



# QUALITATIVE SURVEY REPORT

*Left without a diploma:* challenges facing migrant and undocumented children in Curaçao's education system.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This qualitative research study, based on discussions held with four focus groups in July–August 2025, examined the experiences of key stakeholders with undocumented migrant children in Curaçao regarding access to education, the right to obtain a diploma and other challenges they might face. The sessions involved school directors and social workers, psychologists, legal professionals, migrant children and parents.

## Key Findings

**Systemic Barriers:** Migrant children without legal documentation can enroll in schools but face obstacles in receiving diplomas, accessing health care, and benefiting from psychological support. Administrative requirements (CLOA system, ID numbers) create delays and stress.

**Language and Integration Challenges:** Older arrivals struggle significantly with Papiamentu and Dutch, limiting participation in lessons. Existing transitional programs like Springplank lack sufficient structure and coverage.

**Mental Health and Well-being:** Uncertainty about legal status, risk of deportation, and diploma ineligibility cause stress, demotivation, and absenteeism. Limited or no access to psychological care exacerbates trauma and emotional struggles.

**Discrimination and Belonging:** Children reported racism, exclusion, and being labeled 'illegal,' impacting their sense of belonging and motivation.

**Family and Socioeconomic Pressures:** Parents face precarious employment and high costs for legalization, limiting their ability to support children academically. Families without SVB insurance struggle with health care and rely on NGOs or limited local programs.

**Policy Gaps:** There are no clear national guidelines for diploma eligibility of undocumented children. Schools are left to 'figure it out,' while enforcement of compulsory education is weak.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Key Recommendations

1. **Policy & Legal Clarity:** Develop clear government guidelines on diploma eligibility and education rights of undocumented children, aligned with international child rights obligations.
2. **Central Support Mechanism:** Establish a central coordination office/contact point for schools and families, with structured referral systems.
3. **Access to Services:** Ensure access to basic psychological and health services regardless of legal status; integrate school-based psychologists/social workers proportionate to need.
4. **Language & Integration Programs:** Expand structured transitional programs for all age groups, with language support in Papiamentu and Dutch.
5. **Anti-Discrimination Measures:** Introduce teacher training, awareness campaigns, and inclusion policies to reduce racism and exclusion in schools. Maybe also introduce a child-friendly hotline under the Ministry of Education, linked to social workers/psychologists, so children can report discrimination safely.
6. **Support for Families:** Simplify and reduce the cost of legalization processes; consider student permits or transitional residency pathways.
7. **Monitoring & Research:** Strengthen data collection on undocumented students to inform responsive and inclusive policymaking.

The findings highlight an urgent need for coordinated legal, psychosocial, and educational reforms to prevent exclusion and ensure migrant children's right to learn, graduate, and contribute to Curaçao's society.

# INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns have grown in [Curaçao](#) about the situation of migrant and undocumented children within the education system. While compulsory education ensures that most children can attend school regardless of their legal status, many face significant barriers when it comes to completing their studies and obtaining a diploma. Reports from educators, social workers, parents, and the children themselves highlighted recurring challenges: undocumented students can follow classes but are often denied official graduation certificates because they lack legal documentation.

The absence of a diploma has far-reaching consequences. It prevents young people from accessing further education, limits their employment opportunities, and contributes to a cycle of exclusion and vulnerability. Beyond the educational impact, the situation also affects children's mental health, motivation, and sense of belonging, often leaving them feeling marginalized and without a future.

Considering these challenges, [Human Rights Defense Curaçao \(HRDC\)](#) commissioned this research to better understand (and also document) the issue from multiple perspectives. By organizing four focus group discussions with school professionals, legal and psychosocial experts, children, and parents, the study aimed to capture the voices of those most directly involved. The findings provide valuable qualitative insights into the barriers undocumented children face in education, the emotional and social impact of being denied diplomas, and the practical recommendations from stakeholders on how to move forward.

This report presents the results of these focus groups, highlighting both the challenges and the opportunities for reform. It is intended as a tool to inform the [Ministry of Education \(OWS\)](#), policymakers, educators, and civil society actors, and to strengthen advocacy for an inclusive education system in which every child, regardless of legal status, can learn, graduate with a diploma, and contribute fully to society.

# METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE

**This study adopted a qualitative research design, focusing on the lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings of participants rather than producing statistical measurements.**

Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to provide numerical evidence and generalizable results, qualitative research is exploratory in nature. It highlights individual and collective voices, providing insights into how participants perceive and experience the challenges of undocumented and migrant children in [Curaçao](#).

The findings therefore should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all migrant families but rather as an indication of prevailing themes, concerns, and perspectives among those engaged.

To gather these insights, [the research team led by Simone de Brabander, director of HRDC, and organized by Naomi Cijntje \(project officer HRDC\) and Nicole Brown \(help desk officer\)](#) organized four focus group discussions between July and August 2025. In total 27 respondents participated. This number is considered sufficient and appropriate for a qualitative research study.

Each session brought together key stakeholders with different relationships to the issue of migrant children's access to education and diplomas. The diversity of participants ensured that the study captured perspectives from the institutional, professional, personal, and lived-experience angles.

# METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE

## Focus Group 1: School Directors and Social Workers

Held on July 18, 2025, this session included six participants: one coordinator of upper secondary education with 22 years of experience, one high school director with 15 years in the role, and four social workers with between 4 and 13 years of experience across institutions such as Dienst Openbare Scholen (DOS) and VPCO. This group provided in-depth understanding of the administrative and educational challenges schools face when working with undocumented students.

## Focus Group 2: Psychologists, Social Workers, and 1 Legal Professional

Conducted on July 19, 2025, with six participants: two clinical/educational psychologists with over 20 years of experience, one school social worker covering multiple schools, a social worker at PSGE/SMAT with more than 20 years in the field, an employment lawyer specializing in children's rights, and a private educational psychologist. This session brought together perspectives on the mental health and legal implications of undocumented status for children.

## Focus Group 3: Children's Session

Organized on August 5, 2025, with nine participants aged between 14 and 20 years. The group included students from Colombia, Venezuela, and Jamaica, as well as two Curaçao-born participants with Jamaican parents. They were enrolled in schools such as de Springplank, Scholen Gemeenschap Otrobanda, Maris Stella VSBO, and Pierre Lauffer College. This session provided direct insight into the daily realities, hopes, and fears of undocumented children themselves.

## Focus Group 4: Parents' Session

Also held on August 5, 2025, with six participants. The parents were from Jamaica and Venezuela, with ages ranging from late 20s to early 40s, and employed in informal or low-wage sectors such as domestic work, kitchen assistance, and hairstyling. Some held temporary permits while others remained undocumented. They provided perspectives on family struggles, legal obstacles, and the emotional toll of raising undocumented children.

The focus groups were conducted in Papiamentu, Spanish, and English, depending on participants' preferences, and each session lasted between 1–2 hours. Discussions were guided by semi-structured questions, allowing participants to share both personal experiences and reflections on systemic challenges.

By design, this methodology provides rich qualitative insights into the challenges of undocumented migrant children in education. While the findings cannot be generalized to all migrant children on the island, they offer a valuable indication of the key issues at stake, recurring patterns, and potential solutions as identified by those most directly affected.



# KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS BY FOCUS GROUP

In this chapter you will find the themes and findings per each focus group, summarized.  
The complete Q&A you will find in the appendix.

## 4.1 SCHOOL DIRECTORS & SOCIAL WORKERS

School directors and social workers reported that undocumented children are identified early through the [CLOA registration system](#), but the process is administratively burdensome and often frustrating. While compulsory education allows these children to enroll, missing documentation creates delays, repeated re-entry in the system, and confusion for school staff. Participants also highlighted how stricter government controls (introduced to prevent “ghost students”) inadvertently place additional stress on children who already face exclusion.

Language emerged as a major challenge. Teachers struggle to communicate with migrant children who arrive as adolescents and cannot participate fully in lessons because of limited Dutch or Papiamentu. [Transitional programs such as Springplank](#) exist but are inconsistently structured and not available for all age groups. This leaves many children, especially older arrivals, without adequate support for integration.

The psychological toll was clear. Students face stress from not knowing whether they will graduate or receive diplomas. Some begin working to support themselves, which further distracts from education. Social workers noted the lack of access to psychological care due to the absence of [SVB insurance](#), which prevents referrals. While some NGOs (Skuchami, Salu pa Tur, IOM) provide limited alternatives, budgets are stretched. Older students tend to show more resilience, but younger children without parental support are highly vulnerable.

Participants also described weak enforcement of compulsory education laws, limited parental involvement, and an absence of clear guidance on diploma eligibility. In practice, schools sometimes “[find their own solutions](#)” — granting diplomas informally or issuing statements. However, this lack of clarity leaves both schools and children in a precarious position.

Directors and social workers called for clearer policies, more staff and funding, better mental health access, and a central government contact point to streamline referrals and coordination.

## 4.2 PSYCHOLOGISTS, SOCIAL WORKERS, LEGAL PROFESSIONAL

Psychologists and social workers emphasized that undocumented children frequently present with emotional and behavioral issues rooted in trauma, migration stress, and exclusion. Anxiety, fear of deportation, and identity struggles are common, particularly among adolescents. The group noted that cultural factors also shape family dynamics: Latin families tend to be more proactive in seeking help, while Jamaican families may normalize stricter discipline, and Asian families often avoid external support.

Access to psychological and healthcare services was identified as a major structural barrier. [Children with SVB insurance can access care, but undocumented children without insurance depend on NGOs, private cash payments, or makeshift arrangements.](#) Long waiting lists, lack of specialized testing, and high costs leave many without diagnosis or treatment — for example, children suspected of autism often go undiagnosed because private testing is unaffordable.

The impact of not receiving a diploma was described as devastating, often leading to demotivation, depression, and school dropout. One example shared was a girl who, upon being told she could not graduate, stopped trying altogether. The experts linked this directly to children's right to identity and education under the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) — obligations [Curaçao](#) has ratified but not fully implemented.

They recommended stronger political prioritization of children's rights, clear school guidelines, and increased funding for psychosocial services. Every school, they argued, should have a psychologist and social worker, not based on student numbers but on real need. They also urged for systemic inter-agency collaboration, training for teachers, and consistent public outreach to ensure families know their rights and available services.

## 4.3 CHILDREN'S SESSION

Children themselves expressed mixed but often painful experiences. Many enjoyed going to school and praised the quality of education, but the knowledge that they could not receive a diploma without legal documents weighed heavily on their motivation. Several openly questioned whether continuing was *"worth it,"* with one saying: *"It's like my education stops here, I can't keep going, so why continue?"*

Discrimination was a recurring theme. Students reported being mocked in class, told to *"go back to your country,"* and labeled *"illegal."* Some said racism was *"everywhere,"* including from peers and sometimes reinforced by classroom discussions. These experiences left them feeling excluded and uncertain about belonging. While a few had supportive teachers, most felt that educators were aware of their undocumented status but did little to advocate for their rights or fight for their diplomas.

Despite these barriers, some of the children shared ambitions of becoming orthodontists, architects, and psychologists. They linked their future hopes directly to legal recognition, saying their biggest wish was simply to *"exist legally,"* obtain an ID or passport, and have the chance to graduate and work. Their testimonies revealed a powerful mix of resilience and despair: determination to succeed where possible, but demotivation when confronted with systemic exclusion.

## 4.4 PARENT'S SESSION

Parents described both pride in their children's education and deep frustration with systemic barriers. Many said their children enjoyed school and sometimes received support from teachers, social workers, or the Springplank program. However, they highlighted inconsistent access to psychological care, with one mother sharing how her child's sessions were suddenly cancelled without explanation.

Parents agreed that undocumented status profoundly impacts children's motivation. Some had older children who dropped out once they learned they could not obtain a diploma. Others saw their children repeat years or express the desire to quit and start working instead. Financial strain compounded the problem: with limited work opportunities and low wages, parents struggled to provide stability while also worrying constantly about deportation.

They expressed no or very limited knowledge about diploma rights and found the legalization process impossibly costly and complex. One mother explained that it would cost her **36,000 guilders per year** to meet the requirements for her four children, an unfeasible amount. Others described being told to open businesses to stay legally, which is a high cost with no guarantees of success.

Parents called on government to simplify legalization, create affordable student permits, and make diplomas accessible for all children regardless of status. They emphasized their willingness to contribute to Curaçao's economy but felt blocked by rigid systems. As one concluded: *"We want to contribute to the island, but they make it very hard for us."*



# CROSSCUTTING FINDINGS

While each focus group provided a unique perspective, several themes consistently emerged across the discussions. These cross-cutting findings highlight the systemic nature of the challenges faced by undocumented children in Curaçao's education system.

## 1. Legal Status as a Barrier to Education

Across groups, participants agreed that the inability to obtain diplomas without legal documentation is the most damaging barrier for undocumented children. It directly affects their motivation, mental health, and long-term opportunities. Teachers, psychologists, parents, and the children themselves described how this policy undermines the very purpose of compulsory education, leaving students disillusioned about their future.

## 2. Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

All groups emphasized the psychological toll that uncertainty and exclusion place on children. Anxiety, stress, and demotivation were recurring concerns. Social workers noted the lack of SVB insurance prevents referrals for care, while psychologists warned that untreated trauma and emotional distress often manifest in behavioral or academic difficulties. Parents and children spoke directly about fear of deportation, racism, and the pain of feeling *"invisible."*

## 3. Language and Integration Challenges

Language barriers were seen as a critical obstacle to inclusion. Children arriving at older ages often struggled to catch up in Papiamentu and Dutch, which limited their classroom participation. While the Springplank program offers some support, participants across groups described it as inconsistent, underfunded, or unavailable to older students. Without strong language support, integration remains partial and students risk falling behind.

## 4. Discrimination and Exclusion

Experiences of racism and being labeled *"illegal"* were reported in both the children's and parents' sessions and confirmed by educators and social workers. Discrimination ranged from peer bullying to systemic exclusion through school policies. Teachers themselves were seen as inconsistent in their support, with some actively helping undocumented students while others turned a blind eye.

# CROSSCUTTING FINDINGS

## 5. Weak Support Structures and Coordination

Across groups, frustration was expressed about the lack of a clear system to guide schools and families. Schools are left to improvise, NGOs have limited capacity, and government ministries provide little practical support. Participants consistently called for a central coordination mechanism or referral point to streamline communication and avoid duplication or neglect.

## 6. Family Strain and Limited Resources

Parents and children described the heavy financial and emotional toll of undocumented status. Families often survive on low wages from informal work while navigating costly, complex legalization procedures. The stress of poverty and uncertainty filters down to children, undermining their academic focus and well-being. Educators and psychologists confirmed that these home challenges directly affect school performance.

## 7. Gaps Between Policy and Practice

Finally, all groups noted the contradiction between Curaçao's international obligations to protect children's rights and the realities on the ground. While compulsory education is legally guaranteed, undocumented children remain blocked from completing their education. Professionals called this a gap not of law, but of practice and implementation, urging government to prioritize children's rights in concrete, enforceable ways.

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

In this chapter, HRDC gives recommendations on the way forward. Some of the recommendations come from the focus groups.

## 1. Government policy reform: issue clear legal and policy guidelines on diploma eligibility; align practice with international child rights.

Across all focus groups, participants stressed the urgent need for clarity in government policy regarding undocumented children's right to diplomas and education. School directors explained that, in practice, some students are allowed to graduate while others are denied, leaving schools to *"figure it out"* themselves. This lack of consistency creates uncertainty not only for institutions but also for children who lose motivation when told they may not be eligible for graduation. Legal professionals pointed out that Curaçao has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obliges the government to guarantee children's rights to education and identity.

A clear policy framework is therefore essential to bridge the gap between international commitments and local practice. The government should explicitly define the rights of undocumented students to enroll, progress, and obtain diplomas, ensuring that schools no longer operate in a legal grey zone. By making these rules transparent, the Ministry of Education would reduce confusion, strengthen accountability, and provide undocumented children with a realistic path to completing their studies.

## 2. Education system strengthening: create structured integration programs; mandate psychosocial staff; provide teacher training.

Teachers, social workers, and psychologists alike emphasized the importance of better integration mechanisms within schools. Language was identified as one of the biggest obstacles, particularly for older children arriving with little knowledge of Dutch or Papiamentu. The existing Springplank program, while useful, was described as inconsistent and lacking structure. Directors and parents agreed that transitional programs should be expanded to all age groups and strengthened with clear policy backing.

In addition, participants recommended that every school should have access to a psychologist and a social worker — not based on the number of students, but on the actual needs of the community they serve. Several noted that schools with higher concentrations of undocumented children carry heavier workloads and require proportionate staffing and resources. Training teachers to recognize trauma, address discrimination, and create inclusive classrooms was also viewed as crucial. As one psychologist put it, *"Collaboration between schools and care providers is the only way to make it work."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

## 3. Access to services: guarantee healthcare and psychosocial support regardless of status; establish a central coordination office.

A recurring theme across all focus groups was the limited access undocumented children have to basic services such as healthcare and psychological support. Social workers explained that without an SVB card, referrals are impossible through the formal system. While NGOs such as Skuchami, IOM, and Salu pa Tur offer valuable support, their resources are limited and often over-stretched. This leaves many children without treatment for trauma, depression, or developmental issues such as autism.

To address this, participants proposed that access to essential health and psychosocial services be guaranteed regardless of a child's documentation status. Schools could serve as a gateway, with on-site staff coordinating referrals to a central government-supported system. Establishing a clear referral pathway, possibly through a central coordination office, would give schools, families, and service providers clarity on where to seek help and ensure that no child is excluded due to administrative barriers.

## 4. Family & legal support: simplify legalization; reduce costs; introduce student residency permits; strengthen outreach.

Parents were vocal about the challenges they face navigating the legalization process. Many described it as expensive, bureaucratically complex, and often risky, with requirements such as opening businesses or providing large financial guarantees. For families already working in unstable, low-wage jobs, such conditions were impossible to meet. The financial stress and constant fear of deportation weighed heavily not only on parents but also on children, who often internalized their families' insecurity.

To reduce these burdens, participants suggested simplifying legalization pathways, lowering costs, and introducing specific student permits that would allow children to continue their education without fear. Parents also requested practical support such as transport subsidies to ensure their children could attend school consistently. By addressing legal and economic barriers at the family level, the government would not only improve children's educational outcomes but also enhance broader social stability. As one parent summarized: *"We want to contribute to the island, but they make it very hard for us. Why not legalize us, we are here for so many years already, walking around, undocumented. If we are legal, we can support the economy better."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

## 5. Monitoring & Research: Collect data systematically and evaluate interventions regularly.

Finally, many participants across groups stressed the need for reliable data and ongoing evaluation. At present, little is known about the exact number of undocumented students, their educational trajectories, or their psychosocial needs. School directors argued that without systematic research, policies risk being reactive rather than proactive. Psychologists also emphasized that interventions should be evidence-based and continuously evaluated to ensure they reflect the lived realities of migrant children.

Regular monitoring would allow the [Ministry of Education](#) to track progress, identify where resources are most needed, and adapt programs accordingly. Research should also be inclusive of all undocumented groups, not just Latino communities, to reflect the full diversity of migrant children in Curaçao. By embedding research and monitoring into policy, Curaçao can move towards a more equitable, data-driven approach that ensures no child is left behind.



## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm what schools, families, and professionals have long observed: while undocumented children in Curaçao are formally allowed to enroll in school, they face systemic barriers that undermine their right to complete their education and obtain a diploma. These barriers are not only administrative but deeply personal — they affect children’s mental health, their motivation, their family life, and their ability to envision a future.

The testimonies of school staff underscored the daily struggle of working without clear guidelines, forced to improvise when faced with diploma eligibility questions. Psychologists and legal experts highlighted the psychological toll of exclusion and the contradiction between Curaçao’s international commitments and its local practices. Most powerful of all were the voices of the children and parents themselves, who expressed both resilience and despair: determination to succeed against the odds, but also fear, frustration, and hopelessness when faced with systemic denial of their efforts.

As a qualitative study, these findings cannot claim to represent every migrant family on the island. But they offer a vital snapshot of lived experiences, revealing consistent patterns of discrimination, exclusion, and unmet need. The study also highlights practical solutions: clearer policies, more accessible legal pathways, structured support systems in schools, and equal access to healthcare and psychosocial services.

The message is clear. If Curaçao is to uphold the rights of all children, it must ensure that legal status does not determine whether a child can graduate, access healthcare, or plan for the future. Investing in inclusive policies and support systems will not only benefit migrant children and their families but will also strengthen the education system and society as a whole.

This report is therefore both a documentation of urgent problems and a call to action. The time has come for government, schools, and civil society to work together to ensure that no child is left behind — and that every student, regardless of background, has the chance to learn, to graduate, and to contribute with dignity to the future of Curaçao.

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a large crowd of people, mostly seen from behind, holding hands in a circle. The image is heavily filtered with a dark blue color, creating a somber and unified atmosphere. The people are of various ages and ethnicities, and their hands are visible in the foreground, creating a sense of connection.

# THANK YOU!

