



Cultural Classroom Adjustments and Trauma Awareness for Newcomer Students

Competency

The educator applies knowledge of cultural classroom adjustment and trauma to create a culturally responsive and emotionally supportive classroom, recognizing signs of culture shock or trauma and implementing strategies to foster resilience and well-being among newcomer students.

Key Method

By discovering information from the lived experiences of newcomer students, educators will learn about potential difficulties and develop strategies to support them in their cultural, social, and emotional adjustment in their classrooms.

Method Components

Who is a Newcomer?

A newcomer student is generally defined as a K-12 student who was born outside the United States and has recently arrived, typically within the last three years, and who is still learning English. This definition often includes students who may also be identified as English learners, asylees, refugees, unaccompanied youth, undocumented youth, migratory students, or those with interrupted or limited education.

Recognize that Newcomers Arrive with Different Backgrounds

When newcomer students arrive in the U.S., they come from countries all over the world. Their backgrounds include a range of cultural and educational systems. They may be fleeing war, persecution, or violence. Their families may be coming for work opportunities in agricultural sites around the U.S. They may be from a country that favors male education over the education of females. Or they may be from a country with intense educational expectations. They may have had limited or interrupted educational opportunities. The educational, linguistic, physical, social, emotional, and mental health needs of refugees and students with limited or interrupted formal education can be quite different when compared to students who have recently immigrated to the country voluntarily or with strong formal education in their first language.

Definitions:

Refugees: They have left their home country for several different reasons. These may include persecution for:

- Religion
- Political opinion
- Membership in a particular social group (like LGBTQ+ individuals in a country where that's criminalized)
- Race
- Nationality

They may have experienced torture, upheaval, perilous journeys, tremendous loss, or violence. They typically cannot return to their home country. Most refugees can stay in the country to which they fled, but not always. If not, they may participate in a third country resettlement.

Resettlement applies to a small number of refugees, less than 1 percent, and addresses the most vulnerable in the population: those with emergency or urgent safety or health concerns; those who are survivors of torture or violence; or children at risk.

The refugee resettlement process involves several steps, primarily managed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the U.S. Department of State. Refugees are initially identified and screened by UNHCR, and then, if found eligible, are referred to U.S. resettlement support centers for further processing, including background checks and interviews. After approval, refugees receive medical examinations, cultural orientation,

and assistance with travel arrangements and initial needs upon arrival in the United States. The process prioritizes:

- Survivors of violence or torture
- Women and girls at risk
- People with medical needs
- Children alone or separated from family
- Those facing long-term displacement with no safe option

Asylum seekers: People who have left their home country and are asking for protection. They are residing in another country because they fear persecution or serious harm if they go back. Until their case is reviewed and a decision is made, they're in a kind of legal limbo. In the U.S., if their claim for asylum is accepted, they're granted asylum and can stay—sometimes with the right to work, access healthcare, or eventually apply for permanent residency. If the claim is denied, they might have to leave the country. People usually seek asylum because they're at risk due to things like:

- Political beliefs
- Religion
- Race or ethnicity
- Nationality
- Being part of a particular social group (like LGBTQ+ individuals in a country where that's criminalized)

The key difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee is **legal status**: Asylum seekers are in the country and are *waiting* for a decision on their claim for protection.

Refugees have already been recognized as needing protection under international law. If an asylum seeker is living outside the U.S., they can go through the refugee resettlement program.

Immigrants: People who have moved from one country to another with the intention of living there permanently or for a long period of time. They might leave their home country for many reasons—better job opportunities, safety from conflict or persecution, education, or to reunite with family. Immigrants can be classified in different ways:

- **Legal immigrants:** Those who have permission to live and work in the new country.
- **Undocumented immigrants:** those who move without official permission or overstay visas.

NOTE: Per Plyler v. Doe, school personnel can NOT ask about the immigration status of a student.

Migrants: People who move from one place to another—either within their own country or across borders—usually to improve their living conditions or find work. The Migrant Education Program for the U.S. Dept. of Education focuses on students whose parent or guardian is a migratory worker in the agricultural, dairy, lumber, or fishing industries and whose family has moved for migratory work during the past three years.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment for Newcomer Students

1. The first step for creating a supportive environment begins at registration. Understanding the background of a student contributes to the educator's ability to support the newcomer student's needs. Some immigrant and refugee student records that are important for registration can be challenging for districts and schools to collect and accurately record. These include student name, age, and health records.
 - It's important to record a student's name based on their cultural norms. For instance, Spanish names often include the family names of both parents. Cantonese names may list the family name first. It's important to use resources to ensure the names are accurate. Schools can consult a guide to facilitate accurate recording of student names.
 - Making the effort to correctly pronounce a student's name is vital to helping the student feel validated and that his/her identity is important and seen. Do not try to "Americanize" a student's name or give them nicknames not of the student's choosing.
 - Knowing a student's age for appropriate grade level placement can be a challenge.
 - For refugee students, the resettlement process may include designating a birth date, typically Jan. 1 of an assumed year. (This means that siblings may all have the same birthday with variance in the year.)
 - In some Asian cultures, age is often calculated based on the lunar calendar, with a person's age increasing with the beginning of each lunar new year, regardless of their actual birthdate. This means that a baby born a week before the lunar new year might be considered one year old at birth and two years old the following week.
 - Some countries have grade levels that don't align with U.S. grade levels.
 - Determining the newcomer student's English language proficiency is essential to provide appropriate support. This is

usually done with a district or state's English language proficiency assessment.

- Accessing student education records is an important step.
 - These records may be in a language the educator cannot read nor have access to a translator for that particular language. In these situations, an online translation program such as Google Translate, AI, or other online sources could be used.
 - Determining if the student has gaps in their previous educational journey can help educators understand specific learning needs. In the case of students with no previous schooling, it's important to help students explore unfamiliar items in a classroom, as well as understand classroom tools and how and when to use them. For students who have had consistent schooling in their native country, it's important to continue their educational trajectory, using the knowledge and background they bring with them.
- 2. Understanding the culture a student brings with them is essential for creating a welcoming classroom environment. This may include food customs, religious or cultural apparel, religious observances, etc.
- 3. Knowing the students' background and if they may have experienced trauma in their native country is vital for an educator to be able to support students who may have a variety of triggers or traumatic experiences.

What is Childhood Trauma?

Childhood trauma is recognized as a significant event or events, either witnessed or directly engaged in, that has a lasting effect on a student's ability to create and maintain positive engagement in aspects of learning and interactions with others. A student's history of potentially traumatic experiences can profoundly impact their behavior, emotions, and learning. Sensitivity to this reality, while recognizing the diversity of how trauma manifests, is essential for providing effective instruction and support for newcomer students.

Understanding the potential impact of trauma should remain at the forefront of our minds. The degree of trauma, the frequency of the trauma, the nature of the trauma, and complex environmental factors before, during, and after the trauma can play an essential role in the manifestation of behaviors in the learning context. Recognizing these behaviors as potential indicators of trauma allows you to respond with patience, compassion, and

assistance. Awareness can help us develop strategies to navigate challenges and celebrate our students' resilience.

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health

The social, emotional, and mental health of all students is important, but may be more so for students who have moved often for financial reasons, as for families of migrant workers, or those who have immigrated to a new country. They are often trying to navigate an unfamiliar school system, learn a new language, and feel accepted in the new environment. Educators must explore ways to meet these varying needs of newcomer students.

Some strategies may include:

- Use cooperative learning activities
- Have a structured and consistent routine in place
- Focus on the strengths and resilience students have already shown in their lives: what they have overcome, their willingness to come to school, their effort to learn, being a good friend, and anything else you've observed in the student.
- Incorporate a student's home language in the classroom
- Listen to the stories they are expressing
- Give them a safe space to talk to a trusted adult

Supporting Rationale and Research

California Department of Education. (n.d.). Newcomer students - Multilingual learners. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/newcomerstudnts.asp>

Natoli, C. (2019, August 2). Families fleeing: Family membership as a basis for asylum (UC Hastings Research Paper No. 369). SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3445184>

National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. (n.d.). Newcomer toolkit. <https://ncela.ed.gov/newcomer-toolkit>

Office of Refugee Resettlement. (n.d.). Unaccompanied alien children. Office of the Administration for Children and Families. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/uac>

Panter-Brick, C., Dajani, R., Eggerman, M., Hermosilla, S., Sancilio, A., & Ager, A. (2018). Insecurity, distress and mental health: Experimental and randomized controlled trials of a psychosocial intervention for youth affected by the Syrian crisis. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 59(5), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12832>

Refugee Council USA. (n.d.). Resettlement process. <https://rcusa.org/resettlement/>

Strekalova-Hughes, E. (2019). Unpacking refugee flight: Critical content analysis of picturebooks featuring refugee protagonists. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 21(2), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v21i2.1871>

UNHCR. (n.d.). UN Refugee Agency/USA. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/>

UNHCR. (n.d.). U.S. resettlement partners | UNHCR US. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/resettlement-united-states/u-s-resettlement-partners>

Georgetown Law Library. (n.d.). Other online resources - Immigration & asylum law: A beginner's guide. <https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/immigration>

Resources

Classroom Environment

[5 top tips to welcome refugee students back to school | The IRC](#)
[Being a Buddy Training Slides | The IRC](#)

[8 Tips to Protect ELLs from Bullying in Your Classroom and School | Colorín Colorado](#)

[15 Tips for Creating a Safe Learning Environment](#)
[Bullying Basics | Learning for Justice](#)

[Build a Classroom Community where All Students Feel They Belong](#)

[Getting Students' Names Right | Colorín Colorado](#)

[How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment for ELLs | Colorín Colorado](#)

[Newcomer Toolkit: Creating Welcoming Environments for Newcomer Students | NCELA - English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs](#)

[Trust, Support, and Respect: Creating a Safe Classroom Environment - n2y Blog](#)

[Why Names are Important & How to Honor Them - Experiential Tools](#)

Addressing Trauma

[Addressing Student Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression | Colorín Colorado](#)

[California schools help unaccompanied immigrant students combat trauma, language barriers | EdSource](#)

[Helping Students Heal Through Love and Trust: A Social Worker's Perspective on Serving Immigrant Youth | Colorín Colorado](#)

[How to talk to kids about war and conflict | The IRC](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn this micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient in all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions

400-500 words.

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

Please answer all the following questions:

1. Describe your current classroom setting as it applies to newcomers, such as grade level, subject area, demographics of classroom and community.
2. What languages are spoken in your classroom by newcomer students?
3. Is your classroom
 - a. a transitional program where the newcomer students are there for only a short period of time before being moved into mainstream classes?
 - b. a full-time program?
 - c. a regular education classroom in which you receive newcomer students?
4. How long have your newcomer students been in the country?
5. How would you classify your newcomer students? (migrant, refugee, immigrant, etc.)

Optional: If you currently do not have any newcomer students in your setting but would like to complete this micro-credential in the event you have a newcomer student in the future, you may create a hypothetical student profile and complete each artifact with that profile. **Please indicate at the beginning of the artifact that it is a hypothetical student.**

Passing: The educator completely answers each of the questions using personal relevance and supporting evidence. Writing is organized and easy to understand.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following four artifacts as evidence of your learning. See the rubric for the passing score.

**Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to your reviewers.*

Artifact 1: Analysis of Newcomers (300-600 Words)

Students arrive as newcomers with varying levels of education. Please list all your newcomer students (use their initials or number the students) with their current grade level and the **level of education** they have attained. This may include:

- students with interrupted formal education (SIFE),
- students with limited education
- students with no prior education

Include their current **English language level** based on your district's language level assessments.

Discuss resources that were used to establish birth information and grade level placement.

Artifact 2: Student Profile (300-600 Words)

Select one newcomer student from your classroom. Create a profile for your student using the information you have obtained about their background situation and knowledge you have specific to the student. Describe the background and family situation, being mindful of **strict confidentiality**.

Include the following information:

1. What is the country of origin and/or most recent country of residence?

2. What is the background from which the student is arriving? (refugee camp, political asylum, immigration, migrant work, etc.)
3. What is the family situation, i.e., are they with guardians, immediate family, extended family, a sponsor, unaccompanied youth, etc.?
4. What trauma responses have you observed in your newcomer student?
5. What traumatic experiences are in her/his background?
 - a. Include exposure to violence from a war or civil disturbance.
 - b. Include any dangerous situations from which a student may have escaped, i.e., gangs, cartels, gender laws, abuse.
6. What is the student's English language proficiency?

Artifact 3: Plan for Strategy Implementation

(1,000-1,500 Words)

Using the information from your student profile, develop a SMART goal (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) you will use to achieve your goal in a four-week time frame. Measurement may include observations, tracking sheets, student surveys, or whatever method may best support measuring your goal to make your classroom a culturally responsive and emotionally supportive place for this student. Your plan should include **five** strategies/actions to reach your goal. Keep in mind the student's English language proficiency. **Choose ONE of the following areas:**

1. Create one SMART goal with five strategies for helping the student who displays trauma responses (*see Resources under Addressing Trauma and Social, Emotional and Mental Health*).
 - a. Consider observations and your experiences with your newcomer student dealing with trauma responses or triggers.
 - b. Determine a SMART goal based on your observations and the resources listed above.
 - c. Describe the strategies and how each will address your stated SMART goal. This could include addressing specific triggers, such as:
 - Disagreements or conflicts they may be involved in or have observed
 - Presence of police or resource officers in the school or classroom
 - Sounds of school that may be alarming: school bells, whistles on the playground or in PE classes, fire or safety drills, etc.
 - d. Explain the measurement you will use to determine if your SMART goal was achieved.

2. Create one SMART goal with five strategies for welcoming and acclimating your newcomer student to your school/classroom environment (*see Resources under Classroom Environment*).
 - a. Address the needs you observed from your newcomer student upon their arrival in your classroom. (For students entering with little or no classroom experience, this may include helping the student become familiar with classroom items, routines; using classroom tools appropriately; behaving appropriately during instruction and unstructured time).
 - b. Describe the five strategies and their implementation. Explain how each strategy will meet the SMART goal of acclimation into your school or classroom environment.
 - c. Determine how you will measure the results of your implementation, i.e., observations, tracking sheets, student surveys, student work, etc.
 - d. Consider the following:
 - Important places in the school (office, restroom, lunchroom, etc.)
 - Strategies to provide support for adjustment to consistent classroom procedures/routines
 - Using classroom materials appropriately
 - e. Explain the measurement you will use to determine if your SMART goal was achieved.

3. Create one SMART goal with five strategies that incorporate understanding and honoring of cultural, religious, and family customs (*see Resources under Cultural Differences*).
 - a. Establish a SMART goal based on your observation and information gathered from Artifact 2.
 - b. Describe the five strategies and their implementation. Explain how each strategy will meet the goal of honoring student culture and customs. Consider the following:
 - Lunch time or cafeteria support, keeping in mind their dietary expectations based on religion or culture
 - Apparel that may be unfamiliar to other students in the classroom
 - Holidays that may take them out of the classroom for family attendance, travel, etc.
 - c. Decide on a measurement that will help you know if you met your SMART goal, i.e. observation, class surveys, student acceptance of newcomer customs (no bullying or teasing about any cultural observance).

4. Create one SMART goal with five strategies that focus on the social, emotional and mental health of your newcomer student (see *Resources under Social, Emotional and Mental Health*).

- a. Establish a SMART goal that addresses behaviors you may have observed or that works to avoid possible issues that may arise.
- b. Describe the five strategies and their implementation. Explain how each strategy will positively affect the social, emotional, or mental health of your newcomer student.
- c. Decide on a way to measure attainment of your SMART goal, i.e. observations, lessons you may have implemented and their impact on students, tracking resilient responses, student surveys.

Artifact 4: Analysis of plan results

(400-700 words)

After four weeks, evaluate how your strategies impacted your student and met your SMART goal. Respond to the following questions:

- Did you meet your SMART goal? What evidence do you have that you met your SMART goal?
- If you did not meet your SMART goal, explain why.
- Which strategies were successful? Explain why.
- Which strategies were the most challenging? Explain why.
- How did the student respond to the implementation of the strategies?
- What would you change in the next iteration of your plan?
- Include authentic student reactions and personal insights.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: Analysis of Newcomers	<p>Newcomer students are listed with their levels of education.</p> <p>Newcomer students are listed with their English language proficiency.</p> <p>An explanation of how the birth records were found is included.</p> <p>A description of how grade level placement was determined is included.</p>	<p>Newcomer students are listed with their levels of education OR their English language proficiency.</p> <p>The explanation provided about finding birth records is partially completed.</p> <p>Explanation of grade level placement is partially completed.</p>	<p>List of newcomer students but no accompanying information.</p> <p>No information about birth records is included.</p> <p>No information about grade level placement is included.</p> <p>Student confidentiality is not observed.</p>
Artifact 2: Student Profile	<p>Student profile is completed.</p> <p>Profile answers all six questions.</p>	<p>Student profile is created.</p> <p>Profile answers 3-5 questions.</p>	<p>Student profile is created.</p> <p>Profile answers 1-2 questions.</p>
Artifact 3: Strategy Implementation	<p>There is a SMART goal listed for the chosen topic area.</p> <p>There are five strategies included.</p>	<p>There is a SMART goal listed.</p> <p>There are three-four strategies listed;</p>	<p>There is no SMART goal in place.</p> <p>There are zero-two strategies listed.</p>

	<p>Strategies align with the stated SMART goal.</p> <p>There is a measurement included in the plan.</p>	<p>Strategies loosely align with the stated SMART goal.</p> <p>There is a partial or incomplete measurement included.</p>	<p>Strategies don't align with the stated SMART goal.</p> <p>There is no measurement included.</p>
<p>Artifact 4: Analysis of Strategy Implementation</p>	<p>Response provides complete answers to all questions.</p> <p>Explanations are included for each response.</p> <p>Includes authentic student reactions and personal insights.</p>	<p>Response provides complete or partially complete answers to some of the questions.</p> <p>Some explanations are provided.</p>	<p>Response provides no answers to the questions.</p> <p>No explanations are provided.</p>

Part 3 Reflection

(400-500 words)

For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

**Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.*

Answer all the following questions:

1. How did creating a student profile affect your perspective of the cultural or trauma needs of your newcomer student?
2. How did completing this micro-credential influence your ability to address cultural adjustment and trauma in creating a culturally responsive and emotionally supportive classroom? Be specific, using personal examples.
3. How did implementing your plan contribute to student cultural adjustment or their response to trauma? Use specific examples.
4. Did you encounter any barriers to implementing your plan?
5. How did implementing your plan contribute to your growth as an educator?
6. What are your next steps for your newcomer students?

Passing:

The response includes:

- Information about each of the questions
- Evidence of learning
- Specific examples of how working on this micro-credential has impacted classroom practice. (This means authentic student reactions and personal insights.)
- How this learning will impact future interactions and plans for newcomer students.