

Cultural background: HAITI

*(Haitian refugee students)*



## Language

Haitian Creole and French

## Teaching in the Classroom

Educational opportunities in Haiti are among the lowest in the Western Hemisphere, with the literacy rate being just over 60%. Although the Haitian constitution mandates that children attend school from the ages of 6 to 12, lack of funding for education makes this impossible. About 60% of children drop out of school before receiving their primary education certificate. 90% of schools in Haiti are church or private schools.

The 2010 earthquake displaced at least 50% of the student population. After five years, many families still live in camps. The camps in Haiti have virtually no educational opportunities and are plagued by violent crime, malnutrition, and lack of basic necessities. The earthquake destroyed about a quarter of schools and many children were left with physical disabilities, which schools are unable to accommodate.

Both in and out of camps, parents are sometimes forced to act as educators, as some schools only admit children who can already read and write. When parents are unable to afford to send all children to school, they either focus on one child who is interested in academics or alternate which years the children get to attend school.

Informality in classrooms in the USA may feel odd to Haitian students, who may treat elders very formally in their homes or communities. It is likely that Haitian children in the USA will have limited experience with the school system and that their level of education may be behind that of their peers. Supplemental classes and ESL courses will help them immensely.

## **Family /School Engagement**

Teachers can greet Haitian parents by shaking hands, which is the standard greeting for all genders. Haitian parents will be very happy to have their children in school and will probably be receptive to suggestions and advice. Children are extremely valued, and parents do all they can to make sure they grow up in the best of circumstances.

Because poverty is omnipresent in Haiti, education is seen as a means to gain prosperity, but the parents of children in your classroom may not have had the chance to attend school themselves. Fewer than 20% of Haitian immigrants to the USA have college degrees. They may be confused about how to interact with teachers and about how school days are structured. It would be advisable to take extra time to meet with them and explain the logistics of their children's schooling as well as to immediately establish amicable relationships. It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge even if parents want to be involved.

Since the Haitian concept of time is event-based, rather than based on punctuality, teachers would be advised to respectfully emphasize the importance of being on time to appointments and explain how tardiness may affect other families.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

Most Haitians live in multigenerational households. Manners are very important to Haitians and children are taught to respect their elders and greet visitors formally. Haitians may have several common law marriages throughout their lifetime and children born in separate unions regard each other as siblings. Although both the men and women contribute to childcare, it is typically the mother who brings children to school and does most of the childrearing. Haitian culture is patriarchal, but women are most commonly the ones running day-to-day operations in the home. Major family and financial decisions are made by men.

More than half of the Haitian population is malnourished and students may be surprised by the abundance of food in the USA and may struggle with healthy eating.

Many Haitians practice *Vodou* which includes a belief in the Supreme Creator, *Bondye*, offerings to the spirit *Loa*, and ceremonies of music and dance. Teachers should know that mainstream media depictions of Vodou are inaccurate and offensive. The spelling "Vodou" refers to the distinct Haitian religion, which is distinct from the negative connotations and misconceptions of "voodoo." It may be a good idea to teach a unit about Vodou. You can include Vodou in a broader unit on culture rather



than asking students to share their beliefs, which may embarrass them. If students are comfortable, they can choose to share.