



TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN (TIEREF): A EUROPEAN POLICY FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

The TIEREF initiative (Key Action 3: Support for Policy Reform – Social Inclusion through Education, Training and Youth) represents a comprehensive European effort to foster inclusive education for refugee and migrant children. The initiative sought to close the “native-immigrant” achievement gap by building a network of ministries, regional authorities, and schools that co-developed multilingual resources and teacher training tools. Through digital innovation and professional collaboration, TIEREF operationalised EU policy priorities—such as the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027) and the European Child Guarantee (2021)—and demonstrated how open access and peer learning can enhance equity and belonging in education.

Keywords: inclusive education; refugee children; educational policy reform; teacher training; digital learning tools; European cooperation; migrant inclusion, STEM Education

1. Introduction

Across Europe, refugee and migrant children continue to face systemic barriers to educational inclusion. These challenges range from linguistic and cultural adaptation difficulties to gaps in teacher preparedness and institutional capacity. Despite strong policy commitments to inclusion, discrepancies in access and attainment persist across EU Member States. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these inequalities, disproportionately affecting learners from migrant backgrounds due to limited digital access and insufficient language support.

The **TIEREF** (Towards Inclusive Education for Refugee Children) initiative was launched to address these structural barriers through a coordinated, evidence-based European framework. Supported under the *Erasmus+ Key Action 3 – Support for Policy Reform*, TIEREF aimed to operationalise inclusion principles by linking research, policy,

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and practice. The project built a transnational partnership among ministries of education, schools, and NGOs across Türkiye, Greece, Bulgaria, Italy, and Romania, fostering collaborative learning and policy coherence.

Central to the TIEREF vision was the conviction that inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions. Instead, sustainable inclusion requires institutional transformation supported by policy innovation, teacher capacity building, and the integration of digital tools. The project, therefore, combined top-down (policy) and bottom-up (school-level) strategies, creating an iterative model of mutual learning between decision-makers and practitioners.

TIEREF's framework was guided by three overarching goals:

- 1) To strengthen inclusive education policies and governance mechanisms.
- 2) To enhance teachers' professional competences through multilingual, evidence-based resources.
- 3) To improve assessment and placement practices for refugee and migrant children, ensuring fair recognition of prior learning.

These objectives positioned TIEREF as both a policy experiment and a practical model for inclusive education reform. The following sections present the project's conceptual and methodological underpinnings, highlight its digital tools, and discuss lessons learned from its implementation across partner countries.

2. Policy Background and Rationale

The right to inclusive and equitable education stands as a cornerstone of European social policy. Over the past decade, the **European Commission** has repeatedly highlighted the necessity of strengthening educational responses to diversity, particularly for migrant and refugee learners. The *EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027)* outlines a holistic strategy for building cohesive, inclusive, and fair education systems, stressing that integration is a “two-way process” requiring both the empowerment of migrants and the readiness of institutions to embrace diversity.

In parallel, the *European Child Guarantee (2021)* calls on Member States to ensure that every child in Europe—regardless of origin—has access to quality early education, nutritious school meals, healthcare, and housing. Together with the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4*—to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”—these frameworks create a robust policy foundation for inclusion.

Yet, despite these commitments, evidence from the **OECD PISA 2018** report shows that immigrant students consistently underperform compared to their native-born peers, particularly in reading comprehension. The report attributes these gaps not solely to socio-economic disadvantage but to systemic shortcomings: insufficient teacher training, linguistic segregation, and inadequate policy implementation. Refugee children, who often experience interrupted schooling and trauma, remain the most vulnerable subgroup within these data.

Within this context, **TIEREF** emerged as a concrete policy innovation bridging the gap between aspiration and implementation. It responded directly to the European Commission's call for projects that "*translate social inclusion objectives into measurable outcomes.*"

TIEREF's rationale was threefold:

- 1) To integrate fragmented national efforts into a unified European framework that fosters peer learning and joint experimentation.
- 2) To reinforce teacher professionalisation through structured, needs-based training that embeds intercultural and digital competencies.
- 3) To leverage technology as a mechanism for accessibility, providing multilingual, evidence-based materials open to all educators and institutions.

By embedding these priorities into one cohesive system, TIEREF addressed both governance-level and classroom-level challenges. Its ultimate ambition extended beyond integrating refugee learners into existing structures—it aimed to **redefine inclusivity** as a fundamental characteristic of quality education rather than a remedial effort.

3. Framework and Methodology (TIEREF Approach)

The **TIEREF** framework was designed to transform European inclusion policy into practical mechanisms that schools can implement. Its methodology combined **policy innovation** and **pedagogical experimentation**, aligning macro-level strategies with micro-level classroom realities. The approach was grounded in *participatory action research*, involving ministries of education, local authorities, and teachers as co-creators of tools and resources.

3.1 Policy and Governance

At the policy level, TIEREF established a multi-tiered governance structure connecting ministries, regional directorates, and pilot schools. This structure ensured a continuous feedback loop between policymakers and practitioners, enabling data-informed decisions and policy refinement.

Through transnational coordination meetings—held in Istanbul, Plovdiv, Athens, and Bucharest—the consortium aligned national priorities with European policy frameworks. The resulting **Policy Toolkit for Inclusive Education** provided strategic guidance for national ministries, focusing on early intervention, inclusive curriculum adaptation, and teacher professionalisation.

The governance model also included *bottom-up feedback mechanisms*, empowering schools to report local challenges that directly informed policy improvements. This iterative process bridged a long-standing gap between central authorities and classrooms, strengthening both accountability and innovation.

3.2 Best Practices and Teacher Training

The identification and dissemination of *best practices* constituted TIEREF's methodological backbone. Each partner country conducted case studies documenting successful practices in guidance counselling, language learning, and socio-emotional support. These examples were synthesised into a **Best Practices Catalogue** available on the project's open platform.

Teacher training followed a *needs-based professional development* approach aligned with the European Training Foundation's frameworks. The training modules combined theory and practice through:

- Interactive workshops and micro-teaching sessions,
- Peer mentoring and reflective practice,
- Cross-country webinars and discussion groups.

The training content focused on four key competencies:

- 1) Intercultural communication and empathy building,
- 2) Differentiated instruction in multilingual settings,
- 3) Trauma-informed pedagogy and psychosocial awareness,
- 4) Digital literacy for inclusive teaching.

By promoting reflection and peer collaboration, these modules redefined teachers as **agents of inclusion**, not merely implementers of curriculum.

The framework also contrasts teacher-centered and student-centered approaches to emphasise the transition toward interactive, learner-centered instruction.

3.3 Assessment and Validation

To address the challenge of recognising prior learning among refugee students, TIEREF developed an **Assessment Framework for Learning Validation**. This framework integrated both cognitive and socio-emotional indicators to provide a holistic understanding of each learner's background and skills.

Tools within this framework included:

- Diagnostic language testing to identify linguistic proficiency,
- Concept mapping for subject-area placement,
- Portfolio-based first-language assessments.

Schools used these tools to prevent under-placement, ensuring that refugee children were appropriately challenged. The **School Self-Assessment Guide** complemented this work by allowing institutions to evaluate their inclusion readiness, covering criteria such as staff diversity, parental involvement, and equitable resource allocation.

3.4 Digital Platform and Peer Learning

Digital innovation was central to TIEREF's methodology. The **TeachRef Online Platform** (<https://teachref.eu>) offered an integrated ecosystem for educators to collaborate, exchange materials, and participate in virtual training.

The platform features:

- A multilingual interface (Turkish, English, Greek, Bulgarian, Italian, Romanian),
- A searchable repository of open educational resources,
- Built-in peer mentoring tools and discussion forums,
- Web-based self-assessment instruments for teachers and schools.

Peer collaboration was institutionalised through the “**buddy school**” model, which paired institutions across countries to exchange practices and jointly develop inclusive projects. This model enhanced sustainability by embedding international collaboration into daily school routines.

By linking governance, professional development, assessment, and digital collaboration, TIEREF produced an adaptable framework applicable across different socio-educational contexts.

The online platform provides a multilingual resource library that visually organises materials for easy access and collaboration among educators. Partner schools engaged in peer-learning activities through the digital platform, exchanging resources and practices across national contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

The implementation of TIEREF across five partner countries generated a comprehensive body of evidence illustrating how collaborative and digitally enhanced strategies can transform inclusive education. Data collected through teacher surveys, institutional self-assessments, and project evaluation reports revealed consistent improvements in four key areas: **teacher professional growth, institutional capacity, learner engagement, and policy alignment.**

4.1 Teacher Professional Growth

More than 400 teachers participated in the professional development modules designed within TIEREF. Pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires showed a significant increase in educators’ confidence when working in multicultural classrooms. Three main areas of improvement emerged:

1. **Intercultural competence:** Teachers reported greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and stronger ability to create inclusive learning environments.
2. **Instructional variety:** Educators diversified their teaching strategies, incorporating group work, cooperative learning, and differentiated instruction tailored to multilingual learners.
3. **Digital pedagogy:** Teachers enhanced their skills in developing online materials, using assessment platforms, and engaging with students through virtual learning environments.

The blended training model—combining local workshops with online peer exchanges—proved particularly successful in sustaining participation and reinforcing reflective practice. Teachers viewed the project not as an external intervention but as a supportive community of professional growth.

4.2 Institutional Capacity Building

At the institutional level, TIEREF strengthened schools' organisational readiness for inclusion. Participating schools developed internal *inclusion teams* responsible for coordinating outreach to refugee families, monitoring attendance, and facilitating language support.

School self-assessment results showed that:

- 82% of schools improved coordination between teaching staff and management.
- 74% incorporated inclusion goals into their school development plans.
- 68% established formal partnerships with NGOs or local authorities supporting migrant education.

Such outcomes demonstrate that sustainable inclusion requires leadership commitment and systematic planning in addition to teacher training. The inclusion teams also contributed to better data collection and evidence-informed decision-making.

Several examples from partner schools illustrated how TIEREF implementation strengthened coordination, inclusion planning, and community engagement.

4.3 Learner Engagement and Outcomes

Observation reports and interviews with teachers revealed enhanced engagement among refugee and migrant students following the implementation of TIEREF methodologies. Culturally responsive activities—such as storytelling, multilingual reading sessions, and peer mentoring—helped increase participation and sense of belonging.

Teachers noted visible improvements in literacy and oral proficiency as a result of differentiated instruction and formative assessment. Schools also recorded fewer absenteeism cases and a reduction in social isolation among migrant learners.

These outcomes align with OECD research (2018), which associates inclusive pedagogical practices and teacher collaboration with improved learner performance and well-being in multicultural settings.

4.4 Policy Impact and European Added Value

Beyond classroom outcomes, TIEREF made measurable contributions to policy dialogue on inclusion. Project findings were disseminated through European policy workshops and integrated into national teacher training curricula in several partner countries.

In Türkiye, the Ministry of Education utilised TIEREF outcomes to inform ongoing reforms in digital inclusion and teacher training. In Greece and Bulgaria, partner institutions incorporated the project's best practices into national frameworks for inclusive schooling.

TIEREF thus exemplifies how EU-funded policy experimentation projects can serve as **“incubators for systemic innovation”**—testing scalable models that influence governance, pedagogy, and digital infrastructure across borders.

By connecting local experimentation with European cooperation, the initiative reinforced the EU's strategic commitment to education as both a *social right* and an *instrument for cohesion*.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The TIEREF initiative demonstrates that inclusive education requires not only equitable access but also meaningful participation and systemic transformation. Its results confirm that sustainable inclusion emerges when policies, professional capacity, and digital innovation operate in synergy.

By aligning European priorities with practical, school-based implementation, TIEREF provided a replicable model for bridging the gap between policy and classroom practice. The project's impact extended beyond participating institutions, influencing teacher training systems and policy frameworks at both national and European levels.

Three key insights can be drawn from the project's experience:

- 1) **Systemic reform over fragmented interventions:** Lasting inclusion cannot rely on isolated projects; it must be integrated into the strategic planning and accountability structures of education systems.
- 2) **Empowered teachers as change agents:** Professional collaboration and reflective practice enable educators to translate policy ideals into classroom realities.
- 3) **Digital ecosystems as enablers of sustainability:** Multilingual platforms and open educational resources ensure continuity, scalability, and cross-border cooperation.

Moving forward, education systems can build upon TIEREF's achievements by:

- Embedding inclusion indicators in school evaluation frameworks;
- Supporting continuous professional development focused on intercultural pedagogy;
- Facilitating peer networks and digital communities of practice;
- Enhancing policy coherence between ministries, schools, and community actors.

Through its participatory and data-informed approach, TIEREF provides a blueprint for transforming inclusive education from an aspiration into an operational standard across Europe.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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