EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES (EiE) COMMUNITY

Building Inclusive Classrooms with Migrant Students and Displaced Learners: Europe Dialogue

Monthly Call | 3 March, 2026

About the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Community Calls

Staff, alumni and fellows from across the Teach For All network come together regularly to share ideas, solutions and resources to support students and communities impacted by emergency situations. If you'd like to become a Member of the EiE Community and receive invites for future calls, please complete this short form!

Community resources

- Insights from the last EiE Community call
- Join the EiE Facebook Community
- Recording of the call

Key insights from this call



BUILDING MINDSETS

- Why Inclusive Classrooms are Critical
- Doing this Work with Students, Not for Students
- DEI Mindsets within an Organization



CLASSROOM ACTIONS

- Teacher Training on Migrant Education
- Representation is a Non-Negotiable
- Characteristics of Inclusive Classrooms

Insights on Building Mindsets

Why Inclusive Classrooms are Critical

The composition of Europe's classrooms has been changing over the past decade, and we can't pretend that classrooms are immune to the changing political and social climate of Europe. But the challenge isn't the *scale* of displacement across Europe; it's the *narrative*. If we scan the political landscape of Europe right now, we see an undeniable **polarization**. Migration has become the central fault line in European politics. In many countries, we're witnessing a hardening of rhetoric and a tightening of policy. We see governments winning mandates on platforms that prioritize "security" and borders. We see the normalization of discourse that frames the arrival of displaced families as a "threat" to national identity or economic stability.

Too often across media outlets, we see **dehumanizing language** being used to describe this - words like "*influx*," "*swarm*," or "*surge*" - language that's designed to trigger anxiety, rather than empathy. We see stories that focus on "*burden*", and a silencing of the incredible stories of resilience, contribution, and humanity. All of this is the atmosphere surrounding our students today - a child arriving in a new country

today doesn't just have to learn a new language or a new curriculum, they have to navigate an environment where their very presence is a subject of intense, often hostile, political debate.

As conversations around migration grow more polarized, the role of education becomes more critical than ever. Schools are often the very first institution that a displaced family interacts with in their new host country. And as such, the classroom is very much the **frontline of integration**. We know from decades of neuroscience research that learning cannot happen without a foundation of emotional safety. So when a student feels "othered", they simply cannot thrive in a classroom. Therefore, building inclusive classrooms isn't just another extra task for teachers; it's not a 'nice to have' add-on to the curriculum - it's the foundation for *any* learning to occur at all.

Schools are mirrors of society, so everything that goes on in society is also happening in schools. The reality in society - the challenges, the discourses, the narratives - become a lived experience for the students inside schools. So let's remember that schools are where children will face their reality, and will understand if their complexity, where they come from, with all their languages, identities and experiences, are welcomed or not. Schools are where children **learn if they belong** or don't belong.

Doing this Work with Students, Not for Students

It's important to talk about this topic *with* children and teachers, because they have to do the work. When we talk about belonging, it's not a program that you can just put into schools and say "*this is it, this is how you belong, this is how it's done*" - it's something that you have to **build together with your students**, because they are the experts of their lives.

Even though teachers may have good intentions, their actions might create unintended harm. This is why they need to talk with migrant children, because only they know what they need, who they are, and what they want. When we do this work *with* children, we take them seriously, we give them **choices, a voice, and agency** over their own lives. This collaborative approach helps children create the spaces they need to feel safe and to learn. Children will also engage more if they can decide what to do and how to do it. Power is also key - because displaced children have felt powerless. They have been (and likely still are) marginalized, so giving them power is critical. We want students to feel **empowered** through talking with them about this topic, and to build this culture *with* them, and not *for* them.

[VIDEO CLIP]

DEI Mindsets within an Organization

Embedding migrant education work into organizational strategy and school culture is closely related to the mindsets of people that work at the organization, as well as the openness of the organization to these topics. Staff need to be open to doing the work of **unlearning and learning**. Organizations and schools need to be willing to have hard conversations and point out internal policies or practices that aren't inclusive. The first step to achieving this is the feeling of safety, where you feel safe within your team and workplace to speak up when things need addressing.

Insights on Classroom Actions

Teacher Training on Migrant Education

To prepare teachers for the ground-level reality of modern diverse schools, teacher training, mentoring and coaching needs to move beyond foundational DEI topics. Network partners see better results when they've integrated areas such as trauma-informed pedagogy, second language learning strategies, anti-racism, etc. This includes facilitating the **hard conversations** - addressing white privilege, fragility, and saviorism - not to alienate, but to ensure teachers understand how their own **positionality** affects their students' sense of belonging.

There can often be a disconnect between a teacher's willingness to engage on these topics and their ability to implement it in their practice. Since there is no one-size-fits-all manual for this work, training should encourage **experimental pedagogy**. For example, subject integration helps move these topics out of isolated timetable slots and embeds them into every subject, from History to Maths to Science. Or 'active trialing' helps create a culture where teachers are encouraged to try new inclusive classroom strategies, reflect on what works, and iterate.

Tackling sensitive issues also requires a culture of safety for the teachers themselves. Network partners find it useful to create safe-to-ask spaces - environments where teachers can ask DEI and migrant education questions **without fear of judgment**, which ensures they're accurately informed before they lead discussions with students. These topics could also be included as 'Knowledge Nuggets' - short, digestible segments in regular team meetings to discuss specific cultural or religious topics (e.g. understanding the nuances of Ramadan and how to celebrate it in school).

Additionally, by establishing **Communities of Practice**, teachers are able to share real-time challenges and success stories, collaborate on resource building, and provide peer-to-peer accountability (e.g. reminding one another that this work is a professional requirement, not an optional extra). Teachers should also be trained on how the brain works. The first question everyone's brain asks is '*Am I safe?*' Then '*Am I loved?*' And then '*What can I learn?*' Teachers should be aware of the neuroscience that children won't be able to learn anything if they don't feel safe or loved or that they belong.

Teacher training should respond to the current climate - for example, the recent surge in far-right rhetoric and protests outside migrant housing has created a **mental health crisis** for displaced children. These students, who arrived seeking safety, are seeing that safety ripped away by local or national hostility. Many teachers need specific training to manage the fallout of this external violence within their classroom, and how to provide a stable environment for children whose sense of security has been compromised.

Representation is a Non-Negotiable

For many migrant students, the classroom can feel like a foreign space where they are always the 'other'. Representative teacher recruitment enables students to see their own identities reflected in positions of authority. This '**mirror effect**' validates their presence in the school and provides tangible role models, proving that success in their new host country is attainable.

Teachers with migratory backgrounds often share a common language of experience with their students. This naturally fosters a deep sense of **relational trust**. For example, students are often more willing to disclose challenges or seek help from

teachers who look like them, assuming a baseline of empathy and understanding that might otherwise feel missing. In addition to this, in-group affinity is another key factor. This isn't just a preference - it's a psychological bridge that allows for richer, more nuanced teacher-student relationships.

One of the most significant elements of representative teacher recruitment is the ability to more accurately **interpret student behavior**. Teachers without migratory backgrounds may inadvertently rely on stereotypes to explain 'problematic' actions, whereas teachers with lived experience are more likely to see the structural reality these students are navigating.

Diverse teachers bring more than just empathy - they bring functional skills. For example, **multilingualism and cultural literacy** allow these teachers to act as bridges between the school and the community. They can navigate complex family dynamics and communication barriers that might otherwise leave migrant parents feeling alienated from their child's education.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Characteristics of Inclusive Classrooms

To create inclusive classrooms for migrant and diverse students, the focus should shift from passive tolerance to **active celebration**. It's about moving beyond symbolic gestures - like a multi-language "*Welcome to our School*" sign - and embedding inclusivity into the daily rhythms of school life.

Language is the foundation of identity. Rather than viewing a student's **first language** as a barrier to learning the host country's language, it should be treated as a cognitive and emotional resource. For example, teachers can incorporate students' mother tongues into daily activities, through language-sharing games where students teach their peers words in Arabic, Pashto, Mandarin, Bengali, etc. Celebratory moments can also be used to acknowledge linguistic diversity, such as singing 'Happy Birthday' in every language represented in the room. Teachers can also encourage students to maintain dual-language vocabulary lists, because research shows that a stable first language provides the essential framework for acquiring a second one. The correct pronunciation of a student's name is a fundamental act of respect and love. It validates their identity and signals that they are seen as an individual.

For students who have recently arrived - especially those who may have experienced displacement - the unknown can be a source of significant anxiety. Teachers can establish clear, consistent daily schedules. Using visual cues and **structured routines** allow students to feel safe and to know what comes next, even if they haven't yet mastered the local language.

Inclusivity should also be mirrored in school and **classroom materials**. For example, teachers can ensure that worksheets, names used in math problems, and characters in reading materials reflect the diversity of the classroom. Teachers can also create **Intercultural Calendars** at the start of the year, where they map out a calendar that gives equal weight to various cultural and religious milestones. Also, if the school decorates for Christmas or Easter, it should do the same for Ramadan, Lunar New Year, or Diwali. This could include tangible elements like Ramadan calendars or sweet treats to ensure no student feels their traditions are secondary.

Teachers have a unique opportunity to build the social blocks of a more cohesive future society, by intentionally fostering **friendships across cultures and faiths**. For example, teachers can use seating plans and pair-work assignments to encourage students to interact with peers outside their immediate cultural or linguistic circles. They can also teach their students the art of empathetic listening from a young age, encouraging them to look for the *why* behind an opinion, fostering a culture where they question rhetoric and seek common ground.

[VIDEO CLIP]

Attendees dialed in from:

Empieza por Educar, Enseña Chile, Enseña por Colombia, Enseña por México, Ensina Brasil, Teach First, Teach First Deutschland, Teach For America, Teach For Armenia, Teach For Austria, Teach For Bangladesh, Teach For Belgium, Teach For India, Teach For Italy, Teach For Kenya, Teach For Nepal, Teach For Niger, Teach For Nigeria, Teach For Portugal, Teach For Qazaqstan, Teach For Ukraine, and Teach For Zimbabwe. And friends from Erasmus EU, the International Rescue Committee, Sesame Workshop, United World Colleges and the World Bank.