



DIALOGUE IN  
INCLUSIVE  
EDUCATION



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European Policy  
DIALOGUE FORUM

# Supporting teachers in the use of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in inclusive education for refugees and migrants

## Executive summary

Religious and cultural diversity in Europe's classrooms is increasing, mainly as a result of recent patterns prompted by economic need and political instability outside the continent. European societies are seeing increasing numbers of refugees and migrants and, often corresponding, growing populism, xenophobia and radicalisation. Education systems and spaces, especially classrooms, are important venues for building shared values and encouraging social cohesion in our diverse societies. The role of teachers in promoting social cohesion extends far beyond the walls of the classroom and into the community. In addition to teachers' vital role in facilitating access to quality education for refugee and migrant students, they are often essential in socialising newly arrived students into multicultural democratic societies through the use of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The Network for Dialogue, a pan-European network which gathers faith-based and secular organizations, religious leaders and scholars working in the field of migration and religious studies, suggests that teachers often require support in acquiring and developing the necessary skills and competencies in inclusive education. This policy brief invites policymakers across Europe to invest in the development of interreligious and intercultural dialogue skills for Europe's teachers through formal training, peer-supported capacity-building, partnership-building and community involvement.

The Network for Dialogue  
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**The Network for Dialogue**

Empowering Interreligious and Intercultural  
Action for the Social Inclusion of Refugees  
and Migrants.



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## Key recommendations

- 1 **Mainstream** intercultural and interreligious **dialogue** and learning in the existing educational curriculum
- 2 Provide all teachers with **intercultural and interreligious skills** as an approach to ensure inclusive education
- 3 **Engage families** of refugee and migrant students in school activities as equal partners, co-educators and beneficiaries
- 4 **Enable cooperation** with (migrant-led or refugee-led) civil society organizations working with refugee and migrant students
- 5 Integrate **values and approaches of inclusive education** horizontally in all teacher training curricula
- 6 **Create fast-track qualification** and accreditation programmes for teachers with migrant or refugee backgrounds
- 7 Support **increased diversity in the training profession** by helping representatives of different ethnic groups become teachers

## Introduction

### Who are the authors of this policy brief?

This policy brief is based on the discussions of the 2nd European Policy Dialogue Forum on Refugees and Migrants held online on 3-4 November 2020, organized by the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and the Network for Dialogue, and supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission Representation in Germany. The three tracks at the Forum discussed how intercultural and interreligious dialogue are means to further social inclusion of refugees and migrants in Europe in the areas of inclusive education, trustbuilding and changing the, often negative, narrative on migration. Additional working group meetings with selected experts and members of the Network for Dialogue further fed into the development of this brief and its recommendations.

### Who is the intended audience of this brief?

The brief is intended for policymakers at local, national and European levels across the continent who are seeking ways to foster social cohesion in local communities through dialogue.

### Social inclusion and education

The UNHCR Global Trends Report 2019 identified that there were 6.5 million refugees in Europe at the end of 2019.<sup>1</sup> Migration is a reality in today's European Union (EU). 21.8 million people (4.9%) of the 446.8 million people living in the EU-27 on 1 January 2019 were non-EU-27 citizens (European Commission, 2020). In addition to migration for economic reasons, the number of refugees fleeing armed conflict and the effects of climate change and poverty is on the rise. As societies deal with the dual challenge of building social cohesion and ensuring social inclusion, integrating refugees and migrants and host communities in a reciprocal process becomes ever more critical.

There is growing recognition that schools and educational systems are central to overcoming challenges of inclusion. Classrooms are essential in helping refugee and migrant students, and by extension their families, to define new identities and ways of seeing each other through dialogue with their new hosts.<sup>2</sup> These are also the spaces where cultural diversity is explored by the host community, which can contribute

<sup>1</sup> According to the UNHCR Global Trends Report 2019, Turkey hosted the highest number of people displaced across borders, 3.9 million, most of whom were Syrian refugees (92%).

Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In this policy brief, a migrant is defined as an individual who leaves their country to settle in another. A refugee is defined as a person outside their own country because of a threat to their lives or freedom, defined and protected by a specific international legal framework. This policy brief addresses both refugees and migrants who are living in the receiving country as first-generation or second-generation migrants, who often face similar, specific challenges.



*The primary purpose of education is not only to develop knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes and to embed fundamental values, but also to help young people - in close cooperation with parents and families - to become active, responsible, open-minded members of society” (Paris Declaration, 2015).*

to preventing hate speech, racism and xenophobia. Education is a critical factor for the socio-emotional development of refugee and migrant students within host communities.

### **Dialogue for democratic values**

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue and learning, which are sensitive to gender differences and identities, as well as multilingual methods, are important dimensions of inclusive education. Ensuring that intercultural and interreligious learning is horizontally integrated into educational curricula can motivate students to learn and participate, raise self-awareness and awareness of the Other, reduce bias and the creation of stereotypes, and can also enrich friendships with peers and relationships with others. This fosters a greater sense of belonging and community, improves well-being and enhances opportunities for all.

Intercultural and interreligious education in schools is essential for strengthening ethical values and acquiring the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to address xenophobia, discrimination, hate speech and the propagation of extreme ideologies, all of which adversely impact the democratic underpinning of society.

Inclusive education can positively contribute to how refugees, migrants and host communities interact, their perception of one another and their capacity to live together in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect. This builds on the competencies for democratic cultures developed by the Council of Europe to promote living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies.

### **Embracing diversity**

Countries which were characterised by religious homogeneity are now witnessing greater diversity in terms of religious observance and cultural practice. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and interfaith education as a path to this dialogue, is essential in helping newly arrived refugees and migrants achieve a sense of social connectedness and belonging in their new environments.

Formal education systems are central to the achievement of social inclusion of refugees and migrants, supported by informal and non-formal sectors that involve the community as a key partner in achieving relevance and quality of education.

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue should be fundamental characteristics of democratic societies – a channel through which cultural and religious difference can be peacefully communicated and negotiated. In particular, the Council of Europe denotes intercultural dialogue as “the means through which decision makers can understand the views of all citizens, taking into account their various self-ascribed cultural affiliations” (CoE, 2018, p. 24).

### **Establishing relationships**

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue and an inclusive approach to education can empower educators to foster a sense of belonging, common citizenship and democratic participation. Research indicates a connection between radicalisation and xenophobia and a perceived sense of injustice, both as individuals and members of a larger group. A sense of societal disconnectedness, defined as the perception that an

**Intercultural education**, as defined by Milton Bennett, is the process of “acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one’s own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange” (Bennett 2009).

**Interreligious education** is a part of intercultural education and, like intercultural education, aims to build understanding, tolerance and social cohesion to “actively shape the relations of people of different religions” (UNESCO 2006, p. 14).

individual does not belong to mainstream society, can feed violent attitudes and discrimination. Using intercultural and interreligious dialogue in education to engage parents, faith-based groups and other stakeholders in a community in a wider exchange on civic issues can help to combat this trend.

### **Inclusive education: an interfaith perspective**

From an interfaith perspective, educational inclusion is more than ensuring access to schooling. Many interfaith educational programmes conceive inclusion as, above all, the nurturing of the whole child, and supporting every child's well-being in all dimensions of their development – physical, social-emotional, intellectual, moral, cultural and spiritual.

An interfaith perspective tends to advocate the view that human diversity is to be celebrated, and that the presence of difference in educational environments can serve to enrich our pedagogical practices and encourage educators to be more sensitive to the evolving well-being and learning needs of all students.

Finally, an interfaith approach demonstrates that embracing inclusion and diversity must be an integral endeavour. That is to say that these must not be treated as isolated gestures, or add-ons. Instead, inclusion and diversity must be a whole system process where the empowerment of educators is key.

Extract from Scherto Gill's contribution at the 2020 G20 Interfaith Forum.

## **Challenges**

With notable and significant exceptions, the social inclusion of refugee and migrant students in educational systems across Europe continues to be a major challenge, with varied implications for the continued integration of these persons into European societies. Despite inclusion becoming a priority for policymakers, the reality on the ground often does not reflect this. Schools, and especially teachers, have often reported that they lack resources and support when it comes to dealing with diversity through inclusive education and intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Research has shown that the psychological well-being of refugee and migrant students is affected not only by differences between their countries of origin and countries of destination, but also by how well schools and local communities help them overcome the many obstacles they face in succeeding at school and building a new life.

The following challenges are relevant to teachers and their ability to utilise inclusive education to serve the unique needs of refugee and migrant students:

- 1 **The obstacles disproportionately faced by refugees and migrants, especially when teachers and schools are ill equipped to meet their needs:** Refugee and migrant students can underperform in school due to various impediments to learning such as language barriers, emotional traumas linked to their migration journeys (in the case of refugees), biased perceptions and stereotyping on the part of teachers and fellow students as well as discrimination and even racism based on their cultural or religious identities. As teachers are encouraged to primarily focus on the content-driven curriculum through standardised accountability and testing mechanisms, there is little time and capacity for dealing with intercultural education, religious sensitivities and psychosocial support. Teachers and refugee and migrant students may all experience frustration and feelings of inadequacy from this lack of support, leading to a heightened sense of alienation.
- 2 **A lack of intercultural and interreligious competencies among teachers:** Due to diversity in the classroom, teachers need new skills to address different needs and to reach all of their students. Teachers are not always equipped to work with refugee and migrant students and may lack the required cultural and religious discernment and specialised pedagogical approach. A lack of wider engagement and

dialogue between refugees and migrants and their host communities tends to influence teacher-student interaction. To address this fragmentation in educational settings, teachers need to have knowledge of different cultures and religions to be able to create tailored approaches and address inherent, implicit biases. Teachers require support in navigating minority cultural practices and need to be equipped with effective pedagogical resources. Research also suggests that teachers and schools have limited awareness of the usefulness and benefits of children's first languages and note a lack of shared responsibility concerning the language development of students.

- 3 **A lack of diversity training within the teaching profession:** Evidence shows that despite the increasing diversity of European classrooms, teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Although most initial teacher education programmes include some form of diversity training, it is often in the form of a single module or elective course that is unlikely to have significant or lasting impact throughout the course of a teacher's career. Similarly, access to continuous professional development opportunities aimed at enhancing the capacity of teachers to cater for diversity is not yet consistently established. According to MIPEX (2020), training in relation to the needs of refugee and migrant students or on a consistently intercultural approach is not mandatory in most countries. Moreover, schools in most countries are not required or supported to teach all students how to live and learn together in a diverse society. Finally, there are not sufficient numbers of teachers from a refugee or migrant background who can act as role models within their own communities and showcase diversity.



## SUCCESS STORY

### Learning to Live Together by Arigatou International

*Learning to Live Together: An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education*, was implemented with students in Athens, Greece from 2011 to 2016. Children participating in the programme came from 13 countries from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Teachers were trained to use a *transformative pedagogy* customised to children's needs and contexts that supports dialogue and collaborative learning. The programme was adapted to be used within the context of cooperative sports and games, focusing on inclusion. It helped strengthen children's self-esteem and empowerment, and promoted mutual understanding and respect by challenging gender, cultural and religious stereotypes. The assessment demonstrated significant improvement in children's relations with others, a decrease in the number of bullying cases, and stronger social cohesion both in the classroom and on the playground. Children expressed: "We like how it is here in the school and we wish it could be the same outside."

## Recommendations:

Integration and inclusion depend on both early action and long-term investment. The Network for Dialogue recommends that Ministries of Education, educational authorities on the local and regional levels, formal educational institutions (schools, VET-providers), and teacher training institutions consider the following:



- 1 | **Mainstream intercultural and interreligious dialogue and learning in the existing educational curriculum.** Dialogue should be integrated throughout the curriculum and should incorporate cultural diversity, religious literacy and challenges to social integration. These topics can promote and build critical thinking skills in students, can nurture their curiosity about the diversity of the world around them, and encourage respectful and ethical behaviour. Successful examples at the local level can be promoted through the objectives outlined in the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027.



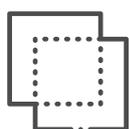
- 2 | **Provide all teachers with intercultural and interreligious skills as an approach to ensure inclusive education.** Teachers and their assistants need professional development and life-long learning opportunities in the field of social inclusion of refugees and migrants to feel comfortable addressing the classroom and providing safe spaces. The inclusion and mainstreaming of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and learning open the way to fostering the values of democratic citizenship.



- 3 | **Engage families of refugee and migrant students in school activities as equal partners, co-educators and beneficiaries.** Specific challenges that parents may face need to be recognised, including the lack of host country language skills. One step towards overcoming these challenges is recruiting assistant teachers, religious teachers and native language instructors as intercultural mediators who can apply multilingual methods. Encouraging teachers to actively reach out to parents, including phone calls or home visits, can create additional links. These steps require adequate resourcing.



- 4 | **Enable cooperation with (migrant-led or refugee-led) civil society organizations working with refugee and migrant students.** Such cooperation facilitates the exchange of experiences and sharing of materials and resources and leads to the improvement of teachers' competencies in creating a culture of inclusion and acceptance.



- 5 | **Integrate values and approaches of inclusive education horizontally in all teacher training curricula.** Such courses should be mandatory instead of elective and should apply to all disciplines. Moreover, professional development for current teachers in the form of courses and training sessions specifically on intercultural and interreligious dialogue are necessary.



- 6 | **Create fast-track qualification and accreditation programmes for teachers with migrant or refugee backgrounds.** Diversity needs to be reflected in teacher recruitment and advancement. Often refugees and first-generation migrants who trained as teachers have difficulty entering the host country's educational system. Policymakers need to ensure the accreditation and recognition of their qualifications as well as promote their recruitment.



- 7 | **Support increased diversity in the teaching profession by helping representatives of different refugee and migrant communities to become teachers.** To make the teaching workforce more representative of the student population, policymakers should attract representatives of ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds into the teaching profession. Ethnically diverse teachers who are familiar with the experiences, cultures and languages of their students can serve as role models and enhance self-confidence.



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