

Cultural background: ETHIOPIA

*(Ethiopian refugee students)*



## Language

Amharic and English

## Teaching in the Classroom

Ethiopia has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world (over 60%). Primary education (grades 1 to 8) is free and, in theory, compulsory. Secondary education is grades 9-11.

Many low-income students struggle to adapt to the culture in public schools designed for middle-class families. As a result, many students drop out of school.

Boys have more educational opportunities than girls. There is a widespread stereotype that girls are less competent than boys, and that girls' education is a poor investment. Discrimination and physical abuse are some of the challenges girls face when they attend school. Many Ethiopian children lack exposure to group work and leadership opportunities in organizational settings.

## Family/School Engagement

Many Ethiopian families migrate to escape poverty but find themselves underemployed or unemployed after coming to the USA. Many end up working in low wage service (parking lots, gas stations, convenience stores, restaurants, etc.). Many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge for parents who would like to be involved.

Generally, people greet each other with multiple kisses on both cheeks. The elderly are treated and regarded with high respect.

It is good to be aware that Ethiopia has a history of ethnic division. Furthermore, Ethiopia has four major social classes and castes with high-ranking lineages at the top, followed by low-ranking lineages. Caste membership is assigned by birth.

Soccer is an activity that many Ethiopians participate in to bolster their sense of belonging. Joining social and economic support groups called *Ekub* can also enhance refugees' sense of belonging.

## **Gender, Culture, and Family**

Many Ethiopians still believe that women are subordinate to men. Women are usually less educated and have less economic freedom. The oldest male is the head of the household and decision maker. There are usually three to four generations in one household. Men engage in physical labor outside the house and women are in charge of household labor. Children are responsible for caring for their parents. Girls have more responsibilities than boys.

Because of the difference in gender roles, adjustment to American culture is often difficult for Ethiopian immigrant families. Sometimes married couples experience tension because of the social, political, and economic freedom granted to women in the USA. In some cases, this tension has led to domestic violence or divorce for many Ethiopian refugee households in the USA.

Ethiopians must always wash their hands before eating since all food is eaten with the hands from a shared dish/tray. Traditionally, guests initiate eating. While eating, it is proper to pull *injera* only from the space directly in front of you. It is polite to engage in conversation while eating since paying complete attention to the food is perceived as ill-mannered.

During Christian fasting periods (varies by individual or church), no animal products can be eaten and no food or drink can be consumed from midnight until 3:00PM. This is the standard way of fasting during the week, and on Saturday and Sunday no animal products may be consumed, although there is no time restriction on the fast. Fasting can be physically and emotionally challenging to Ethiopian students in the USA, and they may need extra support during these times.