

# Common Threads for Inclusive Education



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## Immigrant and Refugee Students

### PLANNING YOUR LEARNING

How can I support the learning of students who come as immigrants and refugees to Canada, and advance intercultural understanding in an inclusive education environment?

### FIRST STEPS

Throughout Canada's history, immigrants and refugees have come to Canada to seek adventure, opportunity, economic prosperity, religious freedom, and escape from political prosecution, civil strife and war. The media is full of stories about the experiences of refugees coming to Canada and the impact on the communities that receive them. Some of these stories are about the challenges; others are about the successes and benefits of becoming a multicultural society. These stories also play out in our schools, where teachers continue to be the leaders in building inclusive learning environments in which diversity is embraced and every student is welcomed, cared for, respected and safe. Regardless of how immigrants and refugees arrive in our communities, they all have one thing in common: they want their children to succeed in school. In this publication, the term newcomer refers to people who are classed as immigrant or refugee according to Statistics Canada.

*Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard.*

—Liz Fosslien and  
Mollie West Duffy  
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In 2018, Canada admitted 321,000 new permanent residents. Of those, 42,000 (or 13 per cent) settled in Alberta.

—Government of Canada 2020





*Newcomer students will flourish in an inclusive learning environment.*

The Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2018) outlines teachers' responsibilities in a culturally diverse, inclusive learning environment. First, teachers need to be prepared for teaching in an intercultural classroom. Working with newcomer students requires an understanding of the contextual variables that can affect student learning. These include the student's proficiency in the English or French language, level of formal schooling and achievement, individual learning strengths and needs, cultural background, family composition, and emotional needs, including personal loss and possibly trauma. Teachers can support newcomer student learning by building positive and productive relationships with students, parents or guardians, members of the student learning team, and the local community to provide culturally responsive instruction and engaging learning opportunities. Newcomer students will flourish in an inclusive learning environment founded on equality and respect, in which diversity is embraced and every student feels a sense of belonging.

## INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The Teaching Quality Standard requires teachers to build positive and productive relationships with students, parents and the school community to support student learning by honouring cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understanding (Alberta Education 2018). The UNESCO glossary of curriculum terminology defines *intercultural understanding* as an awareness, understanding and appreciation of one's own and other cultures and implies openness and respect for other cultures (UNESCO 2013, 32). Intercultural understanding is a mindset, a way of thinking and being in the world. It has three components:

- Recognizing culture (values, beliefs, customs, and ways of thinking and behaving) and developing respect for cultural diversity in the school community
- Interacting and empathizing with others from different cultures
- Learning from intercultural experiences, challenging stereotyping of cultural groups, and taking responsibility for understanding why other peoples' choices can be different from your own because of cultural perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

The goals of interculturalism are to enhance mutual understanding, reduce marginalization and build inclusion. Students who are marginalized because of their culture may have feelings of isolation, frustration and rejection. Such feelings can affect a student's self-esteem, academic motivation and achievement, and sense of identity. When teachers incorporate a culturally responsive pedagogy that is sensitive and responsive to cultural differences, it promotes equity in the classroom, resulting in greater social and academic success for students (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA] 2010).

For more information on intercultural understanding:

- Rader, Debra. "Five Things You Need to Know About Intercultural Understanding." <https://debrarader.com/five-things-you-need-to-know-about-intercultural-understanding/>
- Canadian Education Association. EdCan Network. 2019. "Developing Intercultural Competence." [www.edcan.ca/articles/developing-intercultural-competence/](http://www.edcan.ca/articles/developing-intercultural-competence/)

## Culture

Culture is “the way we do things around here.” Culture is composed of integrated patterns of human behaviour influenced by social groups. The groups can be differentiated by gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ideology, nationality, language, religion, occupation and other factors. A person can belong to many cultures simultaneously, and can be born into or adopt a culture. Culture is not static nor is it hereditary. It is learned. It is constantly changing as people enter new environments and create new affiliations. Nothing in society is culture free. Students and teachers are influenced by their unique cultural beliefs and practices. These cultural differences are generally manifested in how we

- approach learning,
- communicate,
- deal with conflict,
- complete tasks,
- make decisions and
- reveal information about ourselves to others (ATA 2010).

Newcomer students face many challenges as they adjust to life in Canada. They must often learn a new language, make new friends, learn new cultural norms and watch their parents deal with issues of settlement and finding employment. Teachers can support newcomer students by recognizing that the social, emotional and cultural needs of their students must be addressed along with the academics.



*The goals of interculturalism are to enhance mutual understanding, reduce marginalization and build inclusion.*

## UNDERSTANDING NEWCOMER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

A newcomer student's life experiences can dramatically affect his or her ability to learn and to become part of the school. While some newcomer students adjust to school relatively easily, many experience difficulties based on a number of factors:

- The impact of leaving home and other family members
- The history and political situation of the country of origin
- Access to formal schooling
- Parents' educational background
- Proficiency in English or French
- Alberta school routines and culture
- Unfamiliarity with classroom behavioural expectations

### Cultural Adaptation

Newcomer students, like their parents, will go through a cultural adaptation during their resettlement period. The Immigration Services Association of Nova Scotia has described this as a four-stage adaptation process, which helps teachers to understand the experiences of their students and support them in their adjustment.

#### Stage 1: Happiness and fascination

- Occurs shortly after arrival to Canada.
- The person feels excited, confident, optimistic and hopeful.
- The person focuses on the similarities between Canada and country of origin.

#### Stage 2: Disappointment, confusion, frustration and irritation

- Occurs during the first six months in Canada.
- The person feels frustrated and disappointed, focusing on differences between self and Canadians.
- The person misses family and feels lonely and guilty for leaving family left behind.

#### Stage 3: Gradual adjustment or recovery

- The person feels more confident and in control.
- The person starts to get involved in community.
- The person better understands how to adapt to Canada.

#### Stage 4: Acceptance and adjustment

- The person feels comfortable in Canada.
- The person has made friends and is more involved in the community.
- The person understands how things are done in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

If there are no supports or effective interventions to help students who are struggling to cope with these factors and stages of cultural adaptation, the following reactions can occur. Students may

- have trouble forming positive relationships with teachers and other students;
- become angry and aggressive;
- experience depression, anxiety or post traumatic stress disorder;
- feel alienated and rejected;
- seek to belong by joining antisocial peer groups such as gangs;
- struggle academically and appear to make little to no progress;
- engage in high-risk behaviours and substance abuse;
- have a negative attitude toward schooling in general; or
- become overachievers and focus exclusively on their studies to the exclusion of other activities.

It is important to remember that not all students will react the same way. While some will have problems, others are more resilient, cope well and adjust with few difficulties (ATA 2017, 7).

For more information on cultural adaptation:

- PolicyWise for Children & Families. "Understanding Refugee Populations: Key Considerations for Educational Environments with Roxanne Felix-Mah." Video (21:55). [https://policywise.com/video\\_library/understanding-refugee-populations-key-considerations-for-educational-environments-with-roxanne-felix-mah/](https://policywise.com/video_library/understanding-refugee-populations-key-considerations-for-educational-environments-with-roxanne-felix-mah/)
- Canadian Paediatric Society. Caring for Kids New to Canada. "Adaptation and Acculturation." [www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/adaptation](http://www.kidsnewtocanada.ca/culture/adaptation)



*Newcomer students will go through a cultural adaptation during their resettlement process.*

## PROVIDE A WELCOMING, CARING, SAFE AND RESPECTFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Teachers working to provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment for newcomer students need to develop cultural competence. Culturally competent individuals accept and respect cultural differences, pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, continue to self-assess their cultural awareness, and expand their cultural knowledge in order to better meet the needs of minority populations.<sup>3</sup> Culturally competent teachers consider the students' culture needs as well as their social, emotional and academic needs. The first priority when welcoming a newcomer student is to make them feel respected, safe and cared for by their teacher and fellow students.

Teachers will often be introduced to the student and their family early in the orientation process. This is an opportunity to learn about the student's family, culture and past experiences. Learn about the cultural protocols so that you are able to respectfully greet the student and their family. When parents don't speak English or French, try to connect with interpreters or cultural brokers trained to bridge and liaise between cultures. Call home to share the student's positive growth and achievement. This helps build a positive relationship with the family and dispels the myth that the school communicates only when there is a problem.

Welcoming the newcomer student to the classroom is a process of social immersion. Focus on supporting the student's social and emotional needs to feel comfortable in the school community. Once they start to adapt to their new school, they are more able to focus on academic work.

- Encourage and prepare students to welcome the newcomer student.
- Identify students in the class who are respected by their peers and who would be interested in assisting a newcomer student.
- Introduce the newcomer student by correctly pronouncing their name. Don't take the liberty of using a nickname, because many cultures are very sensitive about honouring a person's name.
- Encourage students to correct you if you mispronounce the student's name. Students might be fearful or reluctant to do so.
- Introduce the newcomer student to school personnel who will be in the hallways, cafeteria, library and playground. It is important if the school has a security

guard or resource officer that the newcomer student is introduced to that person and knows that they are there for the protection and safety of all students.

- Learn a few basic words and phrases in the student's language such as *hello*, *have a nice day* and *thank you*.
- Confront prejudice and discrimination, including stereotyping, derogatory language and name calling. Immediately intervene, taking the opportunity to teach respect and tolerance. And take advantage of opportunities to address common myths and misconceptions.
- Develop the whole child by looking for unique skills and talents, encouraging interests and exposing the newcomer student to subjects and activities that they may never have experienced before.
- Help students feel welcome by acknowledging cultural and traditional days that are significant to the students.
- Encourage participation in clubs, after-school activities, sports and school functions. Newcomer students will adjust more quickly if they develop friendships.
- Be aware of signals that newcomer students are floundering, experiencing bullying or developing unhealthy relationships. Many newcomer students will not talk to anyone about their problems because of cultural protocols, fear of punishment or embarrassment.<sup>4</sup>

For more information on cultural practices of other countries:

- Government of Canada. Global Affairs. Centre for Intercultural Learning. "Country Insights." [www.international.gc.ca/cil-cai/country\\_insights-apercus\\_pays/countryinsights-apercus\\_pays.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.international.gc.ca/cil-cai/country_insights-apercus_pays/countryinsights-apercus_pays.aspx?lang=eng)

For more information on cultural competence:

- National Education Association. "Diversity Toolkit: Cultural Competence for Educators." [www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm](http://www.nea.org/tools/30402.htm)

## PLANNING FOR INSTRUCTION

Culturally competent teachers intentionally respond to and celebrate the cultural diversity in their classrooms and community. This involves developing a culturally responsive curriculum that is more than celebrating the food, arts and clothing of different cultures. It acknowledges and values the legitimacy of different cultures, not just the dominant culture, and encourages intercultural understanding for all students. It integrates cultural aspects into the curriculum, rather than adding them on as a special activity or separate unit or course (UNESCO 2013).

Culturally responsive curriculum strategies include the following:

- Recognizing the diversity within cultures. Don't assume that because students come from the same country or region, they share the same culture.
- Learn more about your students' culture. Become aware of students' cultural needs, such as food restrictions and religious holidays or customs that may affect their school attendance.
- Use teaching strategies that consider culture, understanding the core beliefs and gender roles of the student's culture that may affect student participation and influence attitudes.
- Include cultural resources and activities that relate to the lives of all students:
  - › Represent achievements of different cultures in curricular resources.
  - › Assemble resources that reflect a variety of cultural perspectives.
  - › Integrate diverse cultural issues and concepts into curriculum.
- Invite parent participation and use community cultural resources in classroom activities.
- Recognize newcomer student strengths such as bilingualism, biculturalism, prior education, resilience and adaptability, and family and cultural achievements.
- Engage in personal reflection on your biases that may reinforce stereotypes. Overcome your biases by becoming more sensitive and knowledgeable about cultural differences.

For more information on culturally responsive pedagogy:

- English as a Second Language Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. 2010. *Understanding ESL Learners: Moving Toward Cultural Responsiveness—A Guide for Teachers*. [www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-6%20Moving%20Toward%20Cultural%20Responsiveness.pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-6%20Moving%20Toward%20Cultural%20Responsiveness.pdf)
- Maria P Cantu. 2008. "Chapter 8: Qualities of Culturally Sensitive Teachers." *Culturally Responsive Classroom Management and Motivation Handbook*. University of Texas. <https://sites.google.com/site/crmmprojectsite/Home/chapter-4--qualities-of-culturally-sensitive-teachers>

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS

Some school jurisdictions have established intake programs to support newcomer students when they first enrol in school. These programs include an orientation, language proficiency assessment, consideration of program placement, and access to community and family support. Age-appropriate grade placement is considered best for newcomer students, including English as a second language learners (ESL), because the students' academic and social development is fostered when they are able to take part in the learning process with their peers (Alberta Education 2007).

The needs of newcomer students are best met when teachers work collaboratively to differentiate or modify programs, provide explicit ESL instruction and create an environment of intercultural understanding. In an inclusive learning environment, newcomer students may require language instruction or other program accommodations and/or modifications to accommodate their curriculum knowledge levels.

Instructional strategies and supports for newcomer students include the following:

- Differentiate instruction so that the newcomer student can be successful in learning new information. Identify curriculum essential skills, concepts and processes that the student should learn and participate in. Select relevant vocabulary that the student must understand.
- Provide written notes, summaries, learning activity instructions and prereading. Newcomer students can read along and highlight ideas and words.
- Use graphic organizers to represent ideas or texts being studied. Graphic organizers help ESL students to understand the concept and reduce the load on short-term memory. Graphic organizers link language and content, and form a bridge to knowledge that students may already have in their first language.
- Use technology aids, such as Google Translate and text-to-speech software, to support ESL student learning.
- Provide accommodations to meet newcomer student learning needs, including additional time for assignments, tiered instructional activities based on their abilities, access to resources of different reading levels and working with a student partner.
- Ask students differentiated questions, based on their level of language and curriculum knowledge. Provide sufficient time for them to conceptualize the answer and formulate a response. Questioning promotes



*Culturally competent teachers intentionally respond to and celebrate the cultural diversity in their classrooms and community.*

risk taking, self-confidence and pride in being able to communicate and participate in class.

- Cooperative learning is important to second language learning and social inclusion, but if not carefully structured can be an uncomfortable or even threatening experience for newcomer students. Structure cooperative learning by carefully organizing the groups so that the newcomer student will be with supportive students.
- Plan group work so that the task and roles are specific and the newcomer student can participate in a way that reflects their abilities. Differentiate products to provide alternatives to oral participation until the student feels comfortable.
- Hold high expectations for student learning and use authentic assessment strategies. Offer students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning and place less emphasis on written responses.
- Conference one on one with the newcomer student to privately check for understanding, provide positive corrective feedback and offer additional instruction.

For more information on ESL instructional strategies and supports:

- Alberta Education. 2007. *English as a Second Language (ESL): Guide to Implementation Kindergarten to Grade 9*. <https://education.alberta.ca/media/563809/esl-guide-to-implementation-k-9.pdf>
- English as a Second Language Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. 2010. *Understanding ESL Learners: Teaching in the Content Areas*. <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-3%20Teaching%20in%20the%20Content%20Areas.pdf>

## NEXT STEPS

Welcoming newcomer students and supporting their learning is complex work. Teachers promote intercultural understanding by knowing and caring for every student and celebrating the rich cultural diversity in the learning community. Teachers can develop a culturally responsive curriculum and identify instructional strategies and supports that best meet the newcomer student's learning needs by working collaboratively with the student's learning team, including ESL specialists and cultural advisors. As well, developing positive working relationships with parents and providing culturally responsive and meaningful opportunities for them to support student learning will support cultural adaptation and enhance student achievement.

Intercultural understanding embraces the principles of equality to benefit all students in the learning community. Culturally competent teachers continue to critically examine themselves and develop their consciousness about their own sociocultural identities and issues of inequality that may affect their students. Intercultural understanding is an ongoing process, supported by self-reflection and professional development, to establish and sustain an inclusive, multicultural, democratic society.

## CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING

Are you teaching in a welcoming, caring, safe and respectful intercultural, inclusive learning environment? How do you know?

How have you adapted your classroom curriculum to ensure that it is culturally responsive?

What strategies do you use to monitor the social, emotional and academic needs of newcomer students?

Learn about the cultural events offered in your community. Attend a cultural event with a colleague to try some new cultural experiences, food and celebrations.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alberta Teachers' Association. 2010. *Here Comes Everyone: Teaching in the Intercultural Classroom*. [www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/MON-3%20Here%20comes%20everyone.pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/MON-3%20Here%20comes%20everyone.pdf)

Alberta Teachers' Association. 2012. "Welcoming Refugee Children to the Alberta Classroom." *Just in Time* 12, no 1. [www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Just-In-Time/Just%20in%20Time%2012-1%20\(April%202017\).pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Just-In-Time/Just%20in%20Time%2012-1%20(April%202017).pdf)

The ATA has partnered with the Alberta Multicultural Education Foundation to develop a series of publications to support teachers working with newcomer students from India, South Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Arab countries, Central Africa, Philippines and Karen refugee families. [www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity-Equity-and-Human-Rights/Resources/Pages/Resources.aspx#:~:text=Working%20with%20Immigrant%20Students%20and%20Families](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity-Equity-and-Human-Rights/Resources/Pages/Resources.aspx#:~:text=Working%20with%20Immigrant%20Students%20and%20Families) (accessed November 24, 2021)

"Creating Welcoming and Caring Environments for Refugee Students and Their Families with Christine Oliver, CBE." Video (17:50). PolicyWise for Children & Families. [https://policywise.com/video\\_library/creating-welcoming-and-caring-environments-for-refugee-students-and-their-families-with-christine-oliver-cbe/](https://policywise.com/video_library/creating-welcoming-and-caring-environments-for-refugee-students-and-their-families-with-christine-oliver-cbe/)

"Welcome to Canada: Supporting Immigrant and Refugees in the Classroom, 4 Part Series." Alberta Health Services. Mental Health Online Resources for Educators (MORE). <https://more.hmhc.ca/courses/inclusive-education/welcome-to-canada-supporting-immigrants-and-refugees-students/> (accessed August 11, 2020)

*Editor's note: Except as noted, URLs in this document were verified on August 5, 2020.*

## NOTES

1. Government of South Australia. Department of Education. "Intercultural Understanding." [www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/your-childs-education/australian-curriculum-general-capabilities/intercultural-understanding](http://www.education.sa.gov.au/parenting-and-child-care/your-childs-education/australian-curriculum-general-capabilities/intercultural-understanding)

2. Immigration Services Association of Nova Scotia. "Stages of Adapting to Life in Canada." [www.isans.ca/get-settled/community-wellness-services/stages-of-adapting-to-life-in-canada/](http://www.isans.ca/get-settled/community-wellness-services/stages-of-adapting-to-life-in-canada/)

3. English as a Second Language Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. *Understanding ESL Learners: Moving Toward Cultural Responsiveness- a Guide for Teachers*. <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Specialist-Councils/ESL-3-6%20Moving%20Toward%20Cultural%20Responsiveness.pdf>

4. New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance. *Welcoming Refugee Students: Strategies for Classroom Teachers*. <https://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>

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Alberta Teachers' Association. 2010. *Here Comes Everyone: Teaching in an Intercultural Classroom*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Teachers' Association. Available at [www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/MON-3%20Here%20comes%20everyone.pdf](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/MON-3%20Here%20comes%20everyone.pdf) (accessed August 5, 2020).

———. 2017. "Newcomers." *Just in Time* 12, no 1: 5–8. Available at [www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/Publications/Pages/Just%20in%20Time%20Newsletter.aspx](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/Publications/Pages/Just%20in%20Time%20Newsletter.aspx) (accessed August 5, 2020).

Government of Canada. 2020. *2019 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration*. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Available at [www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2019.html#s11](http://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2019.html#s11) (accessed September 29, 2020).

UNESCO. 2013. *IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology*. Geneva: UNESCO International Bureau of Education. Available at [www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/ibe-glossary-curriculum.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/resources/ibe-glossary-curriculum.pdf) (accessed August 4, 2020).