How to practise cultural exchange in schools

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What is cultural exchange?

Cultural exchange in general is defined as when people of two or more different backgrounds trade ideas, feelings, stories and customs.

Cultural exchange can be used as a form of creating dialogue and understanding diversity in communities to help build community relations and cohesion.

Some examples of cultural exchange in a school context may include:

• a school trip to another country
• visiting a cultural venue, like a museum, that has exhibits and artefacts from different cultures around the world
• a culture sharing event.

For this resource, we’ll be focusing on culture sharing events; ways that schools can facilitate sharing between the different cultures that make up your school community.

Why is it important?

Undertaking cultural exchange work in your school will help you to better support the mental health and wellbeing of your school population by:

• improving respect and tolerance across the school community
• increasing self-esteem and confidence for students from racially minoritised backgrounds
• increasing students’ sense of belonging and identity
• increasing the understanding of the diversity within your setting
• increasing the understanding of the diverse skills, languages, knowledge and experiences within your setting
• improving the engagement and involvement of parents or carers from racially minoritised groups with the school
• building community relations and community cohesion
• tackling any racism and xenophobia towards refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants
• expanding the range of cultural activities and outputs in curriculum and school events
Celebrate and show appreciation for our happy occasions and celebrations, e.g. Eid for Muslims.

- Student

Listen. Listen to ethnic minorities ... Bring in parents, if they’re willing to speak on their issues, in front of the other parents. Allow “workshops” of some sort where the students can interact with each other in a real, safe and educational environment.

- Student

All quotes in this resource are from the Anna Freud Centre’s survey on racism and mental health. A total of 796 respondents aged 13 to 20 completed the survey between 23rd September and 11th October 2021.
Holding your own cultural exchange events

Cultural exchange should be a continuous process for schools, with events held throughout the year, or cultural exchange activities woven into other school events. For example, you could make cultural exchange a part of your open evenings or graduation events.

Cultural exchange activities can take place during school hours just between students, but also present a good opportunity for schools to make links with the wider school community, including with parents.

Things to keep in mind

When running cultural exchange activities, especially those involving parents and carers, schools should recognise that this can be sensitive for some people.

Some parents and carers from racially minoritised backgrounds may not have trust in the school and wider education system, and may not feel comfortable sharing their culture with fellow parents and staff. Schools must be careful to ensure that no-one feels pressured to take part in these events.

Communicating with parents and carers ahead of any cultural exchange work is crucial; explaining the reasoning behind the activity and giving parents and carers a way to raise concerns.

You could also communicate with parents post-event, sharing what took place and what was learned, which could help increase engagement ahead of your next event. Celebrating the success of the event in your school newsletter or putting up displays in areas that visitors access could be one way of doing this.

It’s also important to make sure you are not relying on teachers from racially minoritised groups to organise these events. By involving staff from all backgrounds, you can ensure that the responsibility for anti-racism work is shared equally amongst staff.
Ideas for cultural exchange activities

Every culture around the world will have its own traditions around food, clothing, music, literature and more. Celebrating these traditions is a great way for students, staff and parents and carers to learn more about each others’ backgrounds and cultures in a positive way.

There are some suggestions here for activities and events you could run in your school. You could bring these as suggestions to a staff meeting, and get colleagues to discuss any additional ideas for events.

Food

• Create a school cookbook with students submitting recipes from their cultures – you could then cook some of the recipes in class, or hold an event where students bring in their dishes to share
• Mark religious or cultural celebration days by discussing and sharing the food traditionally eaten on that day
• Invite in community members from local restaurants to share the history of their national cuisine

Clothing

• For special events where students and parents are attending in formal wear, e.g. graduation, be clear that formal wear includes the formal wear of the many cultures represented at your school
• Opportunities for staff to take part in cultural exchange events including days where staff dress in the traditional clothing from their particular cultures
Languages

- Make sure that key messages and greetings in school reception areas are presented in all of your community languages.
- Hold events in your school library that showcase your collection of books in other languages; English translations of books originally written in other languages and books written in English dialect forms.
- Share a range of ‘every day’ phrases and greetings in different languages with all teachers and students and ask people to use them on a specified day, e.g. World Languages Day.
- Invite staff, parents and carers or pupils to present an assembly about their home language, second language or powerful experiences of learning languages.
- Create a display that celebrates and explains the different forms of written alphabets and scripts used by the different language speakers in your community or in the world.
- Identify curriculum areas linked to languages that offer opportunities for cultural exchange.

Performing arts

- Students learn a song or dance from a specific culture (ideally one represented in the student population) and perform it at an assembly, open evening or parents’ evening.
- Hold a poetry or story sharing evening for students and parents.
- Identify curriculum areas linked to the performing arts that offer opportunities for cultural exchange.
Funmi, parent of a student at Malorees Junior School in North London:

My son went to school in the London Borough of Brent, the most ethnically diverse borough in the whole of the UK.

At his school there were children from Christian, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist faiths, and from lots of different socio-economic backgrounds – but the school fostered a very strong sense of belonging in all the children.

This was in no small part due to the strong emphasis on cultural exchange in the school.

Each religious festival was celebrated throughout the year, by all the children, who were taught the significance of each of the celebrations.

The parents of children who attended the school were always encouraged to be actively involved in helping to arrange school activities. This meant that many lifetime friends were formed among the parents from very diverse cultures and social groups.

One of the events held annually at the school was the ‘International Foods Evening’.

Parents each cooked a national dish from their country of origin and brought it to share with the whole school. It was always lovely to see all the large platters completely empty by the end of the event.

There was lots of recipe swapping happening too, as people were learning how delicious various dishes from around the world could be.