

Cultural background: CAMBODIA

(Cambodian refugee students)

Language

Khmer and English

Teaching in the Classroom

Cambodians in your classroom today probably have parents or grandparents who lived in refugee situations, but this is not likely to be the experience of your students.

Educational goals have varied throughout Cambodia's history, shifting under colonial rule from the study of Buddhism to an emphasis on training people to become civil servants. After the country became independent, the government increased both public and secondary educational opportunities so that people could acquire the skills needed to advance the country economically and technologically.

The elite who did not leave the country were sent to collective farms or slave labor camps, or were killed by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge eliminated the country's educational system. Only primary schools were open, but attendance was sporadic.

Political and technical courses were occasionally offered at youth communes.

After 1979 the government reopened secondary and higher education facilities, but funding was (and remains) a problem.

Family /School Engagement

Interpersonal communication can involve a high degree of formality. When communicating with parents, it is a good idea to ask parents what they like to be called and to allow parents to address



you as Mr./Mrs./Ms./etc. Many parents from Asian cultures believe it is rude to address people by their given name. If they seem more comfortable calling you "Teacher" or "Sister" or "Grandfather," accept it with respect.

Maintaining dignity (saving face) is very important. If a family believes their child did something to lose face, this can cause stress on the family. When presenting issues, try to think of ways to show how behavior changes can lead to more success rather than explaining the difficulties a behavior is causing.

Generally, collectivism rather than individualism is a guiding principle. When you are presenting ideas, think of ways to present ideas from a collective perspective. For example, if you are trying to encourage a student to attend college, you could talk to his/her parents/grandparents about how going to college can be beneficial to the entire family.

Because the country had been ruled by an absolute monarchy, followed by colonial rule, Cambodian people had little involvement in politics apart from the election of village leaders. This means parents are probably unused to being involved in things such as Parent Teacher Associations and may need extra help understanding civic engagement in the United States. Additionally, many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

Culture, Gender and Family

Most Khmer practice Theravada Buddhism, which until 1975 was the state religion, though the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. Many Cambodians also hold a belief in supernatural spirits called *neak ta*. It is important to maintain social harmony, which may result in Cambodians not saying what they mean or not meaning what they say. It is rude to touch someone on his or her head.

Hierarchically, men have a higher standing than women; the elderly have a higher standing than younger people and are accorded much respect. Monks and other religious figures are also highly respected. Kinship is bilateral, with a prevailing view that settlement is somewhat organized along matrilineal lines. Families are typically large.

In Cambodia, although certain tasks were viewed in terms of being done by men or women, division of work was not strictly along gender lines; instead, physical work was done by either men or women as needs dictated. Women traditionally were responsible for handling the family's finances, but generally had less overall power than men.