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# Role inversion: Equipping youth for empowerment to stabilise families in migrant communities

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Migration historically caused significant instability in communities, families, and the fundamental sense of human belonging as individuals navigated the transition from familiar to foreign environments. In these challenging contexts, it was observed that adult migrants often struggled with the assimilation process while children and young people proved uniquely capable of adapting quickly, learning new languages, and forging crucial community connections. This organic, situational shift effectively inverted the young migrant's traditional role, transforming them from individuals primarily *cared for* to accidental *caregivers* and family facilitators. This phenomenon raised a critical theological and practical problem: How could the church youth ministry be strategically repositioned to prepare and equip these young migrants to take up emergent community and leadership roles within their respective migrant groups? The research employed a literature-based study approach, systematically analysing existing scholarship in migration studies, family sociology, and practical theology to address this question. The analysis argued that the youth ministry should have been positioned to fulfil an instrumental role in caring for and stabilising migrant families. The study concluded that the potential of youth migrants represented a vital wing of the church that could play a critical role in mitigating the intense challenges faced by migrant families and communities. Finally, the article contributed to the journal's scope by engaging with Reformed theology in the quest to develop and enhance the quality of vulnerable groups, specifically focusing on the practical empowerment and quality-of-life improvement for migrants in a foreign nation through targeted youth ministry intervention.

**Contribution:** This article argues that youth ministry should be positioned to perform an instrumental role in caring for families in migrant scenarios.

**Keywords:** young migrants; accidental caregivers; youth ministry; family facilitation; Reformed theology.

## Introduction

The increasing magnitude of global migration indicates a defining feature of the contemporary world, with approximately 304 million international migrants reported in 2024 – a figure that has nearly doubled since 1990 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA] 2024:2; 2025:n.p.). This unprecedented movement, which includes a significant proportion of youth – approximately 11.3% of international migrants in mid-2020 – forces both the young and the old to grapple with adaptation in unfamiliar contexts (UN DESA 2025:n.p.; United Nations [UN] 2016:n.p.). The ease of integration into host societies is largely determined by the speed of adaptation, which is often tied to social interaction and participation in local economic activities (Çiftçi 2021:715–718). While adults frequently struggle with this adjustment, children and youth typically adapt more quickly (Wunseh 2018:54–55). Consequently, many young migrants assume pivotal roles as language brokers, translating and interpreting for their families, thereby building essential connections and fostering stability (Wunseh 2018:55). This phenomenon is recognised as role inversion or parentification, a dynamic where children take on developmentally inappropriate, often critical, caregiving responsibilities for their parents (Hooper, King & Fearnley 2014; Oznobishin & Kurman 2009).

To explore these shifting dynamics, this article employs a literature-based methodology, utilising a qualitative synthesis of existing academic research, theological texts, internet sources and international migration reports. The scope of this review specifically focuses on the intersection of youth sociology and Reformed theology to investigate how the roles of migrant youth are inverted from being *cared for* to serving as active co-workers within their families. Sources were selected based on their relevance to role inversion, migrant youth adaptation, and reformational views on

vocation, with priority given to peer-reviewed journals, UN demographic data from 2016–2025, and foundational theological texts to ensure a robust multidisciplinary perspective. While this approach provides a strong conceptual foundation, it is limited to the interpretation of secondary data and existing theoretical frameworks. As it does not include primary empirical data such as interviews or ethnographies, the findings primarily serve as a theoretical catalyst for future field research.

By rejecting a purely utilitarian view of young people as mere *instruments*, the article anchors its argument in Reformed theology, which views all persons as possessing inherent dignity and fulfilling a vocation within the estates of home, church, and community (Luther 1957 [1535]; Ross 2016). The swift adaptation of the youth can be understood not just sociologically but as an expression of their God-given capacity to serve their family, fulfilling their vocation as co-workers (1 Cor 3:9) within a shared family and community struggle. Consequently, the central question addressed is: How can youth ministry empower young migrants to assume leadership roles as co-workers and active members in their families and communities? This article argues that youth ministry must be positioned to perform a crucial, supportive role in capacitating young migrants to continue these essential roles as family co-workers and their stewardship roles, mitigating inherent vulnerabilities.

## Global migration trends, adaptation challenges, and the inverted role of the youth: A contextual and conceptual overview

A considerable number of sources, such as UN (2016), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA 2019:n.p.; 2024:2; 2025:n.p), and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2024) indicate the unprecedented movement of people across international borders, which destabilises communities, families, and the very essence of being human, as both the young and the old leave their homes for unfamiliar contexts (UN 2016:n.p.). International Organisation for Migration (2024) reports that 'there were around 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, which equates to 3.6% of the global population'. UN DESA (2024) notes that:

> In 2024, the number of international migrants worldwide stood at 304 million, a figure that has nearly doubled since 1990, when there were an estimated 154 million international migrants globally. (p. 2)

This means that in 2024, one of 30 people was living in a foreign nation (IOM 2024), while UN DESA's (2024:2) estimate stands at 3.7% of the global population. In 'Migration and Human Mobility: Key Global Figures of 2025', UN DESA (2025) provides estimated figures of international migrants in 2020, 2022, as well as in 2024 by age and gender. It reveals that in mid-2020, about 11.3% of international migrants were aged 15–24. In the same period, around 12.6% of international migrants were children below 18 years of age. At the end of 2022, about 68 594 265 international students were studying outside their countries, while by mid-2024, women and girls constituted 48% of international migrants across the globe.

In 'International Migration in South Africa: Trends Policy and Xenophobia', Misago (2023) notes that South Africa had 2 418 197 international migrants by 2022, which represented 3.9% of the country's population (StatsSA 2024). In 1996, immigrants accounted for 2.1% of the national population. However, in reality, the official statistics are much lower, as they exclude undocumented migrants. Importantly, most of the immigrants in South Africa originate from neighbouring African countries, mainly Zimbabwe, followed by Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, and Zambia, in ascending order (Maluleke 2025:10). Contending with the aforesaid regional countries, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria, respectively, contributed sizable numbers of citizens who migrated to South Africa (Maluleke 2025).

Consequently, when people voluntarily and involuntarily move to other countries in response to a plethora of push and pull factors of migration (Çiftçi 2021:715–718; IOM 2020:32; Paerregaard 2024:22), they struggle to adapt to their new environments (IOM 2020:32; Oucho n.d.:5; Paerregaard 2024:22). This is problematic because the duration of time that the migrants take to adapt to new environments determines the ease with which they can integrate into these host societies (Paerregaard 2024). In these circumstances, the ease of adaptability is mostly commensurate with one's exposure to social interaction and participation in the economic activities of the host country. When immigrants receive a warm welcome from the host communities, they find it easier to settle in, compared to those who are ostracised from the onset (Paerregaard 2024). Thus, Paerregaard (2024) observes that:

> Equally, in the receiving context migrants must adapt to new environments to find a place to live, get a job, and socialize with people with another social and cultural background. (p. 22)

In these circumstances, adults often struggle to adapt while children demonstrate a greater capacity to blend in quickly (Griffiths & Moll 2022:156; Wunseh 2018:54–55). Exploring these dynamics in the South African context, Wunseh (2018:55) notes that children frequently acquire new languages at a faster pace than their parents. As a result, they often serve as *language brokers*, acting as vital translators who help their families build social connections and foster stability in unfamiliar environments.

This shift in responsibility raises a critical question for this article: How is the role of children inverted from being recipients of care to being active co-workers within their families and communities? To address this, the following sections provide a conceptual definition of role inversion in migrant families and establish a theological framework of youth, vocation, and family within reformational thought. These foundations will then be used to examine the specific challenges international migrants may face and the pivotal role young migrants play in facilitating family adaptation.

## Understanding the role inversion in migrant families

The concept of *role inversion* (often termed parentification or role reversal) in immigrant families describes a dynamic where children take on developmentally inappropriate responsibilities, functioning as caretakers or leaders for their parents and family (Błasiak 2025; Hooper et al. 2014; Oznobishin & Kurman 2009). This shift typically occurs due to the rapid adaptation of children to the host country's language and culture, which surpasses that of their parents (Kuperminc, Oznobishin & Kurman 2009).

In this context, role inversion often manifests in two ways:

- Instrumental caregiving, where children assume practical tasks like language brokering (translating and interpreting for parents), handling bureaucracy, managing finances, or caring for younger siblings (Hooper et al. 2014; Oznobishin & Kurman 2009).
- Emotional caregiving, where the child becomes the parent's confidant or source of emotional support regarding the stress of migration and cultural adjustment (Hooper et al. 2014).

Among immigrant communities, this shift in family hierarchy is often an adaptive mechanism for survival, enabling the family to navigate a new society. However, while some research points to adaptive effects, a sustained reversal of roles can also carry risks for the child's psychological adjustment by restricting their time for developmentally appropriate social and emotional tasks (Błasiak 2025; Oznobishin & Kurman 2009).

### A theological framework: Youth, vocation, and family in reformational thought

Young people organically become family leaders because of their ability to adapt more quickly, and this should challenge scholars to reimagine the role of the youth ministry in preparing young people to take up leadership roles as co-workers and active members of their families and communities (cf. Griffiths & Moll 2022:156; Wunseh 2018:55). To move beyond a purely sociological perspective, this article incorporates Reformed theological ideas, focusing on the biblical perspectives of youth, vocation, and family.

### Reimagining young people as co-workers and active members

The term *instrument* is avoided as it implies a utilitarian view that may compromise young people's autonomy and dignity. A theologically appropriate understanding recognises young people not as mere tools but as full persons, created in God's image, possessing inherent dignity and distinct gifts (cf. Ross 2016).

In Reformed theology, particularly articulated by figures like Martin Luther and John Calvin, the concept of *vocation* (*vocatio*) is central, extending beyond church-specific roles to encompass all legitimate callings in life (Luther 1957 [1535]). Vocation is viewed as the way God works through human agents in various estates or spheres of life: the home, the church, and the community (Luther 1986 [1529]).

- **Family vocation:** Parents are called to their roles, and children are called to honour their parents (Eph 6:1–3). Crucially, the reformational view holds that the family is the primary school of faith, where intergenerational relationships are central to the transmission of faith and values (Luther 1986 [1529]; Miller & Smith 2017). When migrant youth assume new family responsibilities, they are actively living out a call to serve their family and neighbour (in this case, their parents), thereby fulfilling their vocation within the home estate (Barna 2025).
- **Biblical view of youth:** Scripture presents youth not as a deficit but as a time of significant potential for faith and leadership (1 Tm 4:12). Instead of viewing young people as merely being in transition, a theological perspective emphasises their present capacity to contribute to the body of Christ and the family (Strong 2009; Wunseh 2018).

The youth's adaptation, seen through a reformational lens, is not just a sociological function but an expression of their God-given capacity to serve as co-workers (1 Cor 3:9) within the family's shared struggle to thrive. Their actions are an exercise of their faith and love for their family, making them active members whose contributions are indispensable and fully valued within the household and community estates. Consequently, this study seeks to interrogate the ways the youth ministry can empower young people to assume leadership roles as co-workers and active members in migrant families and communities. Considering this, the article argues that the ministry should be positioned to perform a crucial, supportive role in caring for migrant families. The article will firstly provide an overview of the challenges migrants face when arriving in host countries and the role young migrants play in helping their families adapt. Ultimately, the article aims to assist the Church youth ministry in capacitating and positioning youthful migrants to assume or continue with family co-worker and stewardship roles, thereby mitigating against some inherent vulnerabilities.

## The challenges faced by international migrants and the role of young migrants in assisting their families to adapt

### Overview of the challenges of international migrants

#### Cultural shock

International migration refers to the movement of people from their places of origin to destinations across international borders (IOM 2015:35). When people engage in international migration, they are confronted with culture shock as they move from familiar to unfamiliar environments with distinct ways of life. Brinkmann (2017:31) concedes that defining

culture is difficult, as anthropologists and sociologists offer varied descriptions. This article adopts the view that culture is a set of beliefs, values, customs, and practices that define a specific society (cf. Brinkmann 2017:31–34). To use Brinkmann's (2017) words:

> Culture is the sum of internal beliefs and values reflected in external behaviours and symbols, which mutually influence one another – and arise from an epistemological source. (p. 31)

This epistemological source is what Neo-Calvinist theologian Kuyper (1931 [1898]) refers to as the *root* of a people's life, suggesting that culture is not merely a set of habits but an expression of a worldview rooted in one's religious or foundational convictions. Anthropologist Cristina De Rossi provides a comprehensive list of these cultural aspects, noting that culture 'encompasses religion, food, what we wear, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong […] and a million other things' (Live Science 2017). Because nationalities do not share identical cultural aspects, migrants encounter differences that trigger extreme discomfort, uncertainty, and disorientation (Australian Cultural Orientation Program [AUSCO] n.d; Çiftçi 2021:715). Berry's (1997:13) seminal work on acculturation strategies explains that culture shock is often the result of 'acculturative stress', where the migrant struggles to balance maintaining their original culture while participating in the host society.

As migrants feel worried and homesick, their psychological health and relationships suffer (AUSCO n.d.). Coping with this, requires immense effort (Çiftçi 2021:718). Frameworks from AUSCO (n.d.) and WorldRemit (2023) identify four phases of culture shock: honeymoon (euphoria), culture shock (crisis), adjustment (recovery), and mastery (biculturalism). In the crisis phase, immigrants face practical problems like language barriers and unemployment, leading to 'disappointment, frustration, embarrassment, fear, anger, guilt, nostalgia, irritability or depression' (AUSCO n.d.).

Bavinck (2008) offers a theological perspective on this struggle through the lens of 'common grace'. He argues that while all cultures possess God-given value, the displacement of migration disrupts the organic unity of a person's life within their original *sphere*. This disruption necessitates a painful period of adjustment as the migrant learns the social values and rules of the host nation (AUSCO n.d.). Çiftçi (2021:715) notes that immigrants are vulnerable because they, 'have lost their roots and memories and do not feel like they belong anywhere'. To adapt, the immigrant must essentially create a 'new character', a process requiring serious training and communication. As Çiftçi (2021:718–719) observes, 'the troublesome process of migration and the phase of getting used to new life are overcome by communication'.

However, the underlying question remains: How do immigrants successfully navigate this life when hampered by language barriers? (cf. Gogolin 2002:17; Griffiths & Moll 2022:156; Krumm & Plutzar n.d.:2). From a Kuyperian perspective, language is not just a tool but a vital part of, 'sphere sovereignty', allowing families to function as a stable unit within a larger society. The next subsection will elaborate on language as the primary cultural hurdle that complicates adaptation and integration in foreign contexts.

### Language barrier: A major obstacle to employment, healthcare, and integration

Brodowicz (2024a) and Krumm and Plutzar (n.d.:2, 13) note that many immigrants initially struggle to communicate in the languages of their host countries, yet it is a critical factor in gaining access to social and economic integration. Thus, although immigration can be perceived as an exciting adventure, it can be a difficult transition that is associated with language barriers (WorldRemit 2023). In most cases, most immigrants, whether voluntary or involuntary, arrive in the destination countries with little or no local language proficiency (WorldRemit 2023). In corroboration, Krumm and Plutzar (n.d.) note that:

> From the perspective of the receiving society there is a danger that migrants may be considered as 'speechless', because they are not able to use the language(s) of that country. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, one should be cognisant that immigrants can communicate just like any other person, but in languages that are different from those of the host nations (Krumm & Plutzar n.d.). However, in most instances, the immigrants' risk being misunderstood and misinterpreted, as they may not be able to communicate clearly and effectively. This not only affects immigrants' personal relationships with others (which hampers their acceptance and integration into the new societies), but it also affects their business interactions, workspace interaction, and the way they are perceived in institutions, such as banks, schools, and healthcare facilities. Language barriers also make it difficult for immigrants to access services, such as accommodation, employment and healthcare (Nunez 2014).

In an article titled 'Language Barriers Among Immigrant Communities', Aining (2023) notes that language barriers limit immigrants from accessing better job opportunities and quality health care services. In most instances, immigrants with low proficiency levels in native languages are excluded from jobs that require fluency. Further, employers may not be comfortable offering employment to immigrants who do not speak local languages because they will struggle to fit into the workspaces, thereby negatively affecting productivity (Nunez 2014). Given this trend of thought, immigrants are most likely to encounter discrimination in job hiring processes, thereby reducing their chances of securing jobs in the formal sector (Nunez 2014). In that regard, they are relegated to doing low-paying menial jobs that require little communication and interaction with other people (Nunez 2014).

In countries like South Africa, some employers are often accused of exploiting vulnerable immigrants by paying them wages that are below the statutory minimum benchmarks (cf. Abel 2017:1–42; Crush & Williams 2001:8). Thus, most of the immigrants who do low-skilled jobs in South Africa, supplement their incomes by working multiple jobs; this

causes them to burn out, as well as strain their social lives, as they hardly spend enough time with their families and friends (Magezi 2018:222–223). Unfortunately, most of the immigrants in this category may not be able to understand wage laws, safety regulations, and workplace policies; they hardly seek recourse when they are either mistreated or exploited by the employers (Aining 2023). Notably, as described below, language barriers limit immigrants from accessing quality healthcare (Aining 2023):

> Language barriers can limit access to quality healthcare for immigrants as patients who do not speak the language of their healthcare providers fluently may struggle to comprehend important medical information, such as medical instructions or prescriptions. It creates difficulties in accessing healthcare services. Immigrants who do not speak the language of their host country fluently may find it challenging to navigate the healthcare system, such as making appointments or filling out paperwork. This can lead to delays in receiving medical care, which can have serious consequences for their health. (n.p.)

Buarqoud (2018:n.p.) aptly defines language barrier as follows:

> Merely speaking, effective communication is the process of sending the right message to the right receiver through the right channel at the right time and place with the right feedback. Barriers to effective communication are obstacles or problems that break down the communication process because they prevent the flow of information between a sender and a receiver. (n.p.)

The foregoing definition perceives language as the most powerful tool of communication at any given time, and its purpose comprises the following (Buarqoud 2018):

> [*To*] communicate ideas, thoughts, opinion and emotional expression, social interaction, using the power of sound, recording facts, expression of identity. (n.p.)

Thus, Buarqoud (2018) argued, linguistic barriers are crucial, mainly because:

> [*T*]hey are often an impediment to building relationships with others. They can cause misunderstandings that lead to conflict, frustration, offense, violence, hurt feelings, and wasting time, effort, money, and lives of the people. (n.p.)

If this is granted, the issue of a language barrier can be considered as one of the biggest challenges for immigrants, because it can result in discrimination in terms of access to services and employment opportunities. This subjects immigrants to psychological challenges, as the resultant misunderstandings and misinterpretations can cause frustration, conflict, and social isolation (cf. Aining 2023).

On the other hand, the issue of language differences might lead to resentment of foreign nationals. For example, the natives may get frustrated by continually accommodating 'speechless' immigrants. Language is a very important prerequisite in the process of the immigrant integration into local institutions, communities, and societies (Krumm & Plutzar n.d.:13). For instance, Aining (2023) helpfully observes that:

> [*L*]anguage barriers can prevent immigrants from fully engaging with their host society, leading to social isolation and the formation of ethnic enclaves. Ethnic enclaves are neighbourhoods or communities where immigrants cluster together, and they can limit opportunities for interaction with members of the wider community. (n.p.)

In this case, I agree with Brodowicz's (2024b) understanding of language as the source of all people's cultures, as contended below:

> Language is one of the fundamental tools deployed by all human beings to communicate and to understand each other. Everybody innately acquires some sort of language in order to facilitate the communication and understanding necessary to negotiate the physical and social world. It manifests itself either vocally or visually through sign language or written symbols, or a combination of both. (n.p.)

In light of the foregoing discussion, scholars such as Wunseh (2018:55) and Griffiths and Moll (2022:156) argue that adult migrants struggle to adapt, while migrant children are capable of quickly and easily blending into new cultures and lifestyles. Consequently, the next section aims to establish what young migrants were doing to help their parents and relatives to adapt to new environments.

## The roles of migrant children in helping their families and communities to adapt to new environments

### How older children help their younger siblings with schoolwork

In their qualitative article titled, 'What about the family? The role and meaning of life in the integration of migrant children: Evidence from Slovenian schools', Medaric, Gornik and Sedmak (2022:5) reveal that older immigrant children in Slovakia help their younger siblings with their homework. For example, a 13-year-old girl from Kosovo, who had been in Slovenia for years, was cited as saying (Medaric, Gornik & Sedmak 2022):

> For me it was difficult, because my mother does not understand the language, and when I did not start school early at 7 or 7:30 I have to help my brothers and translate if they did not understand. (p. 5)

Firstly, immigrant children assume this role because most of their parents struggle with the language of the host country, which makes it impossible for them to help their children with their school activities effectively. In *Immigrant parents: How to help your child succeed in school*, O'Brien (2008) underscores how language barriers make it difficult for immigrant parents in the United States of America to support their children with their education, as elaborated below:

> Most immigrant parents are very enthusiastic about supporting their children's success in school. However, many of them have limited knowledge or information about how to help their children succeed in school. Immigrant parents with limited English and who have issues with cultural differences sometimes feel helpless. They often sit quietly during parent-teacher conferences, listening to the teacher and looking at a report card and folder with the child's name on it. The parents may

> understand some of the explanation but are unsure how to respond because of the language barrier. They may try to translate the words they want to say into English but ultimately decided not to speak up because of shame or embarrassment at their limited English abilities. For many of these parents, their attempts to be involved in their children's education are ineffective or impossible, so they do not participate unless there is a problem. (pp. 315–318)

Thus, in countries such as Slovenia, older migrant children help their younger siblings because they understand the language of the host nation better, as they would have been taught in a local language and, consequently, they are more adept at using it for learning and communication purposes (cf. Medaric et al. 2022:5ff.).

Crush and Williams (2001:8ff.), Abel (2017:1–42), and Magezi (2018:222–223) argue that many immigrants in South Africa find it difficult to get employment in the formal sector, which offers decent salaries. Thus, as a coping mechanism, some immigrant parents supplement their low (meagre) wages by taking up multiple jobs (Faull 2023:2; Magezi 2018:222–223). This demanding work schedule creates a critical lack of time for parental engagement. Indeed, the issue of lack of time is rife among immigrant parents in South Africa, who are often unable to help their children with school activities due to work and other commitments.

Secondly, the education systems and curricula of the host country might differ from those of the immigrants' native countries (Medaric et al. 2022:5). Thus, due to these differences, it follows that older children, who have gone through that same education system of the host nation, are in a better position to assist their younger brothers and sisters (Medaric et al. 2022). Given all these dynamics – the lack of parental time and the older children's familiarity with the local curriculum – it is apparent that the older children can play important roles in assisting their families to cope with the complexities of living in foreign countries (cf. Faull 2023). However, in a study titled 'Immigrant gaps in parental time investments into children's human capital activities', Ferrer and Mascella (2022; cf. Bornstein, Bohr & Hamel et al. 2020:6) note that some immigrant parents in Canada invest enough time in their 'household production or child service' (such as assisting their children with their school activities).

It is my firm conviction that when young immigrants assist their younger siblings with their school activities, they allow their parents to juggle multiple jobs, which enables them to meet the basic needs of their families. In this case, one can argue that young people can assume domestic leadership roles that can stabilise families. However, immigrant parents should be aware that they are their children's first and primary educators, and therefore their support of their children's achievement in school is critical, so they should help them with their school activities at home (O'Brien 2008:315). However, due to the reasons highlighted in this section, immigrant children are playing a critical role in stabilising their families in the context of education. This means that migrant 'families have to face their own acculturation processes and reorganize their roles in the host society' (González-Falcón et al. 2022:1).

Parental involvement in their children's education is defined as 'the resources parents invest in their child's learning experience with the goal of children's academic and/or behavioural success' (Medaric et al. 2022). Such support involves helping children:

> [*W*]ith homework at home, communication with teachers and attendance at school, such as participation in parent-teacher conferences, involvement in parent organizations, attendance at school events, and volunteering at school, as well as involvement in broader learning environments and extracurricular learning activities. (p. 3)

Unfortunately, the literature does not stipulate how immigrant children support each other in some of the above-mentioned situations, such as communication with teachers and attendance at school events. Hence, I suggest that qualitative studies can be conducted to determine the comprehensive roles that older migrant children are taking to support their siblings' education.

## Immigrant children act as interpreters for their parents

In qualitative research, titled 'A social psychological perspective on schooling for migrant children: A case within a public secondary school in South Africa', Griffiths and Moll (2022:156) indicated that the majority of migrant parents, who participated in the study, reported language barrier as one of the challenges that adversely affected the academic performance of migrant children in South African schools. Such children had no prior exposure to English or any of the native languages of South Africa, which are variably used as the languages of teaching and learning, particularly in the pre-primary and foundation phases, thus presenting a great obstacle to full participation in the education process (Griffiths & Moll 2022).

However, regardless of the learning challenges that migrant children experience due to the language barrier, a study by Wunseh (2018:54–55; cf. Melander & Oksana 2023) discovered that 'in many families children often acquire the new language at a faster pace than their parents'. Thus, in some contexts, migrant children function as translators on behalf of their parents and families, thereby playing the role of language brokering (Melander & Oksana 2023). This is buttressed by Mariana and Mireia (2022; cf. Melander & Oksana 2023; Antonini 2010:1–23), whose study discovered that:

> [*In Spain*], under the current migration reality, there are many children and teenagers who act as translators and interpreters for their parents and (extended) families or communities, without any training or acknowledgement. (n.p.)

Antonini (2015) further describes child language brokering as:

> [*I*]interpreting and translation activities carried out by bilingual children who mediate linguistically and culturally in formal and informal contexts and domains for their family and friends as well as members of the linguistic community to which they belong. (p. 88)

Wunseh (2018:20) concurs with Antonini (2015:88) by adding that language brokering is a situation whereby a multi-lingual young person or child assumes an interpretation, negotiation, advocacy, or translation role to members of their families, who cannot speak the main language in a new context or situation. This is prevalent in many countries, where immigrants find themselves in (Antonini 2015). For instance, Wunseh (2018) notes that in the South African context:

> Children who are considered language brokers engage in both translating and interpreting for instance, in reading bank statements, and in giving and explaining details of various transactions. (p. 55)

Immigrant parents in South Africa face significant challenges securing employment in the formal sectors that offer decent salaries (Abel 2017:1–42; Crush & Williams 2001:8ff.; Magezi 2018:217, 221). As a crucial coping mechanism, many are compelled to supplement their low (meagre) wages by taking up multiple jobs (Faull 2023:2; Magezi 2018:217). This demanding work schedule creates a critical lack of time for parental engagement; indeed, the issue of insufficient time to assist children with their school activities is rife among immigrant families, even when parents have the linguistic capacity to help. Compounding this time constraint, the education systems and curricula of the host country might differ substantially from those of the immigrants' native countries (Medaric et al. 2022:5).

Due to this difference in curriculum, older children who have already progressed through the host nation's education system are in a better position to assist their younger siblings (Medaric et al. 2022). Given the convergence of parental time scarcity and the older children's acquired local expertise, it is apparent that these older children play indispensable roles in assisting their families to cope with the complexities of living in foreign countries (cf. Faull 2023). However, in a study titled *Immigrant gaps in parental time investments into children's human capital activities*, Ferrer and Mascella (2022; cf. Bornstein et al. 2020:6) note that some immigrant parents in Canada invest enough time in their 'household production or child service' (such as assisting their children with their school activities).

Nevertheless, Wunseh (2018:54–55) found out that migrant children who operate as language brokers in South Africa are sometimes exposed to many dangers and abuse. In some instances, these children translate and interpret for their parents as they conduct illegal business transactions. This has the potential of endangering the rights and security of language brokering children. Sometimes, the language brokering role exposes the children to emotional stress. This is captured by Ceccoli (2022), who cites one of the migrant children in this situation:

> I grow up with fear, worry and uncertainty. Every time when I need to help our parents to translate letters or do interpreting because I get all stressed up and worry if I have done the correct translation or interpretation. (p. 45)

The foregoing citation succinctly depicts the emotional pressure and fear that migrant children are subjected to when partaking in the translation and interpretation roles for their parents or guardians.

### Other roles played by migrant children in support of their families

A study by Melander and Oksana (2023) noted that migrant children, born and raised in Poland and Romania, translated and interpreted for their parents and other immigrants in housing cooperative meetings. The children also spoke to civil society organisations on behalf of their parents. Some of the activities that these children were doing on behalf of their parents and relatives include the following (Melander & Oksana 2023):

- Accompanying parents to hospitals or public healthcare services.
- Double-checking documents such as university application forms.
- Translating during formal and planned meetings.

Based on the above discussion, the role of migrant youth has inverted: they are transforming from recipients of care into care providers. This organic process, where young people become family leaders due to their quick adaptation, challenges scholars to reimagine the role of the Church's youth ministry in migrant communities. Church youth ministry – a specialised area focused on the holistic development, spiritual formation, and pastoral care of young people (Barna Group 2023; Clark 2011) – must now capacitate young migrants to take on community and family leadership roles. The following section will therefore discuss the current actions of youth ministry and propose strategies to position young migrants for instrumental caregiving roles within their families.

## Actionable recommendations for positioning migrant youth as family caregivers

The Church youth ministry must pivot its focus to recognise and intentionally equip migrant youth to execute the critical caregiving and leadership roles they already perform within their families and communities. While acknowledging the need for further qualitative research to fully map the extent of these roles (through in-depth interviews or focus groups with both parents and youth), the following clear, actionable recommendations are proposed for the ministry.

### Implement comprehensive academic and language empowerment programmes

The ministry must address the pervasive language barrier that restricts migrant parents' access to job opportunities, quality healthcare, and their ability to provide effective

educational support. Recognising that older migrant children often step in to stabilise the family by assisting younger siblings with schoolwork – thereby creating opportunities for parents to work multiple jobs – the Church should formally strengthen this capacity by way of:

- Tutor support interventions: The ministry must initiate empowerment training programmes (in Church and non-Church spaces) specifically designed to enhance the older youth's curriculum, subject-specific, and pedagogical skills. While this is a costly endeavour, potentially requiring hired tutors, it offers a crucial opportunity to position the youth for family stabilisation.
- Language and academic assistance: The ministry has an obligation to mobilise resources to provide young migrants with language classes and other academic-related assistance. This not only capacitates the youth to excel in their own studies but also strengthens their vital roles as educational supporters and language brokers for their parents.

This emphasis on empowerment aligns with the views of various scholars, who note that when migrant youth adapt quickly and are empowered, they 'can yield positive contributions to the economy, development and cohesion of the countries of origin and destination' (IOM 2020:32). Likewise, Msebi (2021:5) argues that 'churches need to ensure that young people are trained, equipped and given opportunities to serve'.

### Boost informational and institutional awareness (capacity building)

A central element of empowering vulnerable migrant families is providing them with access to critical information. The youth ministry should initiate capacity building and intraformational awareness programmes:

- Institutional mapping: This involves providing detailed information on the location and function of various local support institutions and authorities essential for adaptation and integration, such as municipalities, police stations, banks, clinics, doctors, human rights advocates, civil societies, and lawyers.
- Expert engagement: The church should facilitate easy access to these services and boost awareness by inviting experts (police officers, nurses, doctors, human rights lawyers, bankers, and municipal managers) to address the migrant youth.

By empowering the youth with this knowledge, the church positions them to perform instrumental caregiving and leadership roles – not just as tutors or childminders but as reliable navigators who can lead their families to the correct institutions when challenges like xenophobia, legal issues, or accommodation problems arise. Community empowerment is achieved through this 'community participation, capacity building and access to appropriate information' (Ahmed & Abu Talib 2016; Manyaka-Boshielo 2018:5; Van der Westhuizen, Smith & Beukes 2019:3).

### Facilitate economic and technical skill acquisition

The church youth ministry should leverage its institutional influence to address financial stability – a major source of stress for migrant families.

- Skills training and partnerships: The ministry should partner with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to equip young migrants with technical skills for formal employment or entrepreneurship.
- Microfinance access: efforts should include facilitating access to small business start-up capital from micro or macro finance institutions.

This economic empowerment eases the financial burden on parents, potentially reducing the need for multiple jobs, and allowing adults more time for social life, language classes, and involvement in their children's school activities, thus creating a holistic environment for adaptation and family stability (IOM 2020:32; Manyaka-Boshielo 2018:5; Msebi 2021:5; Van der Westhuizen et al. 2019:3).

## Conclusion

The experience of migration is inherently destabilising, rupturing communal ties and challenging the sense of self for adults struggling in unfamiliar contexts. Yet, within this instability, migrant children emerge not as passive recipients of aid, but as proactive agents of family resilience. The evidence clearly establishes that young migrants are crucial assets, capable of rapidly building connections, mastering new languages, and serving as essential cultural and linguistic brokers for their parents.

This finding presents the church youth ministry with a profound missional imperative far exceeding traditional religious programming. The ministry's role is not simply to provide comfort, but to become an *active architect* of stability within vulnerable communities. By operationalising the recommendations – specifically through providing high-level academic and language support, acting as a crucial information hub linking youth to essential governmental and civil society resources, and brokering access to economic skills training and microfinance – the church directly positions itself in the vanguard of social care.

Ultimately, by investing in the empowerment of older migrant youth, the church is fulfilling a dual mandate: honouring the scriptural call to care for the vulnerable, and simultaneously cultivating a generation of capable, informed, and economically viable leaders. This is not charity; it is a strategic investment that stabilises the family unit, enhances educational outcomes for all children, and accelerates the successful integration of immigrants into the host society. The youth ministry acts therefore as a pivotal force, transforming the trauma of displacement into a launchpad for family and community flourishing. This strategic action ensures that the church remains relevant and indispensable in the dynamic and challenging context of contemporary migration.

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## CRediT authorship contribution

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## Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

## Disclaimer

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