

Cultural background: LAOS

(Laotian and Hmong refugee students)

Language

Lao and some Hmong Daw and Mong Njua.

Teaching in the Classroom

Laotians see education as important because the future of the family depends on their children. For most Laotians (except the most privileged), however, educational opportunities were very limited. Boys in urban areas were more likely to attend school, but due to geographic remoteness, most Hmong received little to no formal education prior to resettlement. The Hmong were largely illiterate. It wasn't until the 1950s that a writing system was developed for the Hmong language.

It is possible some students in your classroom may have been born or been young children in refugee camps, although many have probably been in the school system in the USA for several years. Most of their parents probably spent many years of their adult lives in camps. Before coming to the USA, your students' parents may have known life almost exclusively in refugee camps.

Family/School Engagement

Although handshakes are common among men, they are less so for women. Looking people in the eye, touching them or waving is considered rude. Many parents from Asian cultures also 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.

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.



Generally, it is difficult for Hmong/Laotians to say "no." They will give an ambiguous response rather than decline directly. Instead of asking parents yes or no questions, try to offer several choices and allow them to choose the option they prefer.

In traditional Hmong culture, it is inappropriate to compliment children because compliment can be seen as an invitation for spirits (*dabs*) to steal a child's soul. In addition, humility is a cultural trait.

Culture, Gender and Family

Nuclear families are the norm for the Lao, but in Hmong culture, which prizes kinship, it is common for extended families to live together or near one another. In the USA, Hmong tend to live in neighborhoods with other Hmong.

Although the oldest male is considered the head of the household, women traditionally manage the family's financial affairs. The elderly are highly respected, and children are expected to care for their parents. Families are large, and parents treat children with much affection. In the USA, it is common for Lao women to work outside of the home.

Buddhism is the predominant way of life of most Laotians. In the USA, many have converted to Christianity. The Hmong and other upland peoples practice animism, ancestor worship, and shamanism. Many rituals and beliefs focus on protection against *dabs*, or spirits, which are attributed with causing illnesses and misfortune.

The Lao Loum comprise about two-thirds of Laos' population. Due to proximity to cities, transportation, and fertile land, the Lao Loum is the most economically advantaged group in the country. For the rest of the country, subsistence farming, coupled with geographical remoteness, contribute to high poverty levels. Of the many (approximately 20) ethnic groups, the Hmong is the largest, and even then, there are sub-groups of Hmong.