



# Implementation Protocol

## Welcome To School



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## Related resources and materials

**Website:** [www.refugeeswellschool.eu](http://www.refugeeswellschool.eu)

**WTS Teacher Manual:** Tuk, B., & de Neef, M. (2020). *Welcome to School: Facilitating school-based social support for adolescent newcomers. Teacher manual.* Utrecht: Pharos.

Available in [English](#), [Danish](#), [Dutch \(BE\)](#), [Dutch \(NL\)](#), and [Norwegian](#).

**WTS Student Book.** Tuk, B., & de Neef, M. (2020). *Welcome to School: Facilitating school-based social support for adolescent newcomers. Newcomer workbook.* Utrecht: Pharos.

Available in [English](#), [Danish](#), [Dutch \(BE\)](#), [Dutch \(NL\)](#), and [Norwegian](#).

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## Introduction

This implementation protocol serves as a guidebook to complement the Welcome to School Teacher's Manual, available on the RefugeesWellSchool website ([www.refugeeswellschool.eu](http://www.refugeeswellschool.eu)).

The RefugeesWellSchool project (RWS) seeks to measure the impact of different interventions but also learn more about how to identify and deal with contextual variables. It should offer professionals the necessary tools to create the right context and find solutions for potential challenges they might face. This implementation protocol provides an overview of lessons learned from the implementation of Welcome To School (WTS) intervention as part of the RWS project. The aim of the protocol is to assist future implementation of WTS by presenting practical recommendations and ideas to overcome challenges which might appear in the implementation process.

The information in this protocol is based on participatory observations as well as interviews and focus group discussions with participating adolescents and teachers in Norway, Belgium and Denmark, where the WTS was implemented as part of the RWS project. The intervention was implemented in a total of 39 newcomer classes in the three countries during 2019 and 2020. During this period, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools to close in all three countries, which interrupted the implementation of WTS in all participating classes except for two classes, where implementation took place in 2019 as part of a pilot. Although even the halfway finished interventions taught us numerous valuable lessons on the implementation of the intervention, it should be noted that our experiences are limited to these partly finished implementations and two completed ones.

## Key facts

- WTS is carried out in newcomer classes by teachers as an integrated part of the schedule and can to a large extent replace regular classes. This means that extra teaching or preparation hours are usually not required to implement WTS.
- The main person responsible for the implementation of Welcome To School is the teacher. A crucial point for successful implementation is therefore that the teacher has the experience, interest and competence to engage in the intervention, including in personal and sensitive interactions with adolescents.
- Adolescents can be more or less conformable with sharing personal or vulnerable stories from their lives. It is very important that this is respected by the implementing teacher and that it is made clear for adolescents that sharing is voluntary.
- Although the teacher's manual and adolescent workbook are detailed in their descriptions, implementing teachers should be ready and capable of adjusting the lessons and use of materials to fit adolescents' language abilities, age and level of schooling.
- Even though WTS can be successfully implemented by a teacher alone, the implementation of WTS should preferably be backed up by school management and teacher teams in order to secure support for the implementing teacher as well as to agree on common strategies for how WTS is integrated into the regular school day and how to deal with emotional reactions or struggles appearing during the implementation of WTS.

## The Welcome To School intervention

The WTS intervention and materials were developed and revised in the Netherlands by Bram Tuk of the Centre of Expertise on Health Disparities (Pharos) and Milleke de Neef of Rutgers, the Dutch national expertise centre for sexual and reproductive health and rights. It consists of a set of lessons aimed at newly arrived refugees and migrants at secondary school level. The original version consisted of 21 lessons, which we for this project adjusted to just 14 lessons while also adjusting some of the teacher's manual to better fit the project context. The 14 lessons cover issues related to being a young newcomer and include exercises focusing on cultural exchanges, storytelling and roleplay. Pharos was a part of this process and reviewed and accepted the final version, which we translated to Danish, Norwegian and Dutch (BE and NL) in order to be implemented in Denmark, Norwegian and Flanders, Belgium.

The purpose of WTS is to prevent psychosocial and emotional problems connected to stressful conditions such as trauma from the past, uncertainty about residence permit and unstable living- and family situations, which can all cause newcomers to be vulnerable and in risk of low self-confidence and poor social network with peers and teachers. The goal of this intervention is to use the school as a platform for improving the wellbeing of the newcomer by facilitating an improved adolescent-teacher relationship as well as an improved social environment between the adolescents. WTS does this by counter-balancing some of the many stressors that newly arrived adolescents face by creating a safe social space to share personal experiences, and foster connection between students and their teachers surrounding personal and shared experiences. In addition to this, WTS provides concrete 'tools' to support adolescents' in their psychosocial development through inclusion of lessons about themes such as children's rights and health. Specifically, the intervention seeks to help newcomers feel recognized by their school, teachers and peers, making it easier for them to negotiate social support, and to create positive and meaningful connections between past and present experiences and the future.

## Preparation and logistics

### Preparation

Whilst WTS complements the structures and methods steering many newcomer classes, some teachers may require approval from school leadership to implement the intervention. Irrespective of the need for school management to agree on the implementation of WTS, it may prove helpful for management and newcomer class teachers to discuss expectations, coordination and possible pitfalls in their specific school setting. The management and newcomer class teachers should then collectively and voluntarily place the responsibility of implementation with one or two teachers in the newcomer class. To best ensure a relationally safe and stable classroom space for the intervention, we advise that the same implementing teacher(s) remain the same throughout whole intervention period. Based on our experiences the implementation gains robustness if school management, teacher team and the implementing teacher(s) are on the same page regarding how the implementation will take place in the school schedule as well as how it will fit into the responsible teacher(s)' existing workload and schedule. Before beginning the implementation, it is also advisable to agree on how to continue the implementation of WTS in the case of the chosen responsible teacher being unable to complete the implementation due to unforeseen events. It is also advisable to have a referral plan in place should previously unidentified mental health needs amongst adolescents appear during the implementation as well as a plan for how to handle the arrival of new students midway in implementation. Additionally, a common discussion about the intervention fit for the newcomer class, including the concerns below, should be held prior to implementation:

- **Class environment.** Although the purpose of the intervention is to improve social relations between adolescents, the initial class environment and safety has to be of a certain standard to implement the intervention successfully. Bigger conflicts between classmates or teachers and adolescents should be solved before implementing the intervention.
- **Capacity and experience of the teacher.** The teacher should have the necessary resources to implement the intervention, both in terms of time and emotional capacity. This sometimes means, that management need to contribute with some extra hours, so that these do not have to be taken from the teacher's free time. Furthermore, it is a benefit for the intervention, that the implementing teacher knows the adolescents well and is familiar with the social dynamics in the class.

- **Class schedule.** The class should have lessons together at least every week.
- **Language skills amongst adolescents.** WTS is designed to be implemented with adolescents in the process of learning the host language. However, if many adolescents are complete newcomers and therefore have very limited skills in this language, this can present a challenge for the implementation. If this is the case, the school can consider allocating extra resources such as an extra teacher or digital translation programs before starting the implementation.

If a school or a teacher decides to implement WTS, a first step will be for the teacher to read the teacher's manual thoroughly. The teacher's manual contains a detailed description of the 14 lessons and how to carry them out as well as an introduction to issues related to psychosocial wellbeing amongst newcomer adolescents. This might be repetitive for some teachers and very informative for others depending on their experiences and educational background. Regardless, it is advised that the teacher has time to 1) read the material fully, 2) establish a fixed plan for the schedule of the intervention, 3) reflect on how lessons might have to be adjusted to fit the specific class and 4) discuss the content of the intervention with colleagues or school management, if necessary, before starting the implementation.

We recommend that thorough preparation of participating adolescents and their parents is carried out before the implementation of the intervention. Adolescents should be well informed about the aims and contents of WTS and have time to ask questions. As WTS may instigate emotional reactions, it is important that teachers communicate to the adolescents and their parents that WTS will be implemented, highlighting potential risks and benefits. It is however important that teachers do not overstate the potential change of WTS.

### Logistics and schedule

As WTS can be used as a teaching tool which replaces the ordinary newcomer classes, teachers can often implement the intervention without attending much reorganization in terms of logistics and schedule. However, the following points seemed to be relevant for some of the participating schools.

WTS can be carried out in regular classrooms. However, it may be a good idea to rearrange the classroom before the start of implementation, which aim to create a more intimate and confidential space. For example, if the tables are in a traditional setup, all adolescents facing the blackboard, a possibility could be to arrange the tables in a horse shoe shape move the tables to the side and let the adolescents sit on chairs in a circle in the middle



of the room (depending on the activity). This way, everyone can see each other, making exchanges and interactions around the topic of the lesson easier.

Although WTS can be implemented with a flexible schedule, a schedule of one lesson a week is advisable. This way, adolescents will have time to process each lesson while also completing the intervention within a definite timeline. Without a fixed schedule it can be difficult for teachers to prioritize and complete the intervention, based on the experiences from some implementing classes in RWS.

## Implementation of the intervention

The participating newcomer classes in RWS showed variations in organizational, structural and wider contextual factors which were reported to influence the implementation of WTS. Below we list the most important ones along with practical advice on how to approach them.

### Challenges related to verbal and written language

WTS is planned to be carried out in the language of the country of residence for adolescents with limited skills in the host language. Lessons progress from being more non-verbal to more verbal to fit the language learning progression of the participants. However, for adolescents who have just arrived to the country, any participating in the host language can be difficult, especially if they enroll in the class midway through the intervention. In the following we list two challenges, that can appear in the implementation of WTS related to language and some suggestions to apply in the given situation.

#### Challenge 1:

Some adolescents are illiterate or have very poor writing and reading skills, making it difficult for them to use the workbook.

#### Suggestions:

- It can be helpful to be more than one teacher implementing WTS. One can facilitate discussion and other(s) can help adolescents write and read.
- Discussions, role-play and drawing exercises can be given priority over the written workbook exercises. The homework exercises can be adjusted so that no written language is necessary, but the adolescent draws or finds pictures instead.
- If some adolescents arrive midway the implementation with no shared language with the teacher, digital translation methods such as DeepL and Google Translate can be applied.

### Challenge 2:

Variation in the adolescents' mastery of the school language.

### Suggestions:

- If the adolescents are strong in a different language than that of the school, e.g., English, this may be used as a "support-language" to fill in the gaps and (partially) make up for what goes lost in translation. Inviting adolescents to write in their native language in their own workbook is also advised.
- The adolescents can employ strategies of trans-language and help each other out in translating to their first languages if more adolescents have the same first language.

## Challenges related to age and migration backgrounds

In the RWS project, WTS was implemented in classes of refugee and migrant adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 years with huge differences in migration histories and backgrounds. Here are some of the challenges related to age and backgrounds and some suggestions to how to approach them.

### Challenge 1:

Feedback from participants pointed to how some older adolescents might find playful activities such as games or roleplay childish or too 'silly'.

### Suggestion:

- The teacher can modify or skip exercises according to the age group or if adolescents continue to find them too childish. However, it can be of importance to make some room to explore and discuss remarks such as 'too childish/silly', and what this means for adolescents, before immediately replacing the exercises, since it might be related to the social environment in the class and not just an expression of older age.

### Challenge 2:

The teacher's manual and adolescent workbook might seem to be oriented towards adolescents with a specific refugee background rather than a migrant one. Some adolescents might feel estranged from the material because of this. Some adolescents might feel that their migration history is invisible in the material or fall outside the 'regular' categories of refugee and migrant or outside recognized national identities.

### Suggestion:

- If this issue appears during implementation the teacher can discuss these identity issues with the class. In the lessons where the adolescents are invited to find pictures of their home countries, it should be stressed, that for example having two home countries or not having one at all is perfectly fine. Instead of finding photographs, google earth can also be used to show areas or travels that have been important for the adolescents' histories.

## Adolescent's dispositions to engage in sharing of personal stories

A central part of WTS is facilitating discussions different topics such as "Home", "Friendship" and "Discrimination", and inviting adolescents to relate these to their own experience in order to foster a sense of shared experience within the class. In some lessons this includes invitations to share memories which can be painful or difficult to recall for some of the participants. During the RWS implementation it became clear that such sharing was not always perceived as meaningful, comfortable nor easy for all adolescents. There is a risk of emotional reactions which can be experienced as a loss of control, especially when other classes, in which adolescents are expected to concentrate, comes after the WTS lesson. In the following we present suggestions to approach the potentially difficult storytelling activities.

### Suggestions

- Establishing the 'class rules' which is part of the first planned lesson of WTS, is an important element and should be prioritized to ensure a feeling of safety amongst adolescents. Helpful rules can e.g., be "No laughing of each other", "Always be respectful", "No interrupting when other students are speaking". It can be a good idea to return to these rules throughout the implementation, so that a safe and comfortable environment is maintained.
- It is central to successful implementation that adolescents know that keeping things private is ok and that they can also participate by just listening. No adolescent should feel pressured to share. This should be communicated clearly already during the first lesson and throughout the intervention.

- The teacher can act as role model in sharing her own life stories during the exercises, which can support the classroom climate and trust between herself and adolescents.
- The implementing teacher should be ready to embrace a wide array of emotions, both positive, negative and ambivalent. In the case that serious emotional reactions occur, it should be part of the school's preparation for the intervention to have clear plans for how to deal with emotional reactions and possible referrals to school health services.
- Since WTS will be an integrated part of school schedule, it is important that the whole teacher team for the class knows about and supports the implementation of WTS, especially in cases where adolescents have lessons with another teacher right after feeling vulnerable or emotional during WTS lessons. In this case, the teacher can be understanding and supportive of the adolescents' emotional state and teachers can support each other in monitoring the wellbeing of adolescents throughout the intervention.

### Class stability

By class stability we refer to whether the same classmates are all present for the whole intervention. This was not the case in the participating classes, since newcomer classes often work as a 'pit stop' between arrival and mainstream classes and students therefore enroll and exit the class continuously depending on the arrival of newcomers. This was pointed out by participants as a challenge in the implementation of WTS since it is difficult to introduce the intervention to new students entering in the middle of it, but also because it can affect the class climate and the trust to not have a fixed group.

#### Suggestions:

- Class instability might be impossible to avoid completely. However, if in any way possible to plan according to this factor, it is very advisable to keep it in mind.
- Changes in class composition midway through the intervention, may require the teacher to pay extra attention to changes in the class dynamics and climate in order to act proactively in case of emerging challenges.