

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Creating Welcoming and Caring Environments for Refugee Students and their Families

Part 1. Understanding Refugee Populations

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Understanding the refugee experience has important implications for educators.

Key understandings

- Refugees are people who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.
- Worldwide, over 50 per cent of refugees are under 18.
- Independent immigrants plan to leave home and settle in a new country. In contrast, refugees are forced to flee, often under traumatic conditions (e.g., war, political persecution, natural disasters). The refugee experience often includes loss, grief and trauma.
- In Canada, refugees may be privately sponsored, government assisted or jointly sponsored (government and private).
- Currently, refugees make up approximately 10 per cent of the total number of immigrants coming to Canada, while economic immigrants (approximately 70 per cent) and family sponsored immigrants (approximately 20 per cent) account for the remaining 90 per cent.
- In addition, temporary foreign workers may come to Canada with their own children, or have children while they are here.
- Before coming to Canada, some refugees may have been living for years in a refugee camp with no basic amenities, rationed food and supplies, and limited or no schooling or health services.
- In 2002, Canadian immigration polity changed from selecting the most skilled to accepting the most vulnerable refugees.
- In Canada, refugees must pay back government loans (up to \$10,000 per family)
- To support refugee students, schools need to consider:
 - their diverse backgrounds and experiences
 - the importance of identity and culture
 - pre-migration and post-migration challenges (e.g., economic integration, isolation, racism, uncertain migration status).

Key understandings (cont.)

- Best practices for supporting students with refugee backgrounds include:
 - investing in thorough assessment
 - investing in school-community and family partnerships that address mental health and other social needs over the long term
 - focusing on inclusion and social cohesion through whole school approaches that build social-emotional competency
 - recognizing and acknowledging that discrimination can impact students' lives
 - promoting activities such as sports and arts to build positive experiences and connections
 - integrating student supports (e.g. English as Another Language teachers) with the whole school community.
- Families and communities of refugee students can be a valuable resource for student success.
- Research shows that both intra- and inter-cultural relationships increase trust in others.
- Research also shows that encouraging students to respect and appreciate both their home culture and Canadian culture results in higher educational achievement and higher levels of adult adjustment.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- What strategies can school staff use to better understand the refugee experience of students?
- How can schools ensure that families and communities of refugee students have opportunities to contribute to student success?
- What strategies can schools use to demonstrate respect and appreciation for students' home cultures?

For more information

- Visit the Alberta Teachers' Association website to view the resource, *Here Comes Everyone: Teaching in the Intercultural Classroom*.