

Cultural background: SOUTH SUDAN

*(South Sudanese refugee students)*



## Language

English, Arabic, Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Zande, and Shilluk.

## Teaching in the Classroom

Education is mandatory for children between the ages of 6 and 13, yet less than 50% of children attend primary school and only 21% attend secondary school. Most schools are located in urban areas even though more than 80% of the population lives in rural areas. Many rural schools were destroyed as a result of the war, and also children sometimes do not go to school for fear of abduction.

The country is experiencing a severe teacher shortage and many teachers are untrained. Classrooms are frequently poorly managed. In addition, classes are taught in English, yet many students do not speak English. There is often not enough space in classrooms for learning, so children are taught outside. South Sudanese children may do well with outdoor, collaborative activities and curriculum that encourages discussion and engagement with other students. Students will likely be very appreciative and respectful of their classroom materials.

Males are required to perform military service before they finish their secondary education and many drop out after doing so. It is common for boys to stop schooling after graduating elementary school in order to work to support their families or to go to vocational school. As a result, there are more females than males in higher education.

The educational situation in refugee camps is dire. The individuals living there have little food or water, and experience rampant crime, so schools are a low priority.

## **Family/School Engagement**

South Sudan has many systems of social structure, livelihoods, cultural traditions and a sense of identity. Teachers should keep this in mind and understand that although families come from the same country, they may be different in these basic ways.

Teachers should keep their space when interacting with adult Sudanese and should not get discouraged by the formality of initial interactions. When engaged in conversation, people from South Sudan like to maintain at least a foot of space, especially if the individual is of the opposite sex. Consistent eye contact is uncommon; rather one should glance at the other's eyes periodically during conversation. Men and family members touch or squeeze each other on the shoulder as greeting. Children are expected to speak and listen to elders with respect and reverence.

Due to close family ties, family members will likely have an interest in becoming engaged in the child's education, yet may feel shy or intimidated because of a lack of schooling themselves. Teachers would be advised to focus on showing the parents how they can support the student without actually assisting them with academic tasks, such as helping them with art or music or supporting them in extracurricular activities. Parents will be appreciative of your efforts and will listen to your advice and opinion. Offering parents information about adult education programs would help them feel more confident in their new communities. 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.

The Sudanese have a different perception of time than what is common in the USA, being event-based rather than time-based, so teachers should respectfully reiterate the importance of being on time by explaining how their tardiness may affect other parents or students, or may put their child at a disadvantage.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

Today, nearly 1.4 million people in South Sudan are considered internally displaced people (IDPs), which means they live within South Sudan in camps or other shelters but not in their homes. Because

the country has been consumed by conflict for nearly fifty years, almost 75% of the population doesn't know how to read or write, which is one of the lowest literacy rates in the world.

Most South Sudanese live as an extended family, and usually a respected elder is the family leader. Many people follow animist religions. Dinner is eaten late, around 9pm. At dinner, men and women frequently eat at different sides of the table.

Traditionally, Somali men are the breadwinners and women tend to be homemakers. Many families are polygamous, and the first wife receives special respect from the other wives. Boys are expected to be brave, aggressive, and decisive, while girls are encouraged to be obedient and submissive and wear modest clothing. Female students may need encouragement to ask questions in public, and males to express their feelings.