speakers use their language repertoires in ways that are flexible, purposeful and unique to individual speakers (Vogel & García, 2017). This view is controversial as it defies traditional monolingual approaches that schools apply to migrant students, in which home languages are treated as merely a scaffold for learning the language-of-schooling. The monolingual ideal sets up boundaries and hierarchies between languages, whereas translanguaging cultivates an ecology of languages (García & Klein, 2016). Furthermore, translanguaging practices in the classroom promote the linguistic realities of plurilingual students, allowing them to communicate and learn using the full array of their language resources. As Cummins (2021) affirms:

*“... there is wide-spread support in the academic literature for the propositions that bi/multilingual individuals draw on the totality of their linguistic resources in communicative interactions and that classroom instruction should encourage students to use their full linguistic repertoire in flexible and strategic ways as a tool for cognitive and academic learning.” ( : 7)*

For young migrants who arrive into an unfamiliar school system as teenagers (termed ‘late arrivals’ by the OECD, 2015), translanguaging pedagogy could be very helpful for easing the learning burden of acquiring an additional language (language-of-schooling) plus managing the cognitive demands of secondary school curricula. Several recent studies have observed that emergent bilingual teenagers are adept at creating translanguaging spaces in the classroom, in which they can work interactively and more effectively across multiple languages (Hansen-Thomas & al, 2021; Li & Luo, 2017; Noyau, 2017; Daniel & Pacheko, 2015).

### **A STUDY OF YOUNG MIGRANTS AND TRANSLANGUAGING IN FRANCE AND NEW ZEALAND**

I had the chance to explore this phenomenon of how young migrants create spaces in which they can communicate plurilingually as part of my Phd research (Smythe, 2021). This study compared the translanguaging practices of 42 teenagers who had recently arrived in either France or New Zealand between 2017-2019, and were attending a state school in Bordeaux or Wellington. In this situation, these young migrants found themselves in a monolingual school setting — with either French or English as the language-of-schooling — where their existing plurilinguistic skills, while recognised as valuable to their learning, were viewed at best as a vehicle for transitioning into the language-of-schooling. This deficit view of plurilingualism is still very common in majority language school systems, particularly vis-a-vis minority language speakers (May, 2003; Cavalli & Causa, 2013). However, the study revealed that despite their monolingual surroundings, students themselves mobilised several languages from their existing repertoires in dynamic and fluid ways, in situations where they found this helpful for their learning or classroom communication. Teachers also contributed in many and very significant ways to the study, especially the language-of-schooling teachers and teacher aides, whom I acknowledge and thank<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of participating schools, teachers and students have been anonymised to protect identities.

## STUDENTS AND THEIR LANGUAGES

The 42 students who participated in the study are representative of the high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity found amongst the populations of both France and New Zealand, with 22 different countries of origin and 24 different languages spoken at home amongst the cohort. 21 students also reported speaking more than one language at home, other than the language-of-schooling: for example, a student of Congolese/Spanish origins who speaks 50% Lingala and 50% Spanish at home. In the French context, students housed in asylum-seeker centres reported speaking 30-50% French in their multilingual place of residence, plus a mix of other languages they spoke as first or second languages such as Punjabi, Hindi, Farsi or Arabic. In the New Zealand context, several refugee-background students from Karen hill-tribes on the Burma-Thai border reported speaking mostly Khmer at home, alongside 0-40% English spoken and 5-10% Thai mixed in. These high levels of plurilingualism were reflected in the linguistically fluid ways that students worked together in their French or English classes: translanguaging was a major part of their learning process within the community of young migrants in language-of-schooling classes.

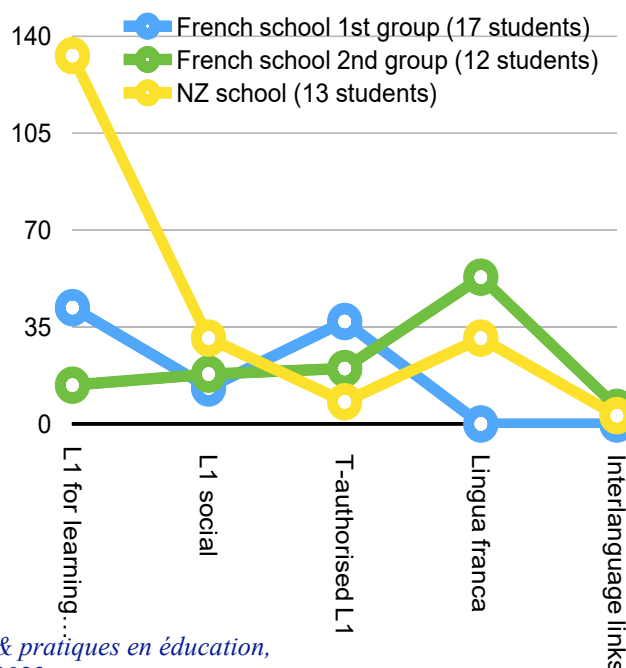
To illustrate this, Figure 1 below compares quantitative data recording the various ways in which the 42 students engaged in translanguaging practices during their French classes (in the French school) and their English classes (in the New Zealand school). As shown from left to right, students often spoke in their first languages for learning purposes, and sometimes for social reasons as well. The teachers at times directed students to work in their home languages (T-authorized L1), employing translanguaging pedagogies. Students also chose to communicate at times in lingua franca — English in the French school, and Arabic in the NZ school. Usually this was in cases where a student had low proficiency in the language-of-schooling, and so compensated with words or sentences in a language understood by the teacher or other students (English or Arabic). Finally, in the right-hand column, students occasionally made interlanguage links between the target language and other languages in their repertoires, finding similarities or differences in vocabulary items or pronunciation, for example.

**Figure 1: Comparing types of translanguaging amongst the EL group in the NZ school (13 students) with the UPE2A groups (17 + 12 students) in the French school**

This figure compares the different purposes of student translanguaging across 20 hours of observations in English classes (NZ school) and 32 hours in French classes (French school).

Note: three major areas of difference:

- highest levels of student L1 production for learning purposes in NZ school
- English as a lingua franca in French school / Arabic as lingua franca in NZ school (amongst Somali and Syrian students)
- higher levels of Teacher intervention to support translanguaging in French school



### TRANSLANGUAGING IN ACTION

In the language-diverse classrooms in the French school and the NZ school, students were observed translanguaging as they learned the language-of-schooling (either French or English). The examples that follow are selected from one group in the French school, and illustrate the main categories of translanguaging captured during the study (as reproduced in Figure 1): (1) a student speaking in his/her first language (L1) for learning purposes (2) and (3) the teacher directing students to work in their languages (4) and (5) a student communicating via a lingua franca, and (6) a student making an interlanguage link. For each, a snapshot of the classroom situation tells a story, and helps to understand the child's linguistic experience in the moment.

Students and their country + languages: Manaal & Raisha (Algeria: Arabic/Berber), Alvaro (Spain: Lingala/Spanish), Mahala (Iraq: Arabic/Finnish), Maria (Italy: Italian/Arabic), Aagati (Bangladesh: Bengali, Hindi, English), Rurik (Ukraine: Ukrainian, English). T = Teacher.

#### *Example 1: Students speaking together in their first languages for learning purposes*

- **10h37** The class are going to revise French vocabulary. Two students are at the board: Maanal and Alvaro. They are going to write the words dictated by Teacher on the back of whiteboard panels, where the class cannot see.
- Dictation begins. T: "*le salon; le canapé ...*"
- Mahala is sitting alone today. She sits biting her lip, looking around the room. T tells her off for doing nothing.
- Mahala: "*Oui, mais je sais pas quoi faire!*"
- T: "*Tu écris, comme tout le monde. La date, vocabulaire, les mots.*" T had already told Mahala to write the date and title earlier. Without the support of working with a peer, she does not know what she is supposed to be doing.
- **10h49** T corrects the words on the board that the two students have written. It means that all students see errors from peers + T's corrections (with group discussion about whether it is correctly spelt or not), as they correct their own work.
- Maanal and Raisha talk in L1 about spelling of words on board that Maanal has written, correcting together.
- T gives a mark 8/15 for each of the students who wrote on the board (Maanal & Alvaro). Students mark their own work, and give themselves a score.

Observation #4, 9/11/2018

The above example shows an instance when some students had access to an L1-speaking peer (Maanal and Raisha, Algeria), and another student, Mahala (Iraq), did not have access to an L1-speaking partner. Without an L1-speaking peer to work with, Mahala was unable to get started on the learning task, and said, “*Je sais pas quoi faire*”, even though the Teacher had given instructions to the whole class on what to do. Mahala often needed extra one-on-one support from the teacher, or other students, to understand instructions and begin a task. The two other Arabic-speaking students in this example, Maanal and Raisha often worked together in their L1 on learning tasks, and seldom asked the teacher for extra support. Translanguaging with a same-language partner therefore seems to support collaborative learning, and helps students to decode task instructions and check their comprehension together.



### Examples 2 & 3: the teacher directing students to work in their languages

#### Ex. 2: Teacher-authorized translanguaging

- **11h20** T writes question words on the board, and asks students to give the word in their own languages: *où, pourquoi, qui*.
- Students become animated and give the words in L1. Mahala is smiling, and confirms an Arabic word with Maanal.
- **11h25** T asks Mahala to read French words aloud and translate into Arabic.
- **11h26** T does a round of the class, asking each student how to say words in L1. Each student says some of these words in L1. They seem happy and motivated.

Observation #2, 4/10/2018



In Example 2, the teacher uses a translanguaging pedagogy, asking each student to translate French question words into their first languages. Even though this is very simple, it gives every student a chance to participate and contribute to the lesson, in their own language. The students seem happy and motivated, as they can accomplish this easy task via their plurilingualism.





### Ex. 3: Teacher-authorised translanguaging

- T asks Alvaro to read in French and translate into Spanish. Then asks Maria to do the same in Italian.
- When Mahala (Iraq) is offered the choice to translate into Arabic or Finnish, she chooses Arabic. T asks Maria (Italy), “T’as compris?”
- Maria (Italy/Morocco) understands Mahala’s Arabic translation, and Aagati says, “Correct!”
- Mahala (Iraq) then asks if she can translate the same sentence into Finnish, which she does.

Observation #1, 21/9/2018

Teacher offers Mahala a choice of the two languages that she already speaks, helping Mahala to become aware of her plurilingualism and to access her existing language resources. It is done in an understated way, yet shows Mahala (and the other students) how it is possible to work across several languages and make connections. Also, the other students who understand some Arabic but may not be fluent speakers (Maria from Italy and Aagati from Bangladesh), add value to the learning experience by affirming their own plurilingual comprehension and Mahala’s correct translation of the French sentence into Arabic. This is a valuable learning moment for these plurilingual students, as they make connections between French and the other languages that they have varying degrees of proficiency in, in the form of a simple translation. Importantly, each child’s plurilingualism is accepted in the UPE2A class context, and the teacher encourages the students to work in plurilingual ways, while keeping the focus on learning French.

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### Examples 4 & 5 : a student communicating via a lingua franca

Rurik (Ukraine) used English quite freely in class, with the teacher, with other students and with me. His English was at about an A2 level (CEFR), while his French on arrival was at a beginner A1 level. He coped with this at times by mixing English and French within sentences, as in Example 4:



### Ex. 4: Translanguaging in lingua franca

- T explains in simple English to Rurik to paste a page into his folder.
- He checks his understanding in simple French sentences. Then says in a mixture of French and English, “Ça colle too? Ça only copy?”
- T replies, “Oui, copier et présenter.”

Observation #3, 19/10/2018, French school

In Example 5 below, students who were already plurilingual on arrival and used to “language mixing” within sentences, as is Aagati from Bangladesh, mixed several of their languages with French to communicate. As in Aagati’s case, this kind-of freestyle translanguaging is also a cultural behaviour, and while not common amongst French speakers, she used this strategy of drawing on all of her existing language resources simultaneously to communicate. In this example, Aagati takes a typically Indian pragmatic approach to language — there are no constraints on language separation within sentences, the aim is to communicate and language mixing is a way of achieving this. Depending on the child’s culture and existing linguistic strategies, this can therefore help a newly-arrived immigrant child to participate linguistically, and to include her own cultural approaches to language learning. Over time, and with greater mastery of the French language, Aagati is likely to adopt French linguistic conventions — that is, one language within a sentence, rather than several. For now, freestyle translanguaging is a useful linguistic tool during the newly-arrived phase.



#### Ex 5: Freestyle translanguaging

- T asks Alvaro (Spain), “A quel âge on va à la maternelle en France?”
- Alvaro: À trois ans.
- Next, T asks students about pre-school in their countries.
- Aagati: “Kindergarten c’est pour les bébés. Pour moi, high school (+ a word in Bengali).”
- Aagati, 12 years old from Bangladesh, speaks Bengali, Urdu, Hindi and English, and is now learning French. At home they speak mostly Bengali.

Observation #6, 7/12/2018, French school

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#### Example 6: a student making an interlanguage link

##### Interlanguage links

- Mahala (Iraq) asks, “pourquoi “r”?”, referring to Alvaro’s rolling “r” in Spanish accent while speaking French.
- T explains it’s because it’s a Spanish “r”.
- M replies, “En Arabe on a “r”, c’est tous” (comparing pronunciation of different “r” sounds across languages).

Observation #1, 21/9/2018

Students made conscious interlanguage links. In Example 6, an Arabic-L1 student hears a Spanish-L1 student pronouncing a French word with a rolling Spanish “r”. She asks the Teacher about this “r” sound, and then comments that the Arabic “r” is not the same.



#### DISCUSSION

The above examples support two important aspects of translanguaging. Firstly, that translanguaging is a learning tool that these teenage migrants regularly made use of in a range of ways, on their own initiative:

as a lever for accessing the language-of-schooling, for interacting with same-language peers about their learning, to communicate more effectively with the teacher, and to explore connections between the target language and their existing knowledge of language(s). Secondly, that translanguaging pedagogy clearly has a role to play in supporting newly-arrived migrant students in the language-of-schooling classroom. These examples illustrate the kinds of simple, easy-to-apply translanguaging pedagogies that teachers can use with migrant students; and most importantly, that draw on the ways that students are already using their languages.

### *Teenage migrants translanguaging*

In the first aspect of translanguaging as a learning tool, the linguistic behaviour of the 42 young migrants in both settings clearly shows that they like working together plurilingually, and find it useful for their learning of the language-of-schooling. To understand this finding, let us look at two types of translanguaging practices: (1) transforming the classroom into a plurilingual space where all languages may be spoken, and (2) individual translanguaging for communicative purposes.

#### Transforming the classroom into a plurilingual space

The high levels of plurilingual interactions amongst students in this study transformed the French/English classrooms into plurilingual spaces where students could work more fluently and participate more actively. From a teaching point of view, this is a way of capitalising on students' plurilingual skills and placing high value on student autonomy in learning. One frequent approach that both students and teachers initiated, was when students discussed and presented something in their home languages in the whole class context, as in Example 2 of students translating the words "où, pourquoi, qui" and other new French vocabulary items into their home languages. The focus here is on each student's individual cognitive processing and ability to form interlinguistic links between home languages and language-of-schooling. There are several advantages for language-of-schooling acquisition in this type of translanguaging activity:

- Students who speak the same languages confirm or correct their comprehension of French words amongst each other. If a student has not understood a word, they can hear the correct translation from another same language-speaking peer.
- Students hear the French words repeated several times as each student says the French word and gives a translation. This means that if there are 10 students in the class, all students hear the French words 10 times. Contextualised input and repetition of vocabulary items are part of an acquisition process (Nation, 2002).
- The teacher can check student comprehension of new words. Even if the teacher does not understand all of the languages spoken in the classroom, she can see whether a student easily gives a translation or hesitates and needs to revise the meaning.
- Students become language experts and responsible for their own learning processes. If they had learned these words for homework and had found the meanings in their home languages, they enjoy a moment of showcasing their achievement in front of the class.



- Students became animated and motivated whenever space was created to work plurilingually in the whole class context. They simply loved sharing their languages and hearing their classmates speaking their own languages. This motivation and engagement is an important factor in language-of-schooling acquisition, as a high affective for learning aids memory and retention of new content (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). In other words, when students enjoy a learning activity they remember language items better.

#### *Individual translanguaging for communicative purposes*

The second type of translanguaging is shown in the example of Aagati mixing languages within the same sentence, in a culturally Indian style of speech. This is a kind of communicative practice that two of the students in this group often made use of (Aagati and Rurik), as a way of compensating for a lack of vocabulary in French at this beginner stage of their learning. It was accepted by the teacher as a way for students to “try and see” with the language elements that they had already mastered in their language repertoires, including French. In this way, students were working plurilingually within sentences that contained elements of the French language — that is French words, a French grammatical structure — and elements of other languages they spoke to varying degrees of proficiency (often mixing English with French, and very little of their home languages). The result was an effective way of communicating that seems to offer multiple teaching and learning benefits, such as:

- allowing the student to practise their newly-acquired French at A1-A2 level, without feeling inhibited or constrained by gaps in their language knowledge;
- showing the teacher what the student doesn’t yet know how to say in French (an unknown French word replaced by the English word), as well as what he/she has already mastered; and
- facilitating plurilingual work in the classroom context of language-of-schooling acquisition, thus encouraging all students to capitalise on their existing plurilingual competences.

#### *Individual translanguaging for communicative purposes*

Translanguaging pedagogies can and should be simple for teachers to use, as well as being effective for students’ learning. As seen in these six examples, the teacher in the French school employed a range of simple teaching strategies for including students’ plurilingualism in their French learning processes, and was skilled at weaving these into the lessons in a little-and-often approach. For example, frequently asking students, “*Comment vous dites ... en arabe/portugais/ta langue ...?*” or asking students to use the bilingual dictionaries provided in the classroom. These strategies helped students to quickly make connections between French and their home languages, and could be extended to include and build on each student’s plurilingual competence in a more complex inter-linguistic approach. This could be in the form of linguistic transfer<sup>2</sup>, for example structuring learning activities so that students make lexical comparisons. It could also

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<sup>2</sup> See Cummins’ Crosslinguistic Translanguaging Theory (CTT) for explanation (Cummins, 2021)

be more deeply integrated into the design of lessons in ways that support students to develop level-appropriate understanding of grammar, semantics and literacy conventions across languages<sup>3</sup>.

A further simple pedagogical approach involves teachers dialoguing with students, especially teenagers, about the various ways in which they can use their full language repertoires in their learning processes. This is an affirmation of the types of translanguaging strategies that the young migrants in this study were instinctively using when they noticed and commented on differences between French and other languages in their repertoires (Example 6: making conscious interlanguage links). What ideas do students have for including their own plurilingual repertoires, and the languages of their classmates? What would they find useful and beneficial for their learning of French, as additive to their existing linguistic skills and knowledge? Students who are participants in their own learning processes feel more in control, and can become more engaged and autonomous learners — and teachers who dialogue with students in this way are also being more socially inclusive (Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018).

Another method of plurilingual teaching that works in this domain of building awareness of links between languages is “*knowledge transfer and interlingual support*” (Castellotti & Moore, 2010: 16). This method aims to use students’ prior learning and existing plurilinguistic skills to advantage the learning of languages (language-of-schooling and other languages offered by schools).

Pedagogical translanguaging is one way that teachers can support active participation during the newly-arrived phase, and overcome some of the limitations of monolingual schooling. As Harju-Autti and Mäkinen (2022) comment in their Finnish study, in diverse European societies today, teachers should be taught ways to include the languages of plurilingual learners, in order to be ready to respond to linguistically diverse students:

*“A linguistically responsive teacher understands the central role of language in all learning and knows how to implement pedagogies that support language learners.” ( : 2)*

This guidance to teachers and teacher educators is echoed across international policy recommendations for plurilingual education (Council of Europe Languages Policy Division), as well as in international studies on translanguaging amongst young migrants (some examples are given in this article).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, translanguaging pedagogy is linked to an inclusive education movement that strives for more equitable educational outcomes for young migrants in majority language settings. The implications are not only for improving futures for young migrants, although that is within every teacher’s reach, but extend beyond individual stories into issues of social justice. As García (2009) frames the debate:

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<sup>3</sup> Lesson design that takes into account the ways that students are already using languages is one of three components of Translanguaging Pedagogy that was found to be effective in a longitudinal project with multilingual students in New York schools (project CUNY-NYSIEB, see García & Klein, 2016).



*“Pedagogical practices for all children, but especially for language minority children, must rest on two important principles — social justice and social practice. Neither of these two principles can be observed if the children’s home language practices are not included in education.” ( : 153)*

In response, teachers and teacher education programmes in many contexts, aware of the advantages of diversifying approaches for diverse populations, are working with adaptive pedagogies that can help all students to actively participate by drawing on their existing skills and knowledge (Millon-Fauré & al, 2022; Auger, 2007). Action-research projects in which researchers and schools work together to find solutions also raise optimism for better outcomes for young migrants, particularly when the views, experiences and learning processes of young migrants themselves are included.

One example of such a collaborative research project is presented in this article, where the translanguaging practices of 42 young migrants newly-arrived into schools in France and New Zealand are documented and discussed. The six concrete examples of situations in the French school illustrate how, at its simplest level, translanguaging pedagogy is about teachers being observant of, and responsive to, students’ plurilingual competencies — rather than framing their initial lack of proficiency in the language-of-schooling as an obstacle to participation.

Why may this point be of interest to teachers and teacher educators? As recent studies of language behaviours amongst multilingual students in monolingual school systems concur, the ways that students are already using their languages should inform how teachers design lessons, and how teachers flexibly adapt teaching to meet the linguistic needs of students (Smythe, 2022; García & Klein, 2016; Auger, 2014; Kibler & Roman, 2013). In this approach, the diverse language ecologies that already exist in schools become visible and valued, and are mobilised in classroom learning situations, with potentially better schooling outcomes for young migrants in the long-term.

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