

Schooling Sub-Saharan Migrant Children in Morocco: Teacher Preparedness, Relational Dynamics, and Intercultural Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing sub-Saharan migrant enrolment in Moroccan public schools, empirical evidence on the relational dynamics between these learners and their teachers remains scarce. Using a mixed-methods, socio-ecological design, data were collected across six state primary schools in Tangier, involving migrant children aged 6–12 and their classroom teachers. Multiple instruments were employed, including a relationship scale, teacher self-assessment, classroom observation, and student focus-group interviews. Findings reveal a fragmented relational landscape in which a considerable share of students experience neutral-to-exclusionary classroom dynamics. Language barriers emerge as the dominant communicative obstacle, compounded by limited home-language support, low teacher expectations, and culturally thin pedagogy. Most teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to support sub-Saharan learners, with cultural sensitivity consistently the weakest dimension across all schools. The study concludes that inclusive schooling for this population currently depends on individual teacher disposition rather than systemic institutional support, with direct implications for teacher education policy and the integration of intercultural pedagogy in Moroccan primary schools.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan migrant children; teacher–student relationships; intercultural education; Morocco; primary schooling; inclusive pedagogy;

INTRODUCTION

The integration of migrant children into host-country schools has become one of the defining challenges of contemporary education policy. Schools represent the primary institutional site through which children with migration backgrounds encounter the norms, language, and social expectations of their new societies, making the quality of that encounter consequential for long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes (Bajo Marcos et al., 2023; Aiello et al., 2025). While research has largely concentrated on receiving countries in the Global North, a compelling body of experience is now emerging in the Global South, where Morocco stands out as a particularly instructive case.

Following King Mohammed VI's announcement of the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (NSIA) in 2013, Morocco formally repositioned itself as a country of immigration, granting undocumented migrants—including sub-Saharan Africans—access to public schooling (Benjelloun, 2020). Yet research consistently reveals a gap between this normative commitment and classroom realities. Ismaili (2023) identifies deficiencies in programme design, limited intercultural teacher preparation, and inadequate resources as persistent obstacles in Moroccan public schools, while Gormat et al. (2025) highlight a distinctive dual-language barrier: sub-Saharan students must navigate both Moroccan colloquial Arabic (Darija) for social belonging and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for academic success—a challenge that existing integration strategies rarely address. Schoenen (2016) further argues that Morocco's approach has favoured cultural performance over structural educational reform, with teacher training remaining its weakest component.

At the centre of this challenge stands the teacher. Across national contexts, teachers' attitudes, expectations, and relational practices are recognised as powerful determinants of migrant students' integration, engagement, and achievement (Khairutdinova et al., 2024; Iskakova et al., 2025). Positive teacher support has been shown to

buffer the effects of social marginalisation on classroom engagement, particularly for first-generation students (Archambault et al., 2023), while low or biased expectations can measurably depress performance. Despite this, teachers' perspectives in the Moroccan context remain largely unexplored in the literature.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating Moroccan public-school teachers' attitudes and perspectives towards the integration of sub-Saharan students, with specific attention to three dimensions: students' integration into the school community, their engagement in school life, and the factors teachers perceive as shaping their educational achievement. By foregrounding the teacher's voice, the study contributes to an emerging Global South literature on migrant education and aims to inform teacher education policy and school-level practice in a context where inclusive ambition has consistently outpaced institutional capacity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The integration of migrant and refugee children into host country educational systems has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing school systems worldwide. Driven by sustained increases in global displacement, the presence of newly arrived students in mainstream classrooms raises fundamental questions about pedagogical readiness, social cohesion, and the limits of institutional adaptation. Bajo Marcos et al. (2023) underscore that inclusive educational environments play a central role in the socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee children, particularly by promoting intercultural dialogue and participation. Yet translating this normative aspiration into consistent, effective practice remains uneven across national contexts. This review synthesises peer-reviewed literature published primarily between 2018 and 2025 to examine four interconnected dimensions of the field: (1) systemic and policy challenges to inclusion; (2) language acquisition and its relationship to academic outcomes; (3) the psychosocial dimension of belonging and well-being; and (4) teacher education and intercultural competence.

Systemic Challenges and Policy Frameworks

A recurring finding in the literature is the gap between legislative intent and practical implementation. Bulat (2025) analyses educational inclusion in the Republic of Moldova and identifies that despite a favourable national legislative framework, interventions at the local level remain sporadic, insufficiently coordinated, and rarely grounded in rigorous needs assessments. The study calls for a unified methodological evaluation framework combining measurable integration indicators, participatory feedback tools, and inter-institutional cooperation mechanisms. A similar disconnect between policy and practice is evident in Spain, where Onsès-Segarra et al. (2024) find, through expert interviews as part of the European MiCREATE research project, that a more holistic and transversal approach to inclusion is required—one that involves migrant families, fosters a sense of belonging, and coordinates action across institutional contexts. Complementing this, Onsès-Segarra et al. (2023) demonstrate the vital yet undertheorised role of families in children's school experiences, noting that migrant families frequently face cultural clashes, school segregation, and limited mechanisms for participation, particularly at the secondary level. These findings point to the insufficiency of child-centred interventions in isolation: structural reform, family engagement, and inter-institutional coordination must proceed together for inclusive policies to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement

Language proficiency in the host-country language is widely recognised as one of the most significant determinants of migrant children's academic integration. OECD data analysed by the OECD (2021) confirm that language barriers can amplify the effects of other sources of disadvantage, including late arrival age, low parental support, and enrolment in under-resourced schools. Borgonovi et al. (2020), drawing on PISA 2003 data from 21,618 fifteen-year-olds, show that linguistic distance from the language of instruction is negatively associated with achievement in reading, mathematics, and science, with stronger effects among students who arrived after age twelve. However, the same study finds that linguistic distance does not significantly affect students' sense of belonging to the school community, suggesting that social integration may follow a different pathway than academic achievement.

The question of whether separate or inclusive language support programmes are more effective has generated debate. Resch et al. (2023) examine Austrian teachers' perceptions of German-language support classes, finding that while teachers appreciate individualised instruction, many report negative social effects, including exclusion and processes of 'othering.' This echoes Cummins's (2008) influential argument that immersion-only approaches are not always optimal, and that bilingual education can be a more effective policy in contexts where linguistic communities are sufficiently concentrated. Smythe (2024) adds nuance through comparative case studies of newly arrived teenagers in France and New Zealand, identifying a set of common best practices for language-adapted approaches and framing integration as a reciprocal process in which students are empowered navigators rather than passive recipients.

Psychosocial Well-Being and the Sense of Belonging

Beyond academic achievement, the literature converges on school belonging as a key mediating variable between migration experience and psychosocial outcomes. Kia-Keating and Ellis (2007), in a foundational study with 76 Somali adolescents resettled in the United States, find that a greater sense of school belonging is associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy, independent of exposure to prior adversities, with belonging alone accounting for more than one-quarter of the variance in self-efficacy. Li et al. (2018) extend these findings to Chinese internal migrant children, demonstrating through structural equation modelling that school belonging fully mediates the relationship between social exclusion and mental health, underscoring the protective function of felt inclusion even in the face of discrimination.

These findings are corroborated across a range of national contexts. Martin et al. (2023), drawing on participatory research with migrant children in Ireland, identify host-language support, positive teacher relationships, and a safe school environment as the primary drivers of belonging. Critically, they also document how experiences of bullying, racism, and intolerance erode that sense of security. Bogossian (2025), in an ethnographic study set in a multi-ethnic English school in the post-Brexit context, similarly identifies school-level strategies—including explicit acknowledgement of diversity and strong staff-student relationships—as fostering belonging among migrant pupils who describe their school as an 'oasis of inclusion.' Schweitzer et al. (2021) offer further practical insights from an Australian school specialising in newly arrived students, identifying three belonging-fostering strategies: supporting environmental adaptation, building socially supportive relationships, and fostering school connectedness. Taken together, these studies suggest that belonging is not incidental to academic integration but constitutive of it, and that school climate—shaped by both structural and interpersonal factors—is its primary determinant.

Teacher Education and Intercultural Competence

The quality of migrant children's educational experience depends substantially on the preparedness of classroom teachers, yet significant gaps in training and institutional support are consistently reported. Biasutti et al. (2019), in a qualitative study with Italian primary and middle school teachers, identify creativity and flexibility as key characteristics of effective intercultural practice, while also finding that teachers express strong needs for training, didactic counselling, and additional resources. Akin-Sabuncu et al. (2023), drawing on culturally relevant pedagogy, highlight that teachers in Türkiye face difficulties in developing the academic achievement, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness of immigrant and refugee students, advocating for systematic pre- and in-service training reforms.

Strekalova-Hughes (2017) raises a concerning finding: teachers who already work with refugee students do not display significantly higher intercultural sensitivity than those who have no such experience, suggesting that mere exposure does not generate competence. This points to the need for structured, theory-informed professional development. Papadopoulou et al. (2022) evaluate a Greek university programme on language education for refugees and migrants, finding that graduates report increased confidence in managing multicultural classrooms, though some uncertainty remains—highlighting that even dedicated training requires sustained reinforcement. Badia Martín et al. (2024) provide a case study from a Barcelona school in which targeted training for teachers on migratory mourning and intercultural education produced measurable increases in staff confidence and student-perceived emotional support, reinforcing the value of school-embedded professional learning.

The Moroccan context offers a particularly instructive case study within the Global South, where the intersection of policy reform and educational practice reveals both progress and persistent structural limitations. Following King Mohammed VI's 2013 declaration of a new National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (NSIA)—which repositioned Morocco from a country of transit to a self-declared country of immigration—sub-Saharan African children gained formal access to public schooling (Benjelloun, 2020; Gormat et al., 2025). Yet research consistently reveals a gap between this normative opening and classroom realities. Ismaili (2023), drawing on a qualitative case study in Rabat, finds that while Moroccan public schools provide a formally welcoming and secure environment, deficiencies in programme design, limited teacher competence in intercultural pedagogy, and a shortage of dedicated resources impede the genuine educational integration of undocumented sub-Saharan students. These findings are corroborated by Chentoufi et al. (2024), whose socio-ecological analysis of four sub-Saharan migrant students in Moroccan public schools reveals that conflicting microsystems—particularly tensions between family and school environments, compounded by cultural and religious differences—hamper students' academic and psychosocial development, even where individual resilience and supportive teachers serve as protective factors. Critically, Gormat et al. (2025) highlight a distinctive linguistic dimension: while proficiency in Moroccan colloquial Arabic (Darija) is closely tied to sub-Saharan children's sense of peer belonging, it is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)—the medium of formal instruction—that presents the principal academic barrier, creating a dual-language challenge that standard integration programmes rarely address. Schoenen (2016) situates these classroom-level failures within a broader structural critique, arguing that Morocco's integration approach has tended toward cultural performance rather than systemic educational reform, with teacher training remaining a particularly underdeveloped component of the national strategy. Taken together, this body of evidence positions Morocco as a context where the political will for inclusion has outpaced the institutional capacity to deliver it—a dynamic that underscores the urgency of investing in teacher preparation, linguistically responsive curricula, and school-level support structures tailored to the specific needs of sub-Saharan migrant children.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed here consistently demonstrates that the educational integration of migrant children is a multidimensional challenge that cannot be resolved through piecemeal intervention. Effective inclusion requires coherent national and school-level policy frameworks, adaptive and linguistically responsive pedagogies, deliberate cultivation of school belonging and psychosocial support, and systematic investment in teacher intercultural competence. Across studies and national contexts, gaps emerge wherever any one of these dimensions is neglected—whether in the form of social exclusion in language-pull-out programmes, teacher unpreparedness, or family disengagement. While the field has made considerable progress in identifying what inclusive practice looks like, the evidence also makes clear that implementation remains inconsistent, under-resourced, and frequently disconnected from the lived realities of the children it is designed to serve. Future research should continue to prioritise child-centred and participatory methodologies, longitudinal measurement of belonging and achievement outcomes, and comparative policy analyses across receiving countries facing similar demographic pressures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative observational and interview evidence. Such triangulation is appropriate when studying relational phenomena in educational settings where attitudinal self-report, behavioural observation, and lived experience may diverge (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The overarching framework is *socio-ecological* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chentoufi et al., 2024): teacher–student relationships are understood not as dyadic events but as microsystemic interactions shaped by institutional, cultural, and macro-level policy environments. An interpretivist lens guides the qualitative strand, while the quantitative strand provides distributional evidence that can be situated within the broader comparative literature.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in six state primary schools in Tangier, Morocco, selected through purposive criterion sampling to ensure variation in school size, socioeconomic catchment area, and proportion of sub-Saharan migrant enrolment. Data collection took place between October 2024 and March 2025. Two participant groups were recruited: (a) 60 sub-Saharan migrant children aged 6–12, representing nationalities including Senegalese, Malian, Congolese, Ivorian, and Cameroonian learners; and (b) 18 classroom teachers responsible for the classes in which these children were enrolled. Informed consent was obtained from school principals and, in the case of minor participants, from parents or legal guardians. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant institutional review body. Anonymity was maintained throughout by assigning alphanumeric codes to all schools and participants.

Data Collection Instruments

Four instruments were deployed, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Data collection instruments, targets, and data types.

Instrument	Target	Data type	n
Adapted TSRS (Pianta, 1992)	Students	Quantitative — Likert	60
Teacher self-assessment questionnaire	Teachers	Quantitative — Likert	18
Structured classroom observation	Classrooms	Observational — coding	6 schools
Focus-group interviews	Students	Qualitative — thematic	60

The adapted TSRS (Pianta, 1992) measured students' perceived relationship quality across six categories (Warm & Supportive → Exclusionary). The teacher self-assessment questionnaire included a five-point Likert item measuring perceived intercultural preparedness, alongside items on professional training and classroom strategies. Structured classroom observation used a pre-coded protocol to record teacher–student interaction frequency, supportiveness signals, and language-accommodation behaviours across three sub-dimensions (emotional support, academic guidance, cultural sensitivity). Focus-group interviews (4–6 students per group, conducted in French with interpretation support where needed) explored communication obstacles, experiences of recognition or exclusion, and relational perceptions using open-ended, child-appropriate prompts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the TSRS and teacher questionnaire were analysed descriptively (frequencies, percentages, and means) using SPSS v.28. Between-school comparisons on the three supportiveness sub-dimensions were examined through one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests where appropriate. Qualitative data from focus-group transcripts underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): transcripts were coded inductively in a first pass, then deductively mapped onto the study's four thematic axes (overall relationship quality, communication obstacles, school-level variation, and teacher preparedness) in a second pass. Member-checking with a subsample of student participants and peer-debriefing with a Moroccan researcher not affiliated with the study were employed to strengthen the credibility and reflexivity of interpretations. Quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated at the *interpretation phase*, with each figure in Section 4 drawing on both data sources.

Limitations

Several limitations merit acknowledgement. First, the sample is geographically restricted to Tangier and may not generalise to other Moroccan cities or rural contexts where migrant enrolment profiles differ. Second, self-report data — from both students and teachers — are susceptible to social desirability bias; the anonymous,

researcher-administered format mitigated but did not eliminate this risk. Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of relationships rather than their development over time; longitudinal follow-up across the primary-to-secondary transition would significantly strengthen the study's explanatory reach. Finally, the small teacher sample ($n = 18$) limits the statistical power of between-group comparisons on the questionnaire data and warrants interpretive caution.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected across six primary schools in Tangier between October 2024 and March 2025, involving **60 sub-Saharan migrant children** (ages 6–12) and **18 classroom teachers**. Four instruments were deployed: an adapted Teacher–Student Relationship Scale (TSRS; Pianta, 1992), structured classroom observation, student focus-group interviews, and a teacher self-assessment questionnaire. The discussion proceeds thematically across four figures, each followed by interpretive commentary situated within the comparative literature on migrant-inclusive schooling.

Overall Perceived Relationship Quality

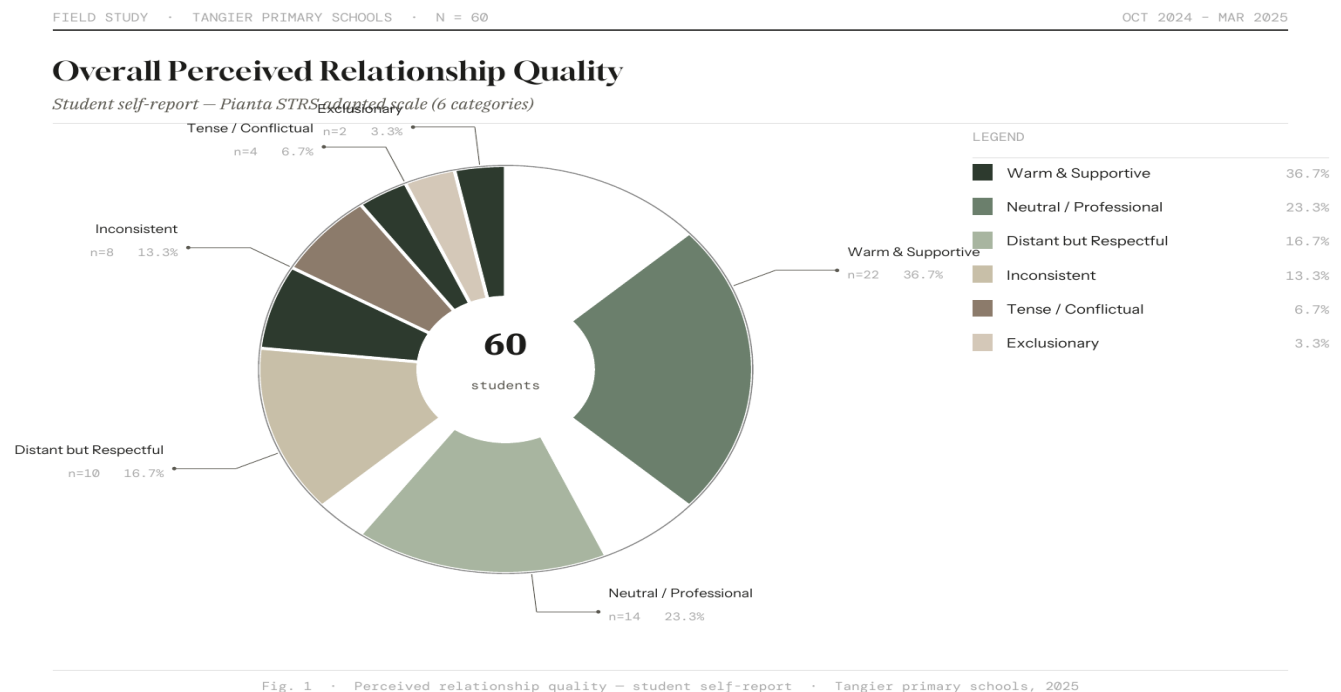


Figure 1. Perceived relationship quality — student self-report, Pianta TSRS adapted scale (N = 60).

36.7 per cent of students ($n = 22$) report a *Warm and Supportive* relationship with their class teacher, and a further 23.3 per cent ($n = 14$) describe interactions as *Neutral/Professional* — yielding a combined 60 per cent who experience the classroom as at minimum non-hostile. However, 40 per cent report more problematic dynamics: 16.7 per cent perceive *Distant but Respectful* treatment, 13.3 per cent encounter *Inconsistent* teacher behaviour, 6.7 per cent experience *Tense or Conflictual* relations, and 3.3 per cent feel *Excluded* — the last two categories being those most strongly associated with early disengagement and dropout in the migration literature.

These findings mirror the protective-factor framework developed by Archambault et al. (2023), who demonstrated that positive teacher–student relationships buffer first-generation immigrant students' classroom engagement precisely when peer acceptance is low. The 36.7 per cent in the warm category likely benefit from the mechanism documented by Ialuna et al. (2024), whereby teacher–child relationship quality moderates the negative effect of language-proficiency gaps on reading comprehension and GPA. Conversely, the 40 per cent navigating neutral-to-exclusionary dynamics reflect the pattern described by Chentoufi et al. (2024) in Moroccan public schools, where sub-Saharan students' academic and social needs remain structurally unmet despite their personal resilience and motivation.

Principal Obstacles to Teacher–Student Communication

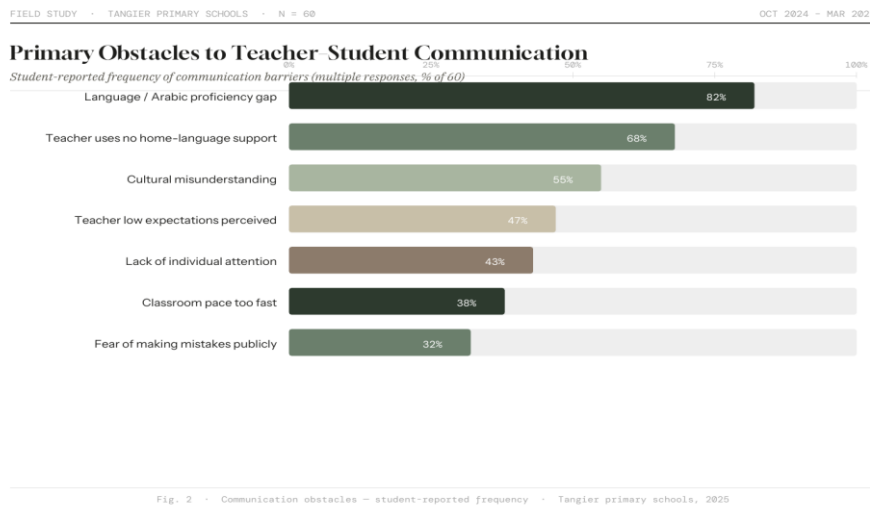


Figure 2. Communication barriers — student-reported frequency, multiple responses as % of N = 60.

Language and Arabic proficiency gaps dominate, cited by **82 per cent** of students — unsurprising in a context where instructional media (Arabic/French) rarely overlaps with students' home languages (Bambara, Wolof, Lingala, and others). Critically, **68 per cent report receiving no home-language support**, signalling that teachers make little systematic effort to bridge this gap. Cultural misunderstanding (55%), perceived low teacher expectations (47%), insufficient individual attention (43%), fast classroom pace (38%), and fear of public error (32%) complete a hierarchy of interlocking barriers.

The primacy of language barriers corroborates Gür et al. (2022), who found linguistic distance to be "the most basic problem" in Turkish classrooms hosting Syrian migrant students. Hameed et al. (2025) further document how language insufficiency cascades into reduced peer interaction and compromised teacher–student relations. That 68 per cent of students receive no home-language scaffolding is a structural absence: Allard et al. (2023) demonstrate that warm, academically effective teacher–student relationships remain achievable without shared languages *if* deliberate translinguaging strategies are employed — a practice conspicuously absent in this sample. The 47 per cent perceiving low teacher expectations is particularly consequential: Alan et al. (2021) showed experimentally that teacher ethnic prejudice significantly reduces inter-ethnic social ties and heightens peer-violence risk for newly arrived refugee children, underscoring that expectation effects operate at a structural, not merely psychological, level.

Teacher Supportiveness Across Schools

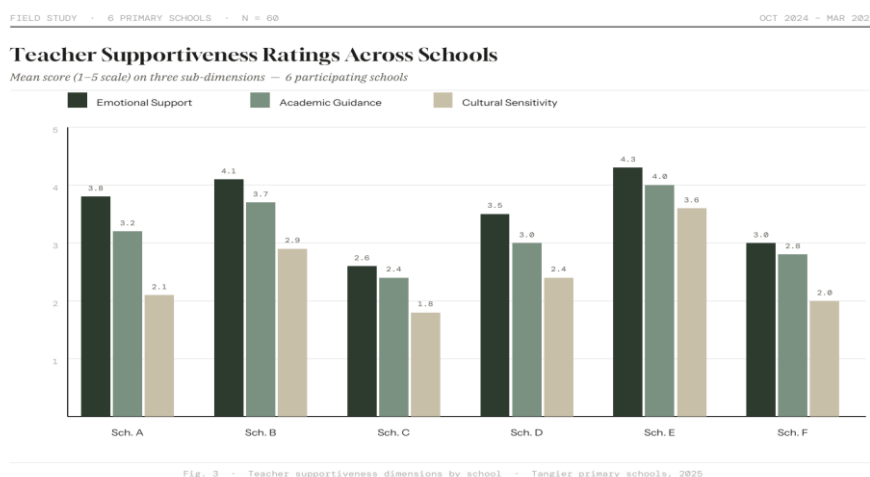


Figure 3. Teacher supportiveness by school — three sub-dimensions, 1–5 scale (N = 60).

Figure 3 reveals stark between-school variance. **Cultural sensitivity** scores the lowest across all six schools, ranging from 1.8 (School C) to 3.6 (School E) — even the strongest performer falls below the threshold typically associated with inclusive classroom climates. Emotional support and academic guidance scores are higher and more variable (School E: 4.3 and 4.0; School C: 2.6 and 2.4), suggesting that individual school leadership and ethos drive the relational conditions that migrant students encounter.

The consistent deficit in cultural sensitivity aligns with Romijn et al. (2021), whose review of 45 professional-development studies found that intercultural competence gains require embedded, contextual training with guided reflection — precisely the kind of institutional investment absent in most of the schools surveyed. The between-school variance itself echoes Martin et al. (2023): belonging for migrant children in Irish schools was not institutionally guaranteed but depended on localised teacher dispositions and micro-level interactions. Biasutti et al. (2021) further identify school principal engagement as a pivotal determinant of inclusive climate — a factor that appears highly uneven across this Tangier sample. The gap between acceptable emotional support scores and poor cultural sensitivity scores suggests teachers may be willing but not equipped: Medina Podadera et al. (2023) characterise this as the difference between relational goodwill and pedagogic competence.

Teacher Intercultural Preparedness

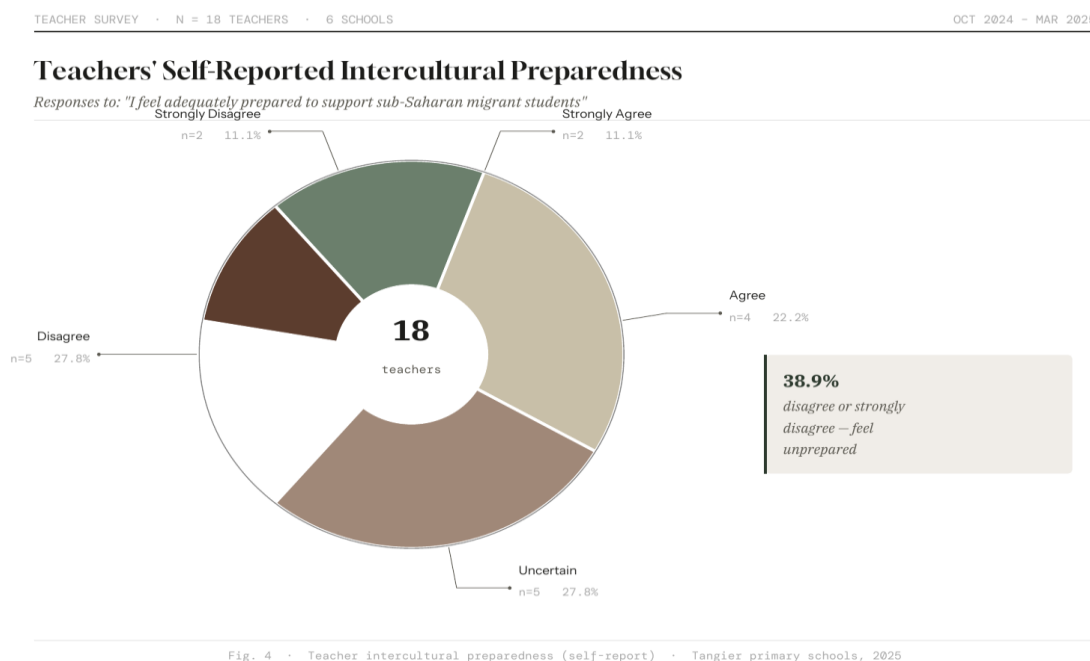


Figure 4. Teacher self-reported intercultural preparedness — Likert scale (N = 18 teachers).

Only **33.3 per cent of teachers** (Strongly Agree + Agree) feel adequately prepared to support sub-Saharan migrant students. The largest group — **27.8 per cent Uncertain** — reflects ambiguous professional self-concept rather than acknowledged deficit, while **38.9 per cent disagree or strongly disagree**, marking explicit unpreparedness. Combined, **66.7 per cent** of classroom teachers either doubt or are unsure about their capacity — a figure that creates direct interpretive linkage with Figure 2's 47 per cent perceiving low teacher expectations.

This proportion aligns closely with the OECD benchmark documented by Uibu et al. (2022): globally, only 35 per cent of teachers report feeling prepared for multicultural classrooms. The Moroccan context compounds generic unpreparedness: sub-Saharan students bring linguistic profiles (multilingual African repertoires), cultural scripts, and often precarious sociolegal circumstances that fall outside standard Moroccan teacher-education curricula. The 27.8 per cent who are Uncertain represent a critical policy target: Sjøen (2023) showed that teachers who encounter cultural difference without reflective scaffolding tend to overestimate their intercultural progress while deepening stereotyped thinking. Romijn et al. (2021) supply the remedial framework — embedded professional development featuring enactment and guided reflection is the intervention most likely to convert uncertainty into genuine intercultural competence.

Synthesis and Policy Implications

Across all four dimensions, the data reveal a structural gap between the educational entitlements formally accorded to sub-Saharan migrant children in Moroccan policy and the relational conditions they encounter in Tangier's primary classrooms. A meaningful minority benefit from warm, protective teacher relationships — relationships that Wang (2025) and Ialuna et al. (2024) identify as the strongest school-based predictor of migrant children's academic adjustment. The majority, however, navigate a classroom environment characterised by unmediated language barriers, culturally thin pedagogy, and teachers who are themselves unequipped. These conditions are mutually reinforcing: teacher unpreparedness generates low expectations; students perceive those expectations and disengage; disengagement further reduces the relational investment teachers make. Eden et al. (2024) argue that interrupting such cycles requires systemic institutional commitment — professional development mandates, curriculum reform, and community partnerships — rather than reliance on individual teacher goodwill. The present study's between-school variance suggests the conditions for that interruption exist in isolated pockets; expanding them to system level remains the central policy challenge.

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