

Cultural background: SOMALIA

(Somali refugee students)



Language

Somali, Arabic, some Italian and English

Teaching in the Classroom

Many Somali refugee students will have no formal education before coming to the USA. Most Somali refugee camps offer schools in camp, although the number and quality of the schools is contingent on funds provided by local governments and international relief agencies. As a result, schools frequently experience teacher shortages, lack of materials, and lack of electricity and attendance is generally low. In Dadaab refugee camp, the largest Somali camp, only 40% of children attend primary school and less than 20% attend secondary school. Children often prioritize taking care of younger siblings, helping parents, or aiding sick relatives.

In Somalia itself, only 5% of children complete primary school, and fewer than 3% graduate from secondary school. Schools are usually modest institutions with limited seating and chalkboards. Primary education includes nine compulsory subjects: Islamic Studies, Arabic, Somali, mathematics, business, science, social studies, physical education, English, and arts and crafts. Classes are short, typically lasting 35 or 40 minutes per subject. Most classes are taught in Somali or Arabic with an emphasis on oral learning over writing. Higher education is largely private. Technical and vocational schools are available at both primary and secondary levels. Qur'anic schools are the most frequent option in rural areas.

Somali parents teach discipline at a young age, so Somali students will likely get used to the structured classroom environment fairly quickly. Girls have difficulty continuing their education as many are forced to do housework rather than homework. Girls will likely need encouragement in a classroom setting.

Family /School Engagement

Education is highly valued but due to the patriarchal nature of the culture, mothers will likely be more present within the classroom setting. Women typically submit to men and do not socialize with men in public places. This may be challenging in a school situation, especially if the teacher is a male. Encouraging women to make decisions about their child's education can be advantageous. Somalis have great respect for their elders, so if you have the opportunity, engage the student's grandparents in the child's school activities. Somalis value oral communication above all else, but do not have the habit of expressing gratitude verbally, which may be discouraging to educators helping their children.

It is considered disrespectful to hand objects or shake hands with one's left hand. It is suggested to let parents and students initiate handshakes and set parameters when greeting. Somalis also use certain Arab hand gestures to communicate.

Somali society continues to be defined by clan identities, and teachers should attempt to learn which clans their students are from in case rivalries or ill feelings exist. However, the word clan can be very contentious and should be avoided if possible. Ask your students or families directly which words they use to describe their identity. Men of the same clan-family share a long handshake when greeting one another. Women greet informally and may hug and kiss one another on the cheek. Members of unrelated clan- families may not want to shake hands or exchange intimacies. Some Somalis in the USA have tried hard to build unity and overcome historic tension. Others feel their past history cannot be easily forgotten.

In Somalia, the concept of time is flexible, so individuals may be late to appointments or leave early, when they find it appropriate. Teachers should respectfully highlight the importance of promptness in the USA to ensure timelines are followed. Somalis are extremely family-oriented, so approaching the entire family if a student is experiencing behavioral or health issues is recommended.

Culture, Gender and Family

Somalis, the dominant ethnic group in Somalia, make up 85% of the population; minority groups include Arabs, Southeast Asians, and the Bantus, who were brought from Southeastern Africa by Somalia as slaves. Individuals with lighter skin tones may be held in higher regard. The use of

nicknames is very common, as there are many individuals with the same traditional names, such as Mohamud and Fatima. Most Somalis are Muslim.

There are two Somali traditional practices that are against the law in the USA, including female circumcision, which typically happens when girls reach puberty. Additionally, it is common to use burning (scarring) to help with healing after an injury. Schools should engage multicultural health professionals to consult about these issues. By focusing on health and legal consequences, rather than labeling these customs as wrong, you will likely have a better reaction from the families you are helping.

It is common for several generations of a Somali family to live in the same home. Men are considered the head of a household and about 20%, mainly Somali Bantus, have multiple wives. In the USA, most Somalis only have one wife and/or their remaining wives are still in Somali. When inviting a family to a parent-teacher conference, you can assume the biological mother will attend.

Most Somalis eat with their hands and it is common for family members or close friends to use the same cup and bowls; it may be challenging for students to adjust to the individual style of eating prominent in the USA.