

Lesson 5 - How did coming to Britain change refugees' identities?

Confronting One's Identity: How Coming to Britain Changed Refugees' Ideas About Themselves

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives:

- To develop understanding for those who have been displaced and/or persecuted
- To enable students to share their knowledge and preconceptions about their own identity, and how identity can change, especially after major personal changes (such as migration, trauma, changing family dynamics, such as marriage)
- To challenge simplistic judgements and narratives

Introduction

Given the major upheavals and personal losses that refugees and migrants experience on their journeys, including the incredible sacrifices they make in creating a new life in Britain, survivors often reflect in interviews that their experiences have a measurable and profound impact on their identities. This interactive and thought-provoking lesson explores the concept of identity through the intimate experiences of refugees and migrants in post-war Britain. Although this is a conceptual and perhaps theoretical topic for young students, this lesson investigates the concept of identity through a number of exercises. By first acknowledging that identity is also formed by others' perceptions of you, and that this can often lead to multiple different identities coexisting at once, this lesson opens with a brief exercise that asks students to describe how others see them (friends, family, teacher, the Prime Minister). This quickly illustrates that no matter who *we think we are*, our identity is often not consistent, fixed, or predictable and can be seen in different ways by different people or at different times.

The lesson then exemplifies how refugees' and migrants' identities altered in three key ways when coming to Britain: physical identity, community identity, and religious identity. Survivors' testimonies illustrate how individuals coped with their changing identities. This then feeds into a more comprehensive activity which challenges students to explore all the ways in which their identities might change if they were a refugee settling in Britain. This encourages empathy by

asking students to develop a comprehensive and “360 degree” awareness of how impactful the act of migration is upon the individual, and their own perception of self.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested on the basis of a one-hour lesson, and may need adapting based on circumstances.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore, challenge and resolve misconceptions.

Resources:

- Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Print out PowerPoint

Lesson Plan

Starter: What is identity? (10 mins)

Ask students to define ‘identity’ (slide1) and give them a few minutes to discuss and feedback before looking at the official definition: do they agree? Spend a few minutes creating a list on the board of different things that are part of our identity (e.g., language, physical appearance, home country, education, age, gender etc). Remind them that identity is not just who the individual believes themselves to be – our identity is also who others perceive us to be. *Please note the slide is set up to reveal the questions as the activity moves on rather than show everything at once.

The next portion of the activity is a thought exercise, after which students are not obliged to share their answers. Students may wish to complete the matching worksheet (slide 2 on the Print Out PowerPoint). Ask the students to write 1-3 descriptive words beside each question:

1. How do you identify yourself? (e.g. I am honest, Londoner, netball player)

2. How might your parents identify you? (e.g. I am the oldest, helpful...)
3. How might your friends identify you?
4. How might your teacher identify you?
5. How might your Prime Minister identify you?

Gather some initial impressions from your students, even if they do not share their specific (personal) answers. They will quickly see that identity is not the same for each group. In fact, the less a person knows the student (e.g., the Prime Minister), the less likely the student's identity is accurately perceived.

This exercise showcases ultimately that identity is not fixed, consistent or predictable, but that multiple 'identities' can coexist at the same time; this often causes confusion.

Slide 2 – Lesson Title: How did coming to Britain change refugees' identities?

Draw students attention to the information under the image box containing the question mark. Students are not expected to know who the person being described is, but allow a moment to read and consider who it might be and what their story might suggest.

Returning the theme of the starter activity, use slide 3 to illustrate how identity can also be about external perception through a cartoon, whereby a snake is not a threatening rattlesnake, but a friendly snake with donuts on his tail.

To provoke further thought and discussion, you may ask students whether we should judge people on their outward identities – is it always accurate to who they are as a person? Why or why not? And why do we often feel inclined to judge others? Again, the goal here is to highlight the difference between how we perceive ourselves, and how others might perceive us. The gap between those two identities may be quite incompatible. In some instances, this can lead to humorous outcomes (such as with the rattlesnake cartoon). Other times, it may lead to negative outcomes, such as others feeling marginalised or targeted because of their perceived 'identity.'

Refugees, Migrants and their Identities (5 mins)

Slide 4 reintroduces the concept of identity as it relates to refugees. A quote from Ethiopian refugee who migrated to Sweden, Sewite Solomon Kebede, conveys that s/he refuses to accept the label of 'refugee'. Encourage the students to provide feedback to the group about why someone might resist the label of 'refugee'. Another question (same slide 4) prompts students

to consider when they themselves have ever been called a term that wasn't part of their identity. They could also discuss this in pairs, and feedback to the group.

This concept of changing identity shifts to refugees more broadly (slide 5), with a few key points that can be read out to the class. The final point asks "In what other ways might refugees' identities change when coming to Britain?" Can they think of any other ways that identity may be affected or changed?

Examples of Changing Identities (20 mins)

Slides 5-9 explore the concept of refugees' identities within three themes: physical, community and religious identity. Each 'theme' has a video link or audio link (with time stamps, linked on the slide) to watch with the class.

After each video, refer to the accompanying slides for questions that prompt a group conversation. Keep the discussions on each theme generally brief (max 5 minutes) so that there's enough time to address each theme.

1. Physical Identity, slide 6: Ellen Kerry Davis testimony, 48:00 to 50:25,
https://youtu.be/_cQ4uAzYp7k?t=2881
2. Community Identity, slide 7: Esperance David testimony,
<https://gatheringthevoices.com/esperance-david-integration/>
3. Religious Identity, slide 8-9: Rudi Leavor testimony, 22:05 to 25:25,
<https://youtu.be/nJj74iprpB0?t=1325>

How might your life change if you were a refugee settling in Britain? (15 mins)

Slide 10: this activity asks students to brainstorm how a refugee's life might change when settling in Britain. Give the students the worksheet (slide 3 on Print Outs). Each circle has a heading of an 'area' of someone's identity, students need to think of 2-3 specific ways in which identity may be affected and write them in the circles. Prompts for teachers are below:

- Physical appearance – style of clothes, types of shoes (sandals versus boots), hair style
- Community – You have to create new friends, new neighbors, new clubs, everything
- Religion – Your religion might be in the minority in Britain (e.g. Polish Jew in a Shtetl vs living in Protestant England), or you might have to change religious sects (orthodox/conservative vs. progressive/liberal)
- Language – learning English; means you might be multilingual or over time possibly forget your mother tongue

- Family – dynamics may change through relationship breakdowns, or new marriages, or new siblings or death of family members
- School/Education – what you're taught and how you learn might change completely, as it's a new culture; our career aspirations might also change given you're in a new country with different economies and social expectations (e.g., previously wanted to be a farmer in Sudan but now wants to be an NHS worker in Britain)
- Personality – you might believe you're no longer yourself anymore because everything externally has changed, so your core identity might not feel the same.
- Legal Name – your name might change, in order to appear less 'foreign' to local English-speaking groups, to stay safe
- Relationship with your home country – you may not want to identify as being from your native country, or you may feel like a foreigner when you revisit

Summary: How did coming to Britain change refugees' identities? (5 minutes)

Students are first prompted on Slide 11 to follow up with the starter task from slide 2, by identifying Kahin from Mogadishu – can they guess who he is today? The answer is Sir Mo Farah, the British Olympian. This is an opportunity for the class to consider the identity/identities of Hussein Abdi Kahin/Sir Mo Farah. In what ways has his identity changed? Is he an illegal immigrant or an Olympian? Is he Somali or British? Are these labels helpful in understanding him as a person? Why or why not?

Afterwards, give students 2-3 minutes to discuss the following questions in pairs (Slide 11):

- How do people see themselves, as opposed to how others see them?
- In what ways can someone's identity change?
- Do people always accept their 'new' identities? Why or why not?

Give students time to discuss their thoughts, then collect feedback from the group on these questions. This discussion provides opportunities to draw connections between how we perceive ourselves, as opposed to how others perceive us. This also interplays with how we view refugees and migrants settling in Britain, as opposed to how they view themselves.

This is also an opportunity for students to reflect on how the stigma associated with refugees and migrants. Newcomers to Britain often struggle to speak English (and often have an accent, which distinguishes them as 'different'), they may also dress differently for cultural or religious

reasons, and/or they may *feel* far more integrated to British life than others perceive them to be. Understandably, these groups may resist any attempt to categorise or label them as a 'refugee'.

These questions, and the subsequent discussion, will encourage students to take a look at how identity, and the labels we give to people (and their identities), are often inaccurate, unpredictable and arbitrary. Again, you may want to reference the photo of Hussein Abdi Kahin/Sir Mo Farah.

This discussion encourages empathy for those whose identities change as a result of external circumstances (often beyond their control, such as forced migration), and who are trying every day to better understand who they are, and who they want to become in Britain. This also asks students to grapple with complex problems and nuance about a topic which has no fixed 'answer' but is constantly shifting within an ambiguous 'grey zone' of self-discovery.

Learning Resources produced by Dr Chelsea Sambells and Hannah Randall, 2025.