

Liminal Legality and Educational Inequality: The Long Road to Social Justice for Indonesian Migrant Children on the Sabah-Sarawak Border

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines the liminal legal status of Indonesian migrant children in Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia, focusing on their educational challenges and the broader implications of their uncertain citizenship status. These children, born to migrant workers, often find themselves trapped between legality and illegality, without clear nationality recognition, which significantly limits their access to formal education and other essential services. Despite the palm oil industry's critical role in Malaysia's economy, which relies heavily on migrant labour, these children are systematically excluded from the formal education system. Alternative educational opportunities are provided through Community Learning Centres (CLC) run by local organisations and religious institutions, but these programmes lack formal recognition from the Malaysian government. As a result, these children often remain in a state of “semi-legal” existence, facing barriers to accessing fundamental rights such as education, healthcare, and legal protection. This paper highlights the complexity of their situation and draws on a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of these children. It also examines how their social identities are shaped by their ambiguous legal status, creating a sense of marginalisation and uncertainty. The study advocates for more inclusive and culturally sensitive policies that integrate Indonesian migrant children into Malaysia's education system and safeguard their fundamental rights and urges both countries to enhance cooperation on migrant rights, education, and social protection.

Keywords: Indonesian migrant children, liminal legality, educational inequality, Community Learning Centres, Malaysia

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Introduction

Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysian states located on the island of Kalimantan, have become meeting places for various ethnicities and cultures, especially since the enormous wave of migration from the Philippines and Indonesia in the 1970s (Allerton, 2014, 2017). Non-citizen migrant children face complex and multi-layered challenges, particularly related to their unclear legal status and access to education (Nesadurai, 2013). This study aims to explore the ambiguous zone between legality and illegality experienced by children of migrant workers from Indonesia in Kinabalu, Sabah, and Kuching, Sarawak, and how their experiences are influenced by factors such as age, gender, ethnic appearance, and the use of unofficial identity documents. Migrant children in Sabah and Sarawak are often trapped in uncertain situations, systematically excluded from Malaysia's formal education system. Although they may have access to education through alternative learning centres established by various organisations, including churches and mosques, the education they receive is often not officially recognised. This creates a situation in which migrant children must struggle to gain recognition and their rights as individuals, even though they do not have clear citizenship status (Gurowitz, 2000).

This study describes how their experiences of anxiety increase as they get older. This anxiety stems from their awareness of the difference in legal status between themselves and their peers who are Malaysian citizens. Allerton's (2024) research report, for example, tells of migrant children who often use fake birth certificates to attend Malaysian primary schools, while other studies reveal that they did not feel afraid when they were young, even though they did not have official identity documents (Allerton, 2024). These studies are their experiences, which show that migrant children often live in a liminal state, where they operate between legality and illegality, and must navigate various challenges that arise from their unclear status.

As explained earlier, schools are considered special places where children practise citizenship. However, in Malaysia, the explicit exclusion of migrant and refugee children from government schools makes it much more difficult for them to see and have the same form of cultural ownership as their citizen peers. Although Sabah and Sarawak are heavily dependent on foreign labour to support their economies, migrant and refugee children are often considered a "category error" that does not have the right to education. This policy contradicts the human rights principles enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees all children the right to a free basic education. Furthermore, we examine how the experiences of migrant children in Sabah and Sarawak can be understood through the lens of the concepts of "liminal legality" and "semi-legality" (Allerton, 2018). These concepts help explain how migrant children can claim conditional forms of legality, even though they do not have clear citizenship status.

Social and Historical Context of Migration in Sabah and Kinabalu

Large companies in Malaysia, such as Sabah Land and Development Berhad (SLDB), collaborated with the Indonesian Consulate in Sabah to establish CLCs for migrant workers' children. However, these facilities were often limited and isolated from city centres, creating a separate social space between migrants and the local community (Wahab & Abd, 2022). The history of migration also reflects different narratives between the country of origin and the destination country. From Malaysia's perspective, migrants are often portrayed as temporary workers who are here to meet labour needs, without the right to become permanent members of society. Conversely, from the perspective of the Indonesian migrant community, migration to Sabah and Kinabalu is seen as a continuation of historical cross-border relations.

Many migrant families emphasise that they have lived in Sabah for several generations, so they do not consider their presence to be merely temporary. This conflicting narrative creates a grey area, where migrant children are caught between Malaysia's economic claims and Indonesia's genealogical ties, but do not receive full recognition from either. The existence of migrant children in the history of cross-border migration shows that migration is not merely a movement of labour, but a complex social process.

According to Galli and Garip (2024), by placing children at the centre of analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the roles of age, intergenerational family dynamics, and social processes in shaping migration experiences. De Haas (2021) asserts that human mobility is an integral part of broader social change processes. They were born into families of plantation workers who struggled for a better life but grew up in uncertain legal conditions. With relatively low skills, they generally chose jobs such as domestic work, factory work, plantation work, and other unskilled work (Wulan et al., 2024). On the one hand, they were a product of Malaysian development policies that required cheap labour.

On the other hand, they were also a consequence of economic and social limitations in their regions of origin. Marotta (2025) argues that liminal or “in-between” conditions can shape individual identities and experiences in the context of migration. Thus, the history of migration in Sabah, specifically in Kinabalu, is not only about worker mobility but also about the formation of a liminal generation that continues to live in uncertainty regarding their identity and citizenship.

Economic and Social Factors Driving Migration

In terms of driving factors, unstable economic conditions, high poverty rates, and limited job opportunities in Indonesia, particularly in regions such as South Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara, are the main reasons families send their members to work in Malaysia. This finding aligns with Djafar and Hassan's (2012) findings, which showed that Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia are significantly influenced by income and unemployment, with positive effects in Indonesia and adverse effects in Malaysia. For many low-income families, migration is not only a choice but a necessity for survival. Low incomes in the local agricultural sector are insufficient to meet daily needs, while in Malaysia. However, plantation wages are considered low by local standards; they are still higher than what can be earned in the villages. On the pull side, Malaysia offers better economic prospects and strong labour demand in the palm oil plantation, construction, and agriculture sectors. Large companies offer stable employment opportunities, though these often come with long hours and minimal legal protections.

For migrants, the pull factors are not only wages, but also the availability of basic facilities provided by companies, such as housing, community schools, and basic health services. Although these facilities are limited, their existence suggests that migration to Malaysia is more promising than staying in their villages of origin, which are often constrained. Workers are often recruited through a system of recommendations from family members or friends who have already settled on the plantations, creating a chain of intergenerational migration. Wahyudi's (2017) research findings show that social capital in their networks develops through various channels, particularly friendship, kinship, neighbourhoods, communities, and ethnic groups.

The direct impact of these economic and social factors is clearly evident in the lives of migrant children, who are the generation born of their parents' choice to seek a livelihood in Malaysia, but who grow up with limitations. These children generally only have access to community schools provided by companies or non-governmental organisations. Although education is provided, the curriculum is limited and rarely recognised by the state. These limitations place migrant children in a vulnerable position; they enjoy the fruits of their parents' economic decision to migrate, but at the same time, they inherit an unclear legal status. Studies on migration between the two countries must encompass all relevant migration factors to obtain a comprehensive picture of migration (Wekke, 2013). Furthermore, these economic and social factors not only encourage migration but also shape the way migrant children view themselves. They grow up with hopes for a better life, but reality shows discrimination, exclusion and limited rights.

A child at the CLC recounted how his parents migrated because wages in Malaysia were higher. However, he still felt different because he lacked official documents to continue his education. This testimony shows that economic and social factors are not only determinants of migration but also the basis for the formation of migrant children's liminal identity in Sabah and Kinabalu. This situation emphasises the need for the state to play a role through bilateral cooperation (MoU) with Malaysia to ensure comprehensive protection for migrant workers, including their children, especially in vulnerable sectors such as domestic workers (Wijayanti & Turgel, 2021). The presence of migrant workers in Sabah and Kinabalu has become one of the important pillars of Malaysia's economic development. Palm oil plantations, which are a strategic industry and a major contributor to the country's foreign exchange, are highly dependent on migrant workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. Crowley's (2020) research on labour in Malaysia found that the initial focus on replacing foreign workers with local workers was not entirely practical, shifting instead to retaining foreign workers and training Malaysians for technical and managerial positions in the industry. The position of migrant children in the socio-economic context reveals deeper vulnerabilities. They are born in Malaysia, grow up in plantation environments, and interact with local communities, but their legal status is unclear. Without a valid birth certificate or passport, they cannot access formal education, continue secondary school, or work in the formal sector as adults.

The Position of Migrant Children in Malaysian Policy

Malaysian education laws require citizenship documents or official residence permits, which most migrant children do not have. As a result, they are systematically directed to Community Learning Centres (CLCs) managed by plantation companies, community organisations, or religious institutions. CLCs do provide learning spaces, but the Malaysian government does not formally recognise them. Thus, diplomas obtained from CLCs are not equivalent to those from public schools and therefore cannot be used to continue education at a higher level or to access formal employment. This limitation shows that the education of migrant children is positioned not as a means of social mobility, but as an instrument for the reproduction of plantation labour. According to Allerton (2020), this is a clear example of indifference on the part of individuals in power who should be more aware of their workers' children. This situation contrasts sharply with that of Malaysian children, who have full access to public schools and national education programmes. This difference creates a widening social gap, with migrant children trapped in a limited education system, while local children move on to formal education recognised by the state. In addition to limitations in education, migrant children also face social discrimination in their daily lives. They are often viewed as "outsiders," even though they were born and raised in Sabah and the Kinabalu region. This discrimination takes

many forms: differential treatment at school, negative stereotypes from the local community, and government policies that reinforce their position as a marginalised group. This situation gives rise to feelings of inferiority, alienation, and identity confusion among migrant children. Migrant workers and their families are often vilified, their contributions to Malaysia are rarely recognised, and there is no public discussion of migrants' rights (Gurowitz, 2000). Government Regulation (PP) No. 28 of 1990 on Primary Education stipulates a nine-year compulsory primary education programme to expand educational opportunities for all citizens and improve the quality of human resources. This programme is intended for all Indonesian citizens aged seven to fifteen, both within and outside Indonesia (Tilaar, 2014). However, they are excluded from formal education, directed to limited education pathways in CLCs and face social discrimination in their daily interactions. The state's selective policies reinforce their position as a marginalised group valued only as labourers, not as members of society. Thus, migrant children live in a situation of semi-legality that reflects legal uncertainty, limited fundamental rights, and institutionalised social discrimination.

This study employs qualitative methods, drawing on Creswell's (2018) phenomenological approach, to explore and understand the experiences of Indonesian migrant children in Sabah and Sarawak. It describes their daily lives, particularly how migrants consciously construct meaning from their interactions with other communities, especially the Malaysian community. This study will focus on migrants' experiences as individuals, examining how they subjectively perceive their experiences and assign meaning to the phenomena of legality and illegality from the perspectives of identity and citizenship. The phenomenological approach will provide an overview of the structure of thought, explore the values in life experiences, and discover the meaning and essence of experiences, rather than simply seeking explanations or measures of reality. The citizenship identity of migrant children is expected to be obtained from a first-person perspective through formal and semi-structured interviews.

This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Kinabalu, Sabah, and Kuching, Sarawak, with Indonesian migrant children who meet the research criteria. This study identifies four clusters of meaning. First, we asked the informants about their place of birth, including aspects they may not be aware of, and their knowledge of international relations between their country of origin and their country of residence. We also explored the impact of these relations on their lives in Malaysia. Second, we investigated the migration and legal processes, with questions about the reasons for emigration, the process of arrival in Malaysia, previous contacts in Sabah and Sarawak, the difficulties encountered in legalising their status, and their plans for staying in the country. Third, discuss the issue of citizenship applications, including whether the informants have applied or plan to apply for citizenship, the reasons behind this decision, and how they believe this affects their integration and access to rights, including voting rights. We also explore their experiences in the application process and their reflections on their identity and choice of citizenship. Fourth, discussing a sense of belonging and identity, including experiences of exclusion as foreigners and how factors such as accent, culture, gender, and economic or educational level affect their integration process.

The Educational Experiences of Migrant Children

Access to Formal Education

Indonesian migrant children in Sabah and Kinabalu are unable to attend school full-time. However, formal education is universally recognised as a fundamental right of children that should guarantee equal access to knowledge (Ramadhan et al., 2022). The main obstacle faced

by migrant children is related to official documents. Malaysian regulations require a passport, residence permit, or valid identity card for students who wish to attend public institutions. In addition to regulations, the complicated bureaucracy and high costs further burden migrant families. Many parents work on palm oil plantations for low wages. Passports are usually issued on the company's guarantee and are renewed only once a year. Thus, administrative barriers not only hinder access but also reinforce social inequality between citizens and migrants (Anggraeni et al., 2025). As a result, migrant children grow up feeling marginalised. They realise early on that their educational opportunities depend on documents they do not possess. This situation creates a psychological gap compared to local children and narrows their future social mobility (Song, 2010). In an effort to overcome these obstacles, many migrant families use emergency documents or borrowed identities issued by the community or consulate. One student said that the identity cards they had, as well as family cards and birth certificates, were obtained through the Indonesian consulate. This demonstrates a form of semi-legality, where some institutions recognise the documents, but they are not entirely valid within the Malaysian system. This strategy represents a form of agency or effort by families to advocate for their children's right to education, despite its legal fragility. In this way, children can still attend school, but without any guarantee of continuity (Menjívar, 2006).

Limited access to formal education has a direct impact on children's psychological development. They often feel different from their peers, bear the stigma of being an outsider, and lose their self-confidence. One respondent said: "If asked to choose, I would still choose Indonesia, because that is where I come from. However, I was born here." This statement confirms that the lack of documents leaves children living amid citizenship ambiguity: born in Malaysia, but not recognised by Indonesia, and without full access. Structurally, interrupted education reduces migrant children's opportunities to obtain formal skills and state-recognised qualifications. Without educational documents, opportunities to continue to higher levels of education are minimal. Ultimately, they are more likely to be absorbed into the same low-wage jobs as their parents. Thus, legal and administrative barriers to accessing formal education are not only technical problems, but also part of the political dynamics of citizenship. Education, which should be a path to social mobility, has instead become a mechanism of exclusion, placing migrant children in a "semi-legal" position in the society in which they grow up.

When access to formal schools is closed, alternative education becomes the most feasible solution for migrant children. This education comes from community initiatives, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that seek to guarantee children's fundamental right to continue learning. Although the state does not recognise its status, the existence of alternative education provides an important space to build fundamental skills while maintaining hope for a better future.

The Role of NGOs, Religious Institutions, and Communities

Many migrant children in Sabah access education through Community Learning Centres (CLCs). The presence of such institutions ensures that children continue to have access to basic literacy even though they are excluded from public schools (Febiola, 2023). Additionally, CLCs serve as social spaces. One student recounted how they made friends with the Sabah children. However, alternative education has its limitations. At the BomBalai CLC, there is only one teacher, Ms Ade, who has to teach all subjects, including Pancasila and Civics. In addition to teacher limitations, facilities are also minimal. As a result, the quality and scope of education are uneven, often stopping at the basic level (Loganathan et al., 2022). The Malaysian government does not recognise CLC certificates, so children who graduate cannot

continue their education to secondary school or university. This means that children who graduate from community schools receive recognition only within the community, without the legal right to continue their education beyond secondary levels (Tjandraningsih et al., 1996). Alternative education serves only as an emergency measure, rather than an official pathway that can alter the social status of migrant children (Hossain & Sengupta, 2009).

Nevertheless, the existence of CLCs reflects community solidarity. Religious institutions, consulates, and NGOs provide learning spaces to prevent children from becoming illiterate. Children still have hope, albeit in limited amounts. However, the “semi-legal” status of alternative education places them in a liminal situation. They can study, but they have no formal legitimacy. This hinders social mobility, and children grow up with the awareness that their education could end at any time if the state no longer allows tolerance.

Fundamental Rights, Services and Legal Uncertainty

Access to Basic Services

The fulfilment of children's fundamental rights is not limited to education; it also includes health, legal protection, and population administration. These three aspects are important foundations for ensuring the quality of children's lives (Romadhona, 2025). Access to healthcare services in Malaysia typically requires official documents, such as a passport or a residence permit. Without these documents, migrant children are categorised as foreigners and charged high fees at public hospitals. As a result, many migrant families prefer small private services, traditional medicine, or even delay treatment until their condition worsens. This policy creates structural discrimination because migrant children are treated differently based solely on their administrative status. Kaur's (2014) research shows that migrant workers and their families face serious obstacles in obtaining public health services due to unclear documentation. Thus, the health of migrant children is more often seen as an economic burden rather than a fundamental right. As a result, migrant children tend to have below-standard health. Low access to immunisation, nutrition, and medical care affects their growth and development.

In addition to health, legal protection is also uncertain. Mrs Lili, an Indonesian Consular official in Sabah, explained that many migrant children who are victims of violence or exploitation cannot be prosecuted due to a lack of documentation. Trauma and fear of facing the authorities cause many families to remain silent. As a result, a culture of silence emerges, where cases of violence, abuse, and exploitation are left without legal protection (Lim et al., 2024). This kind of trauma impacts psychological development, lowers self-confidence, and limits their ability to participate fully in social life (ILO, 2006). This condition shows how migrant children are in a situation of *liminal legality*, as described by Menjivar (2006), where they are present in society but do not have official protection when their rights are violated. The receiving country takes advantage of this legal uncertainty to maintain migrants' subordinate position. Without birth registration, they lose the fundamental rights typically afforded to citizens, including access to education, health care, and legal protection. *Statelessness* ultimately renders them “invisible” to the law.

On the other hand, some children are in a state of *contingent legality*, for example, having a passport valid for one year with a guarantee from a palm oil company. However, this status is temporary. Maureen and Blitz (2011) refer to this condition as a form of flexible exclusion, in which the state provides limited access while still maintaining restrictions on migrants' civil

rights. As a result, children live in a state of constant legal uncertainty. Although they are present in the social system (going to school, making friends, participating in community activities), this recognition is fragile. Menjivar (2006) refers to this condition as *the grey zone of legality*, where a person is present in the social system but lacks complete legal legitimacy. The state deliberately leaves them in an ambiguous position to maintain the boundary between citizens and non-citizens (Block et al., 2024). Legal limitations not only hinder formal access but also shape a pattern of life full of uncertainty and structural vulnerability, thereby reinforcing the cycle of social marginalisation and economic (Tjandraningsih et al., 1996).

The situation of migrant children in Sabah and Kinabalu contradicts the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which affirms that every child has the right to education, health, and protection without discrimination. However, in practice, migrant children face systematic barriers due to their legal status (Viviansari & Prameswari, 2019). The impact of this situation extends beyond the legal realm into the moral sphere. Migrant children grow up feeling uncertain and without any guarantee for the future. They learn from an early age that their rights can be ignored simply because of their weak legal status. Thus, the daily lives of migrant children in Sabah are clear evidence of the gap between universal human rights principles and the practice of state policy.

Navigating Identity Between Two Worlds

At home, they inherit the Indonesian language, religion, and cultural values; while outside, they adapt to local Malaysian customs. Hall (1990) asserts that identity is always fluid and negotiated in everyday experiences, so it is natural for migrant children never to have a single, definitive identity. This condition forms a “*hybrid identity*”, in which they are both Indonesian and Malaysian, but are not entirely accepted in either country (Bhabha, 1994). One student explained that they are accustomed to using two languages interchangeably: “When studying, we use Indonesian, but when talking with friends, we use more Sabahese.” This dual identity creates ambivalence, but also gives them the ability to navigate across cultures. Migrant children's sense of belonging is also ambivalent. On the one hand, they feel close to the local community because they attend the same school and play together. On the other hand, their attachment to Indonesia remains strong. Formal education, health insurance, and residency documents available to residents are not available to migrant children, causing them to experience “othering” or being labelled as outsiders (Castles & Miller, 2009). In addition to differences in status, migrant children also face social discrimination. Some students recounted experiences of being looked down upon by local children. Fox et al. (2013), using Berry's acculturation theory, explain that many migrant children are trapped in a position of marginalisation, neither fully accepted by the dominant culture nor fully able to access their culture of origin. Living in two worlds causes migrant children to experience a form of double consciousness (Baysu et al., 2011).

The situation faced by migrant children highlights the importance of inclusive policies that emphasise not only legal aspects but also socio-cultural dimensions. Alternative education run by communities, for example, can be strengthened by incorporating Indonesian cultural values, mother tongue, and community solidarity (Abdusamatov et al., 2025). This can be seen at CLC Sungai Balung, where teachers continue to teach Indonesian and Pancasila even though students speak Sabahese daily. One student said, “We use Indonesian in class, but when we play outside, we speak the Sabah language.” Community schools are strategic spaces for preserving Indonesian cultural roots while facilitating integration with the local environment.

Additionally, a hybrid education model that integrates the Indonesian and Malaysian curricula could be a long-term solution. With this kind of curriculum, migrant children can continue their education in both countries. This step not only provides opportunities for social mobility but also helps prevent the erosion of Indonesian national identity among younger migrant generations. A socio-cultural approach can also be a gateway to more humanistic diplomacy. Instead of emphasising purely political aspects, Indonesia can emphasise cultural proximity, history and kinship as a basis for negotiation. Thus, inclusive policies are not only legally and formally established, but also grounded in the social reality of border communities. This is the direction that must be considered if both countries truly want to resolve the issue of migrant children fairly: policies that integrate legal protection with a cultural approach, as well as education that prepares children not only to become citizens but also to become transnational actors capable of navigating two worlds.

Conclusion

Indonesian migrant children in Sabah and Kota Kinabalu experience structural vulnerability due to their ambiguous citizenship status, which restricts access to fundamental rights, particularly education, healthcare, and legal protection. Although many are born and raised in Malaysia, the absence of formally recognised citizenship leaves them in a “semi-legal” condition, reinforcing social exclusion and limiting future mobility. Reliance on Community Learning Centres (CLCs), while crucial, further marginalises them, as the education they provide is not fully integrated into the Malaysian formal system, thereby constraining pathways to higher education.

These findings highlight the urgent need for more inclusive national and regional policy responses. At the national level, formal recognition of CLCs and expanded access to public education and healthcare services are essential. At the regional level, stronger ASEAN cooperation is required to harmonise child protection standards, particularly through mechanisms such as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). Ensuring migrant children’s rights should be treated as a shared regional responsibility in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, so that they are no longer confined to a legal and social “grey area.” However, they can develop with dignity and equal opportunities.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Directorate of Research and Community Empowerment of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia for funding this research.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, was used to proofread and refine the manuscript's language. Its use was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are written initially and derived from the appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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