

## Cultural and educational background information



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## **Afghan refugee students: Cultural Background Profiles**

### **Language**

Pashto and Dari

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

It is estimated that only one-third of school-age Afghan children ever attended school during the 1980s, during the Soviet occupation. The education system fell apart completely in the ensuing civil war. Children were either taught at home, in the local mosque, or not at all.

Under the Taliban, secular education did not exist. Boys received religious education, and girls were forbidden education altogether. In Islam, education is more highly valued than wealth but parents who wanted their children educated arranged for private tutoring in informal groups.

Afghans in the United States have a higher mean level of education than Southeast Asian and African refugee groups, but decades of recurrent conflict have led to the education being disrupted or discontinued. In Pakistan, approximately 80% of the school-age Afghan refugee population is currently out of school, resulting in extremely low literacy among Afghan refugees, especially among women and girls. Many women and elders have had little or no formal education at all.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Children are expected to work hard in school and to come home after school to do homework. For this reason, some parents might not allow their children to engage in after-school activities. Boys usually have much more freedom than girls. Another contributing factor may be that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

While Afghan communities in the United States have made tremendous concessions to Western life, there is often tension in families as the children bring their school-learned American sensibilities into homes with traditional Afghan values. Schools teach children independence and assertiveness, which contradict cultural values of family interdependence and strict obedience to elder family members, particularly to the father's authority. Families are concerned that children will pick up immodest behavior from their non-Muslim classmates, as well as from school itself.

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

The Afghan population in the United States shares a common nationality and Islamic religion, but it is diverse in terms of political orientation, religious affiliation, ethnicity,



social class, and attitude toward modernization. The importance of this diversity cannot be overstated. In terms of ethnicity alone, there are 19 different groups in Afghanistan, and, while the majority of Afghans in the United States are Pashtun and Tajik, there is an Uzbek minority in New York, as well as some Afghan Jews and Hindus; and Hazaras are scattered around the country.

Afghans are generally reluctant to share personal and family issues with nonfamily members, including healthcare professionals, although women may discuss their problems with friends, including non-Afghans. They dislike others, especially outsiders, telling them what to do. In the United States, Afghans might perceive school and social service agency intervention as undermining parental authority, responsibility and control.

The Afghan family is sacrosanct and a matter of great privacy. It is considered a significant breach of manners for a man to express interest of any sort in another man's female relatives. For example, it may be inappropriate for a male teacher to ask, "How is your wife?"

Even though Afghan culture in the U.S. is in transition, with families ranging from traditional to cosmopolitan depending on their backgrounds and personal choice, family life remains the core of U.S. Afghan culture. Afghans tend to socialize almost exclusively with extended family members, and this intense family focus can cause culture conflict in the U.S. Extended family obligations often supersede other responsibilities.

Afghan women have, generally speaking, adapted to the U.S. better than have Afghan men, who have had difficulty finding a middle road between a traditional and an American lifestyle. The traditional husband's power and role as head of the family is further undermined when children learn English more quickly than their parents do and become their parents' translators and spokespersons.

## Algerian refugee students: cultural background profiles



### Language

Arabic (official)  
French and Berber dialects

### Teaching in the classroom

In French colonial days, many children were taught primarily in French. However, at the time of independence in 1962, the Algerian government took over the education system and redesigned it to meet the needs of its population and has sought to increase enrollment. School is free and mandatory for children aged 6 to 15 years old. However, only about half of children within that range are enrolled in school. You may notice a variation in literacy levels among Algerians.

### Family/school engagement

When greeting Algerians, it is common to see good friends of the same sex kiss on the cheek or shake hands with one another. For more formal interactions, handshakes are more acceptable as well as a simple nod of acknowledgment. However, it is unacceptable for some men and women to touch members of the opposite sex due to their religious beliefs. It is important to know this if a family member does not extend their hand to shake hands.

Algerian culture is otherwise informal and you will find that modes of speaking are generally relaxed. It is common to ask how the family is doing and inquire about general topics. The relaxed nature also applies to sense of time. People and relationships can take precedence over tasks and deadlines. Due to these priorities time may be viewed loosely in social and even business or classroom situations. Algerian students may be late to class while they adjust to the rules of the classroom.

Algerian communication styles are direct but non-confrontational. It is better to avoid public criticism, as it can bring shame to a student and his or her family. In this case, indirect or polite feedback is more appropriate. It is important also to avoid discussing

politics, sexuality, and religious issues until a bond of trust is established. General topics of conversation are better at first, including sports, family, music, food and culture.

Personal space amongst Algerians can be closer than the average interaction with members of the same sex, but greater than usual with members of the opposite sex. Light touching is acceptable only if you know someone well, so it is generally reserved for good family or friends. In the classroom, it may be best to remain more formal. However, eye contact is a sign of respect without being overly direct in nature. Making eye contact when speaking will let your students know you are listening. Wagging one's index finger is considered rude, so it is also better to use your whole hand rather than pointing with your index finger to draw attention.

Family ties are strong, and Algerians rely heavily on family support. It is common for Algerians to live with extended families due to the tightly knit sense of community. This means that families are closely involved in students' lives. Thus, when addressing any particular issue with students, it is normal to speak to family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into offering alternatives, solutions or ideas. Grandparents of Algerian students may be eager to engage in their education as well.

### **Culture, gender and family**

The majority of Algerians are Muslim, but there are other less commonly practiced religions. The predominant ethnic group is Arab-Berber and a small percentage of European descent.

Algerians have acquired modern Western-style clothing, but traditional attire is also common. It may be common to see more traditional women covering their hair as a religious practice or Islamic garment. Most socialization in Algerian culture revolves around family, and men and women socialize less often together. The formality in interactions with the opposite sex has a religious foundation. These practices apply to personal life as well as the classroom.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women have evolved historically. While they were traditionally viewed in the past, now it is common for women to enter the workforce. Because of this ongoing shift, you will see varied expectations among families.

## **Bhutanese refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Nepali, Dzongkha, and some English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Most Bhutanese refugees have come to the United States from refugee camps in the neighboring nation of Nepal. Education is highly valued among the Bhutanese. More than 75 percent of Bhutanese refugees were able to attend school in camp and an estimated 5 to 10 percent of those attended college or university. As students graduated from the camp schools, they went on to develop teaching skills by teaching the younger students in the camp schools.

Education in the refugee camps is free until grade 10. There are many schools in the Nepalese camps starting from kindergarten and below the age of five through primary and secondary school. From 10th to 12th grade refugees must pay a portion of the tuition. Many children from the camps go to boarding schools in Nepal and India for 10th to 12th grade. Students leaving for third-country resettlement are given School Leaving Certificates from their respective schools, which can be useful to their future school in their new countries.

The school system in the camps is what Westerners would consider strict and hierarchical. Teaching methodology is old-fashioned and includes rote memorization and recitation exercises. Many students will be unfamiliar with the Western model of expressing individual opinions and creative thinking in the classroom.

Bhutanese families may be in the habit of eating two meals a day—lunch and dinner—which may mean children do not eat breakfast before leaving home in the morning.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Eye contact during conversation is standard. Men and women generally don't touch in public. Shaking hands between men and women is not common (but is not restricted) so when you meet parents, it's a good idea to follow their example or to fold your hands over your chest and dip your head in greeting. Moving one's head from side to side can mean both yes and maybe.

Very often family issues are first discussed with the elders in the family. The elders, in turn, may decide to involve additional community elders. If you need to discuss an issue with a Bhutanese family, it is a good idea to invite the entire family including grandparents. Many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

Having come from an environment in which parents knew all their neighbors, families may not supervise children as closely as U.S. parents are accustomed. The concept of privacy, and the value that is placed on it in American culture, is new and may be



perceived as somewhat strange, especially in situations related to their children. Parents are less likely to engage in games and play with their children than their American counterparts. Some community members describe a clear distinction drawn between adults' and children's activities.

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

This is a very diverse group of refugees in terms of life experience. Some have attended university and worked outside the camps. They can be highly educated and have lived in 'westernized' conditions. Others have never left the camps and have had no exposure to western amenities.

Lhotsampas have a caste system that creates a social hierarchy. In the refugee camps in Nepal, and now in the U.S., caste may no longer be an issue for some people, while still having importance for others. This system is kept somewhat underground in interactions with Americans.

Living arrangements typically include many members of an extended family, and the younger generation assumes the responsibility of caring for elderly relatives. The average family size ranges from 6 to 8 children. Within a family, respect is owed to elders, particularly by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. When dealing with a death, members of the immediate family spend thirteen days in formal mourning, which can be challenging for students.

Traditionally, mental illness is a stigmatizing condition. The Bhutanese have the highest suicide rate of any immigrant group in the US. Traditional gender roles significantly impact health care utilization.

Among Bhutanese refugee families, out-of-home child care is rarely used. Rather, relatives, or a Bhutanese neighbor are most likely to care for their children. Babies and children may be adorned with eyeliner, called kohl, and jewelry, such as bracelets. Some traditional kohl contains high levels of lead. Information about lead poisoning should be shared in culturally respectful ways.

## **Burmese refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

*Please note this profile is about students from Burma who are ethnically Burman. The majority of refugees in the US from Burma are Karen, Karenni, or Rohingya – see separate background profiles for these groups.*



### **Language**

Burmese

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

While very little funding is given to education, individuals tend to highly value education and place teachers in positions of utmost respect. Education in Burma is heavily politicized—the curricula are controlled by the government, and schooling is often used to impose ethnic discrimination. Ethnic peoples are not allowed to learn their own language and culture. The military government used education as a tool to prevent students from learning how to rebel. Today education is still controlled by the government at all levels.

Children in rural areas or from poor families are less likely to have attended school. Approximately 40% of children do not attend school and about 75% do not complete their primary education [Thein Lwin, 2003]. Monastic schools provide some education for low-income families.

Schools are typically somewhat corrupt. Many teachers have not had adequate training and will accept bribes. Teachers are often authoritative and students are expected to show obedience and respect. Teaching in most classrooms is dominated by “call and response” styles, with very limited interaction between students and teacher. Students are expected to memorize facts and will likely have little understanding of critical thinking.

Among Burmese Americans, enrollment in higher education shows almost equal numbers of females and males.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named Htay Maung might have a wife named Win Swe Myint and two children named Cho Zin Nwe and Than Tut. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in Western countries.

Students in your classroom who are ethnically Burman may have parents who experienced severe political persecution, though they themselves may have been born in the US or been very young when their families came to the US. Literacy rates of



adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the US are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

Respect for elders is important: Younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect. Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person.

Don't touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body. Treat Buddhist monks and monk imagery and objects with respect. For example, one would not normally place objects above a Buddha image.

Burmese tend to be reserved until friendships are formed. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing.

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

The family, both immediate and extended, is the most important social unit in Burman life. Uncles, aunts, and cousins may live together under extended family arrangements. The mother usually takes care of the daily chores, helped by daughters or unmarried sisters. Males have priority—they wield greater authority, and are shown deference. Grandparents living with the family are also shown deference.

## **Burundian refugee students: Cultural background**

### **Language**

Kirundi and French; Swahili spoken in specific areas; and some English.

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Burundi has a very young population with 45.64% aged 14 or younger. There is no official curriculum for primary education. Lower primary school is taught in Kirundi, which presents a challenge when students have to transition in fifth grade to learning in French. Burundi's education system has high repetition and dropout rates.

Most refugees, however, will have come from camps outside Burundi and their children will have been born in camps. Primary education is available in the camps, but schools are poorly equipped or understaffed, classes are overcrowded, and attendance is inconsistent. There is not much opportunity for students to practice what they have learned while in the camps.

### **Family/School Engagement**

The Burundian population is largely composed of small-scale peasant farmers with a little formal education, rural backgrounds, long residence in refugee camps, and past trauma. Many refugees who have witnessed traumatic events will show signs of PTSD.

Children are highly valued in Burundian societies. They represent insurance for the future—as one proverb says, “The greatest sorrow is to have no children to mourn for you.” Children are taught communal and family values, such as treating elders with supreme respect and responding promptly and willingly to their commands.

In Burundian culture, a typical greeting involves both people wishing each other large herds. Handshakes are important and vary by location. For instance, one version involves touching one's left hand to the other person's elbow. People stand close together when talking and often continue holding hands for several minutes after shaking. Facial expressions and gestures are not well received because they are interpreted as a lack of control or a lack of calmness. Pointing with the index finger is often considered rude. A Burundian will usually point by extending his or her arm outward, with the palm turned upwards.

Social gatherings, large or small, formal or informal, often include food and drink, especially beer. It is considered rude to turn down food or drink when it is offered.

Many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.



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

Ethnic groups in Burundi include Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, Europeans, and South Asians. Burundian households are typically made up of nuclear families with extended families nearby. Uncles and aunts often assume care and responsibility for their siblings' children. Traditional Burundian society is patriarchal. Men assume leadership roles within their households and communities. Traditionally, men farm while women and girls carry out household duties, such as firewood collection, cooking, laundry, and childcare. Women have more duties than rights and are expected to be subordinate to men.

Many women who have grown up in refugee camps have attended primary school, and some have attended secondary school. A few women have been able to receive training in traditionally female occupations (e.g. nursing and teaching). Women are not restricted socially from working outside the home.

Traditional medicine is practiced to some extent. People normally go to traditional practitioners when they cannot afford to buy modern medicine or travel to the hospitals outside the camps. Deaths of family members are sometimes attributed to witchcraft.

## **Cambodian refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Khmer and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Cambodians in your classroom today probably have parents or grandparents who lived in refugee situations, but this is not likely to be the experience of your students.



Educational goals varied throughout Cambodia's history, shifting under colonial rule from the study of Buddhism to an emphasis on training people to become civil servants. After the country became independent, the government increased both public and secondary educational opportunities so that people could acquire the skills needed to advance the country economically and technologically.

The elite who did not leave the country were sent to collective farms or slave labor camps, or were killed by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge eliminated the country's educational system. Only primary schools were open, but attendance was sporadic. Political and technical courses were occasionally offered at youth communes.

After 1979 the government reopened secondary and higher education facilities, but funding was (and remains) a problem.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Interpersonal communication can involve a high degree of formality. When communicating with parents, it is a good idea to ask parents what they like to be called and to allow parents to address you as Mr./Mrs./Ms./etc. Many parents from Asian cultures 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.

Maintaining dignity (saving face) is very important. If a family believes their child did something to lose face, this can cause stress on the family. When presenting issues, try to think of ways to show how behavior changes can lead to more success rather than explaining the difficulties a behavior is causing.

It is important to maintain social harmony, which may result in Cambodians not saying what they mean or not meaning what they say. It is rude to touch someone on his or her head.

Generally, collectivism rather than individualism is a guiding principle. When you are presenting ideas, think of ways to present ideas from a collective perspective. For example, if you are trying to encourage a student to attend college, you could talk to his/her parents/grandparents about how going to college can be beneficial to the entire family.

Because the country had been ruled by an absolute monarchy, followed by colonial rule, Cambodian people had little involvement in politics apart from the election of village leaders. This means parents are probably unused to being involved in things such as Parent Teacher Associations and may need extra help understanding civic engagement in the United States. Additionally, many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

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

Most Khmer practice Theravada Buddhism, which until 1975 was the state religion, though the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. Many Cambodians also hold a belief in supernatural spirits (neak ta).

Hierarchically, men have a higher standing than women; the elderly have a higher standing than younger people and are accorded much respect. Monks and other religious figures are also highly respected. Kinship is bilateral, with a prevailing view that settlement is somewhat organized along matrilineal lines. Families are typically large.

In Cambodia, although certain tasks were viewed in terms of being done by men or women, division of work was not strictly along gender lines; instead, physical work was done by either men or women as needed dictated. Women traditionally were responsible for handling the family's finances, but generally had less overall power than men.

## Chinese refugee students: Cultural background profiles

### Language

Standard Chinese or Mandarin (official); Cantonese and several other dialects are spoken throughout the country.



### Teaching in the classroom

The literacy rate among men and women in China is generally high, illustrating the importance of education in Chinese society. Since the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the development of the education system in China highlighted the importance of advancing economic modernization, which led to significant efforts to improve the education system. You may notice that Chinese children are aware of the importance of education.

However, due to the size of the country and the range of national minorities, education still varies throughout the country and can depend on proximity to cities or other factors limiting access to education.

Across Chinese society, punctuality, diligence and respect are common practices, and particularly for Chinese students. It is considered respectful to remain seated when the teacher is speaking. Principles of respect are important in Chinese culture and can be reflected in the classroom.

### Family/school engagement

When greeting Chinese people, seniority takes precedence. This means it is polite to greet the oldest person before greeting others. It is also important to address Chinese adults by Mr., Mrs., Miss plus their family name, not by their first names. Women generally keep their maiden name when they marry. Chinese people are also addressed by their professional titles. For example, address Li Ziang using his title: Governor Li or Director Li.

Chinese culture is formal and you will find that ways of speaking show this. Greetings for men and women include handshakes, and in conversation there is little or no touching unless engaging with family or close friends. Generally speaking, Chinese dislike being touched by strangers. However, do not be surprised if Chinese people physically touch you as a form of expressing sympathy.

Close family ties and a collectivist culture means that families are closely involved in the lives of Chinese students. Furthermore, the emphasis on respecting one's elders means that Chinese students' parents are influential in their children's lives. This influence also

happens with elder siblings and younger siblings. Therefore, when addressing an issue with students, it is wise to speak to family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into alternatives, solutions or ideas. You can talk first to elder siblings, because within a Chinese family, traditional family structure is rigid and hierarchical, so easing an issue into the family through the natural hierarchy may avoid problems.

Chinese conversation can be indirect, and you may need to interpret the meaning behind words. In conversation, someone may say the opposite to what they mean (perhaps to avoid giving offense or because of privacy), so it is important to pay attention to this and ask questions to understand the real meaning.

Direct eye contact shows respect, politeness and attentiveness, so it is important to recognize the speaker with eye contact. When speaking to elders or parents of children, lowering one's head is another sign of respect.

A gesture to avoid when engaging with Chinese students or family is to finger-pointing. Use your whole hand or flat palm rather than pointing with your index finger. Also avoid snapping your finger or whistling to get someone's attention. Use respectful modes of communication to avoid any disrespectful perceptions.

The Chinese generally avoid political-related conversations, such as criticisms of Chinese politics or the Cultural Revolution. It is best to make polite, positive small talk.

### **Culture, gender and family**

There is a great deal of emphasis on community and collectivism, and traditional and religious customs are important in the life of Chinese.

The majority of the Chinese population practice a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. A smaller minority of the population practice Christianity, Protestantism, Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam and Judaism. The predominant ethnic groups are Han Chinese, and a small percentage of the population comprises other ethnic groups including Zhuang, Uygur, Hui, Yi, Tibetan, Miao, Manchu, Mongol, Buyi, Korean.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women originate in more traditional views as Chinese society remains male-dominated, but because women are increasingly becoming more equal in society, views of women are evolving. However, although the proportion of women in the workforce is growing, a woman is still expected to have domestic responsibilities.

Men and women tend to dress formally and conservatively, wearing dark colors and clothes that are not revealing.

## Colombian refugee students: Cultural background profiles

### Language

Spanish and English

### Teaching in the Classroom

Primary school is mandatory and free in Colombia. Schools are available in nearly all communities, although urban schools offer better supplies, more trained teachers, and are held in more modern buildings. About 85% of children ages 6–12 attend primary school. Secondary school is not free, so children from poorer homes are frequently unable to attend. After secondary schools, students can attend five-year university programs or can opt to go to technical school for 2 to 3 years. Primary and secondary schools mandate that children wear uniforms to lessen the distinction between social classes. Colombian children may be surprised to learn that they are free to wear what they please at school.



In 1975, Colombia implemented a method of teaching called *Escuela Nueva* (New School), which focuses on placing children in the middle of the learning process, rather than having them learn primarily by listening to their teacher. Students learn in small groups and are allowed to move at their own pace. The program is seen as a major success—it is used in over 20,000 schools and has expanded internationally to 17 countries. Colombian students in the U.S. are likely to thrive in group environments and will enjoy group discussion.

School frequently ends around noon, so Colombian children will not be used to the length of the American school day. It may be advisable for teachers to plan interactive activities for the afternoon, to help maintain focus.

### Family/School Engagement

Women are usually the leaders when engaging with social issues, church functions, and education so will likely be enthusiastic about participating in school functions. Teachers may consider suggesting that Colombian fathers become participants on parent advisory committees or PTA, as they are frequently in governance or decision-making roles within their families. 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.



Family is of utmost importance to Colombians and there is great respect for elders, who are expected to make important family decisions. If older members of the family come to school functions, they should be acknowledged and greeted first. Within families, the oldest child usually receives the most prestige and attention, so teachers should take care to give additional encouragement to younger siblings.

Colombians are very friendly, but initial meetings tend to be formal. When meeting someone for the first time, it is appropriate to shake hands while making eye contact. Colombians are indirect communicators, so it is important to be mindful of their body language and context rather than the words being exchanged. Teachers should be careful to not ask too many direct and personal questions during the first exchanges, so as not to cause offense or embarrassment. Colombians can become animated and raise their voice when speaking. but this should not be interpreted as aggression or agitation.

Colombians have a different sense of time from North Americans, and it is the norm to show up late to appointments, even if they are business-related. Teachers should iterate the expectation of punctuality in the United States, explaining that American sense of time is not event-based and their tardiness may affect others adversely.

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

Households in urban areas usually contain the nuclear family while rural families may live with several generations. Both tend to live close to other family members and visit each other frequently.

Gender roles are clearly defined in Colombia, with the male frequently providing for the family financially. In upper and middle classes, it is more common for women to stay at home, while in lower classes and in rural areas, women may work out of necessity.

Violence against women is an issue. According to a recent national study by the non-profit organization Profamilia, 37 percent of married women have been physically abused by their husbands but rarely speak out.

## **Congolese refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

French, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Tshiluba, Kinyarwanda, and some English.

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Primary school is (in theory) compulsory, and public education is a hybrid system consisting of schools managed by the government and faith-based organizations. Children begin primary education age 6-7, and typically study in the mornings from Monday to Saturday. Generally, one teacher will teach all subject matters, and classrooms include students of mixed ages. To advance in their education, students must take a national exam at the end of grade 6.

Secondary school consists of grades 7-12. The academic year is 30 weeks in length and broken into two semesters.



As of 2003, the DRC had one of the world's largest percentages of children out of school. Girls attend schools at lower rates in the DRC, so the majority of refugees with no primary or high school education and low literacy levels are female. Some obstacles impeding access to education include insufficient funding, school fees, community violence, child soldier recruitment, and the destruction of school buildings during the recent conflict.

Congolese children who attended school in a refugee camp in Uganda will have had greater exposure to English. Sexual exploitation of young and adolescent girls in refugee camps in Burundi and Tanzania is common. Girls are forced into sex work in exchange for basic goods, and there is frequent reporting of teachers demanding sex from girls in exchange for grades or money. In Nyaragusu camp in Tanzania, human compensation, in which families give women and girls as a form of payment for debts, is common.

### **Family/School Engagement**

59% of Congolese refugees have no oral English skills and an even greater percentage has no ability to read (65%) or write (66%) in English. More than half of the existing Congolese refugee population in the US is female, and 20% are single mothers. Nearly 40% of women in Eastern DRC have experienced sexual violence. The physical health, mental health and social impacts of sexual violence in the DRC cannot be understated.

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 families want to be involved in their children's education.

Congolese take great pride in their appearance. Regardless of financial status, it is common to wear clean, handmade clothes. People dress up when going to work. Congolese are also very friendly. It is customary to shake hands when meeting people and when leaving as well. An inquiry must be made about one's health and family to indicate the required level of respect. There are several ways to greet people depending on time of day, the nature of the relationship, and so forth. Older people are shown respect through physical gestures, and agreement with them is considered more important than frankness.

Congolese often discipline their children physically, which presents a legal and cultural problem in the US. Traditionally, childcare is a community responsibility which conflicts with Americans' parenting practices. Congolese children often care for younger ones when parents are away. This also presents a cultural and legal problem in the US.

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

Among the Congolese, the nuclear family is only one part of a much larger extended family that includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, and even those not related by blood. Many of the ethnic groups in the DRC are matrilineal. The oldest uncle on the mother's side is considered the most important male and sometimes has more influence over a child's life than does the father. Cousins on the mother's side are considered siblings. Congolese may often call a distant family member (or even someone not related by blood) their son, daughter, brother, or sister. This has created confusion both for overseas processing and for establishing legal relationships in the United States.

Tribal affiliation is often more important for Congolese refugees than national affiliation, and tribal names are a significant marker of religious identity and social status.

Gender roles vary among tribes. Men are generally regarded as the principal income earners and protectors of the household, and women are commonly expected to obey decisions made by men in their families. Both boys and girls begin helping out at home at a young age. Generally, women are in charge of domestic chores. In some rural areas, girls must stay at home until they marry at a young age. However, urban women tend to be more independent and have more say in family matters.

## **Cuban refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Spanish and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

The Cuban education system is excellent, with 10% of the national budget being allocated to it. Teacher to student ratios are 12:1. Education in Cuba is mandatory through the end of secondary school (ages 15–16) and literacy rates are reported to be around 98%. Children wear uniforms through all of the years of primary school so may be surprised by the casual nature of dress in American schools.



Primary education lasts for six years and is followed by basic secondary education. There is a strong emphasis on math and science, but the curriculum also includes dance and gardening, lessons on health and hygiene, and Cuban revolutionary history. After primary education, students can choose whether they wish to begin preparing for university or vocational school. Cuban students will likely be extremely engaged and motivated in their studies, as high academic achievement is a cultural standard and necessary for professional success.

Education in Cuba is fairly formal and most classes are taught in lecture format. Relationships between teachers and students are close but formal, and group work and peer interaction is kept to a minimum. Teachers may need to facilitate group work and encourage Cuban students to be vocal in class, as this is mostly discouraged. It may take time for Cuban students to get used to the drastic increase in personal freedoms in the U.S. Teachers may need to yield questions and offer clarification on these issues.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Cuban families highly value education. Cuban teachers are very active in the communities they live in and there is a high priority on building relationships with parents in order to enhance the learning process. Teachers are highly trained in Cuba, with most going to school for at least five years in order to obtain their degree. Because of this, the profession is highly regarded and Cuban families will likely be extremely respectful and interested in developing strong relationships with their child's teacher. Teachers should reach out to families regarding possible ESL enrollment in adult ESL courses. 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.

Children in families with two working parents are often taken care of by grandparents. It is likely that grandparents will have interest in attending activities and getting to know teachers.

The Cuban concept of time is event-based, which means that they do not always attend appointments until they have completed their previous engagements. This may be difficult for teachers, as they may be tardy to their children's school events or parent-teacher meetings. Explaining the US approach to punctuality and how it may affect others is advised.

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

Cubans are open, generous, and sociable. Cubans typically will have small talk before beginning to talk about business or official matters. It is actually somewhat rude not to greet males with handshakes and women with kisses on the cheek. Touching is common and not taboo. Some Cubans speak loudly when engaged in discussion; this should not be interpreted as aggression. Teachers should expect warm social contact while making sure to maintain their own personal parameters.

Cuban families, much more so than Cuban-American families, are characterized by patriarchy, strong parental control over children, and the importance of non-nuclear relationships within the family (ie godparents). Cuban-American women have more authority in decision-making and children have greater personal freedom. Cuban families new to the U.S. may assimilate to these new standards if they live around other Cuban emigrants.

## **El Salvadoran: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Spanish

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

While education is mandatory until age 13, many families cannot afford to send their children to school. The cheapest schools cost the equivalent of \$25 per month, while the most expensive private schools can be as expensive as \$250 per month. Poor families often cannot afford to pay for supplies and school fees, and they need children to work to bring in income for the family.



Schools attendance rates are nearly equal amongst genders although boys are usually given priority if families can't afford to put all children through school. School is held in three cycles: grades 1 to 3, 4 to 6, and grades 7 to 9. Students frequently attend all levels of schooling in the same buildings, many of which are underfunded and in sub-par conditions. Understaffing and lack of materials are common issues, and classes often exceed 50 students. School schedules and curriculum vary widely by community. Foreign languages are usually only taught in private schools only, so it is likely that refugee children will not know English.

El Salvadorian schools are very strict about the student's appearance. Boys cannot have long hair, girls can't wear miniskirts, uniforms are usually required, tattoos and piercings are not allowed, and couples cannot be seen kissing or holding hands. Teachers may want to explain American school standards of dress and appearance to incoming students to facilitate their transition. Because school attendance is so low, teachers should expect challenges with attention spans and unfamiliarity with testing.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Education is highly valued in El Salvador and is a luxury to many, so parents will likely be enthusiastic about participating in their children's schooling. Gender roles remain rigid in El Salvador, however, and child rearing is seen as a woman's task. Men may be reluctant to attend parent-teacher meetings or help with homework. Teachers should take the time to reach out to parents individually. It may be a good idea to allot special time for fathers to come visit the school and discuss with them the importance of parent engagement.

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.

Although Salvadorans are friendly and hospitable, initial contact with a person is often formal, with friends and family being the only individuals who use first names. Handshakes are appropriate greetings for both genders, and it is customary for the woman to extend her hand first.

EI Salvadorans are indirect communicators and they find public conflict to be rude and abrasive. If a child is having issues at school, it is important for the teachers to address the parents in private. Salvadorans may use the words “yes” and “no” in conversation only to indicate their engagement and without divulging their true opinion on the matter. Teachers can iterate the same question in different ways and ask for parents to repeat important information back to them.

EI Salvadorans have an event-based idea of time and are used to lengthy meals and gatherings, so teachers should explain the value and standards pertaining to punctuality in the U.S.

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

Although EI Salvadoran culture is still male-centric, it is not uncommon for an EI Salvadoran woman to be a single parent or single head of household. Domestic and alcohol abuse are common problems. Although most women work outside the home, they are also expected to do all of the cooking, housework, and childcare. Almost one third of girls under the age of 16 also work outside of the home. Within appropriate contexts, providing resources for women who need assistance with household issues may be advisable.

EI Salvadorans are the sixth largest immigrant group in the U.S. Today, there is a new surge of EI Salvadoran women and children fleeing the country due to gang violence. For more information and resources on issues of domestic violence, please see below.

## **Eritrean refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Languages spoken in Eritrea**

Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Kunama, Rashaida, Bilen, Afar, Beni, Amir, Nera, and some Arabic.

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

In Eritrea most schools are government owned and free-of-charge. There are a few private schools, but only at the primary education level. The academic year starts in September and ends in June for all levels of instruction.

Students are taught in their native tongue in grades 1-5, and then in theory transition to English in sixth grade but in reality, Tigrinya is more dominant in school. Primary education is free and compulsory for children age 7-14. Secondary school is grades 6-12. At the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, students take the Seventh Grade National Examination at the National Examination Center. At the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, students take the Eritrean School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE).

An ongoing challenge in Eritrea is providing equal and equitable educational opportunities for all children. To illustrate, 27.2 % of school-aged children are still out of school. Students in rural and remote suffer the most since they have very limited access to education. For example, more than 31% of nomadic children (7-14 years) are out of school. In addition to access to education, the quality of education is also problematic.

Traditionally, parental attitudes towards women's education have been an obstacle to educating girls. In addition, school fees discourage many families from investing in women's education. For low-income families that are dependent on child labor, enrolling girls in school means loss of extra income, child care, and domestic chores.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Greeting somebody with a handshake and the word "Salam" is common. Lengthy, elaborate greetings are normal, especially on special occasions. Women greet each other by ululating and kissing each other on each cheek three times. It is customary and polite to ask how things are, about one's spouse, children, and other family members. Each greeting is accompanied by a great deal of genuine laughter and joyousness.

Questions have different endings depending on whether you are addressing a single male, a single female, or several persons. Eye contact during the first encounter with





someone is usually seen as a sign of disrespect, however; eye contact becomes more acceptable as people become more acquainted and develop a relationship. Eritreans are very hospitable and great care is taken to make guests feel welcome and included. Eritreans are also pleased when non-Eritreans show an interest in their customs.

Many Eritreans have a strong sense of national pride and fear losing their culture, which sometimes slows down the process of acculturation in the US. Lack of English proficiency has also been a barrier for Eritrean immigrants who wish to fully engage in American culture. In particular, this is a struggle for many Eritrean women. Additionally, 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 Tigrinya are the dominant ethnic group in Eritrea. Traditionally, the highland and lowland groups have had antagonistic relationships. These groups distrust each and live in segregation. It is good to be aware of these community divisions as they may carry over to Eritreans in your school community.

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

Eritreans pride themselves on being hard workers and resilient individuals. They demonstrate great social responsibility. Respect for elders and authority is the norm. Eritrean families are close-knit. Typical households consist of nuclear families with kin networks close by. Generally, men are the primary providers and decision-makers whereas women are homemakers. In many communities, women are inferior to men. Children assist with household chores from an early age, girls in particular play a more active role than boys. Boys act as herders of the family's livestock while girls assist with domestic duties.

Eritreans celebrate major events with members of their community. For instance, birthdays, marriages, graduations, and other events. Traditional foods and music always play an important role. All traditional foods are eaten using the right hand only and without the use of silverware. The left hand is considered impure.

The majority of Eritreans are circumcised. Female circumcision (female genital mutilation) is carried out by Christians and Muslims. The Kunama people practice traditional medicine, including slashing eyelids to treat an irritated eye, burning cheeks to treat chronic headaches, and cutting the epiglottis in both males and females. The Kunama also have a coming of age ritual for young men where their heads are shaved and they are sent into the wilderness to slaughter an animal, but the group has necessarily become flexible about this coming-of-age ceremony in the US. Other cultural traditions may clash with cultural practices and laws in the US.

## Guatemalan refugee students: cultural background profiles

### Languages

Spanish (official) 68.9%, Mayan languages (a total of 21 are recognized) 30.9%, (K'iche 8.7%, Q'eqchi 7%, Mam 4.6%, Kaqchikel 4.3%, other 6.3%), other 0.3% (includes Xinca and Garifuna). Do not assume that Mayans from Guatemala speak Spanish.



### Teaching in the classroom

School for children is free and compulsory in Guatemala, in theory. There have been new programs and policies in recent years. According to USAID, this has increased numbers attending school and numbers with passing grades. But not all Guatemalans, especially the Maya and those in remote rural areas, have had access to education, and fewer than half make it to middle school.

There are many private schools due to the lack of public schools in some areas. The private schools are often run by Catholics. If children have attended school regularly, they may speak Spanish and English. Other children may only speak their own Mayan language.

You may find illiteracy among parents and children. Parents may have trouble with paperwork, especially long forms. There can also be confusion caused by family members with different last names.

Students are taught to be obedient, to not question instructions, and generally not to behave disrespectfully.

### Family/school engagement

Interpersonal engagement is characterized by formality and respect. Teachers are highly respected in Guatemala, and Guatemalan parents may not raise concerns or question you because of this. They may also be ashamed of their own lack of education or knowledge about the school system.

Elders are highly respected. Women are not treated as equals, however. There is a high rate of abuse of women. Many of the parents you meet will be mothers who have fled with their children to escape gang violence.

Personal space of two and a half to three feet space is considered normal, and touching between women is normal during a conversation, more so than between men or between women and men.

Making eye contact is a sign of respect and a critical way of showing interest. Speaking loudly is not approved of. It is common practice to shake hands between men and women, or for women to embrace one another with a kiss on the cheek. Men generally greet other males with a handshake, but it is not unusual for close friends and family male and females to greet one another with a kiss on the cheek.

## **Culture, gender and family**

Most Guatemalans hold Roman Catholic or Protestant religious views and carry indigenous Mayan beliefs. Around 50% of Guatemalans are Roman Catholic, while around 40% are Protestant. The remaining 10% of Guatemalans practice a range of Mayan indigenous religions. The Mayan beliefs are centered on the worship of gods who control natural earthly elements such as weather and crops.

Guatemalans are usually identified between Amerindians and Ladinos. Ladinos are those who have adopted the Spanish language and culture and are classified as mestizos, or those of mixed Amerindian and European descent.

Male-female interaction is traditionally limited outside the family, and dating is uncommon until later on. A female Guatemalan adolescent's fifteenth birthday marks her adulthood and is celebrated by a traditional ceremony. For a male Guatemalan adolescent, his mark of adulthood occurs later on when he reaches the age of eighteen.

Formality between genders in this aspect remains throughout adulthood, but friend and family ties are often close. The extended family is generally involved in the nuclear family life and forms the foundation of Amerindian communities. Guatemalans are community-minded rather than individualistic.

Guatemalan dress is casual and similar to Western dress.

## **Ethiopian refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Amharic and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Ethiopia has one of the highest illiterate populations 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.

Fasting periods (see below, under culture) may be a physically and emotionally challenging experience for students.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Many Ethiopian families migrate to escape poverty but find themselves underemployed or unemployed after coming to the US. 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 US. In some cases, this tension has led to domestic violence or divorce for many Ethiopian refugee households in the US.

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.

## Haitian refugee students: Cultural background profile

### 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 US classrooms 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 United States will have limited experience with the school system and that their level of education may be behind that of their peers.

### 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 US have college degrees. They may be confused about how to interact with teachers and about how school days are structured. Take extra time to meet with and explain the logistics of their children's schooling and 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 are advised to 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 US and may struggle with healthy eating.

Many Haitians practice Vodou, believing in the Supreme Creator, Bondye, typically making offerings to the spirit Loa, and participating in 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.

## Honduran refugee students: Cultural background profiles

### Language

Spanish (official)

Amerindian dialects including Garifuna, Tawahka, and Castilian



### Teaching in the classroom

Access to education varies across social classes in Honduras. Honduras did not have a national education system until the late 1950s and prior to the reform, education was exclusively for elite families who could afford private education. Government reforms in the late 1950s created a national public education system.

At least one-quarter of people from Honduras cannot write or read, although education reform led to free and mandatory schooling for children between seven and fourteen years of age in Honduran society. Less than half of those that enroll in public schools follow through primary level, whereas middle and upper-class families generally send children to private schools. Because of the disparity, you will likely notice that some Honduran students will have little or no reading or writing skills.

### Family/school engagement

When greeting people from Honduras, educational degrees are important. Addressing a family member by their respectful title, such as “Dr., Mr. or Mrs.”

Honduran culture is more relaxed and you will find that modes of speaking are generally informal and punctuality is more lenient. The close family ties and communalism culture means that families will be more involved in students’ lives. Thus, when addressing any particular issue with students, it is normal to speak with family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into offering alternatives, solutions or ideas.

While Hondurans are more private in nature, they can also be more expressive and vocal in conversation, using hand gestures or tapping someone they are speaking to in order to get their attention. Pointing fingers can be offensive or seem rude, so it is better to greet Hondurans with open hands in a general direction or with a widely acceptable “thumbs up” to indicate that everything is OK.



Hondurans generally avoid casual conversation topics around work or partisan politics. The Honduran coup of 2009, which maintains family and community divisions, largely characterizes modern politics, so it is better to avoid introducing these topics of conversations early on. Other conversations to avoid with families when engaging with students, parents or extended family involve criminality or corruption, as many Hondurans may have encountered some aspect prior to immigrating.

### **Culture, gender and family**

The majority of Hondurans are Roman Catholic or Protestant, with other less commonly practiced religions. The predominant ethnic groups include Mestizo, which are mixed American and European descent, as well as a small percentage of Amerindian, black and white.

However, dress can be more formal or conservative in Honduran culture and brightly colored clothing, particularly amongst women. There is a great deal of emphasis on community, and traditional and religious festivities and customs are important in the life of Hondurans.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women are more traditionally viewed. The strong gender roles reflect the dominant male role of power and authority with decision-making. Women are perceived to have primarily domestic roles as well as the understanding that is less appropriate for women to be unaccompanied in public.

Additionally, because of the collectivist culture rather than Western individualism and the large average family size, Hondurans can be more personal in space, where it is common to speak and stand in close proximity to one another. It is not uncommon to see friends holding hands with one another or expressing affection openly in public. Younger Honduran students may be more affectionate than other newcomer populations.

## **Iranian refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Farsi, some Turkish and Turkic dialects, and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Iran has the world's youngest population, with approximately 18 million school-age citizens. Education is mandatory and free and school is taught in Farsi. Children attend 5 years of primary school, 3 years of lower secondary and then have the option of enrolling in 3 years of upper secondary, and one year of pre-university. The education system has been reformed several times in the last decade; currently the focus is on vocational training that will allow young Iranians to find employment quickly after graduating. Teaching methods are constantly being updated and revised.

Both urban and rural schools are becoming more connected to technology, with most having access to computers and the internet. Equal access to education for both genders is a priority for the Iranian government; currently 49 percent of the student population is female. 93 percent of the population is literate. This rate is increased to 97 percent among citizens aged 15 and up, without any gender discrepancy. Iranian students will likely be academically focused and enthusiastic about becoming assimilated, having been taught the importance of education from an early age.

Religion is a part of the school curriculum in Iran so refugee students may be surprised by the secular nature of American education. There has been a recent push by the government to improve the quality of English instruction at the primary school level. Many Iranians supplement their English classes with private instruction. Depending on their age, incoming students may have some English proficiency and the enthusiasm to learn the language.

There are nearly 60 universities in Iran, and some are the most prestigious in the Middle East. Engineering, social sciences, business, and law are popular topics of study and nearly 750,000 Iranians graduate college each year.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Education is extremely valued in Iran. Teachers in Iran are well-educated and, though underpaid, are respected both in their places of work and their communities. Iranian parents are usually very involved with their children, so are likely to be enthusiastic about building a relationship with their child's teacher. Some Iranian homes are multigenerational, so involving grandparents in school activities would be appreciated. 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.

Iranians are generally formal in public and try to conform closely to societal norms. Male relatives are very protective over female relatives, and in more traditional families it can be considered rude to ask questions about the private lives of females. It is expected that individuals will meet several times to get to know each other before business or personal matters are talked about. Teachers should abstain from asking personal questions until a rapport has been established.

Iranians greet each other by shaking hands or kissing on the cheek. They are extremely polite and decline compliments and help when offered. They practice both verbal and nonverbal communication, frequently in order to minimize public conflict or embarrassment. Teachers should keep this in mind, as what is said may not always match what is actually felt or intended. Gifts are exchanged frequently.

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

Iranian families are extremely close-knit and frequently private. It is within their home that they truly feel they can be themselves. Many aspects of their lives, from the most private to the most public, are governed by *shariah*, the Muslim code of conduct which has evolved over centuries. Women in urban areas have been given more freedoms in recent decades and most can choose what clothing they would like to wear. However, archaic practices such as arranged marriage still exist in rural areas. Women were not allowed to vote until 1963 and are still expected to do most, if not all, of the childrearing and home tasks.

Many homes are still multigenerational, although small nuclear families are becoming more usual. Most Muslim Iranian families are headed by the father and are centered on creating extended family networks. Business, political, and social life is determined by the family network, and family members are strategically distributed through various sectors of society. Nepotism is not considered to be a negative cultural construct.

## **Iraqi refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Arabic and some Kurdish

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

In Iraq, education is free and compulsory until the age of 12. However, the danger involved in going to and from school has precipitated a decline in attendance. This has resulted in a general decline in school performance marked by the necessity of most children repeating one grade level.

Only about 10% of the total Iraqi refugee youth population is enrolled in school. The UN, Red Crescent, and NGOs such as Save the Children are operating in the region monitoring the situation and have set up care centers with some limited educational opportunities or educational reference services. Students in your classroom are very likely to have experienced interrupted educations and to be several grade levels behind their peers. Girls may well have had less access to education than boys.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Iraqi families value education, and before the war, many Iraqis were highly educated. Parents and older Iraqis may actually have higher literacy rates than teenage Iraqis or young adults.

Iraqi males, often classified as achievement-driven and hard workers, thrive in positions of leadership and value affiliation. Iraqi males are likely to do well as community navigators or as leaders of planning committees within the school. The US created a Special Immigrant Visa (SIVs) for Iraqis who were employed by the US government during the Iraq invasion as translators, so you may find interpreters among your parents.

Most Iraqi women wear a hijab and, although they may be somewhat modern in terms of working and driving in the US, they still generally prefer gender separation. Iraqi women are typically responsible for their children's education and will work hard to ensure their children succeed. Holding ESL classes or other adult education classes with separate genders may increase Iraqi women's participation. 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.

Teachers working with Muslims should remember that Islam does not depict the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, using images of the Prophet is considered offensive.



## **Culture, Gender and Family**

There are some Iraqi social traits or customs that are helpful to know. Men commonly hold hands or kiss when greeting each other, but this is typically not the case for men and women. Respect is given to the elderly and women, especially those with children.

Hospitality is an Arab and Muslim tradition deeply ingrained in the culture. Visitors must always be fed and looked after. Invitations to a home should be seen as an honor. Iraqis will often work to help others in need.

Almost 80% of Iraqis are Arab, while some 15-20% are Kurds. Kurdish women, unlike those in many other Muslim cultures, do not cover their faces, and men and women participate in mixed-gender activities. Iraqi Christians may follow Iraqi cultural traditions but not religious Muslim traditions.

The contemporary conflict between Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis is based not only on a schism that happened almost 14 centuries ago but on the politics of the Saddam Hussein era. The Sunni Arabs, some 15-20% of the population, provided the bulk of the governing class under Saddam, while the Shiites, upward of 60% of the population, were denied political rights and their religious freedoms were curtailed. The majority of non-Kurdish Muslim Iraqis in the United States are Shiites. There are also a large number of Christians.

Among Muslims, while there is a divide between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, they share many of the same basic values, including not to consume pork or alcohol, to meet on Fridays at the mosque, and the necessity of fasting, praying, pilgrimage and zakat, or giving to the poor.

Islam is a strictly patriarchal religion such that men are at the head of their family and society generally. Women are expected to be strictly obedient to their husbands. One custom that is at odds with US society is the practice of arranged marriage for girls of a very young age.

Between 1960 and 1980, Iraqi women had gained access to education, healthcare and employment, and their political and economic participation was significantly advanced. But women suffered considerably during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, with many becoming widows and having to support their families, although at the same time, the shortage of men enabled women to enter fields of education and employment that had previously been closed to them. UN sanctions imposed after the first Gulf War (1991) caused further hardship for the Iraqi people, and since the 2003 war, women's position and security in society has markedly deteriorated. As of 2009, though, this appears to be improving.

## **Karen refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, with some of the most well-known being the Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Rohinyan, and Mon. The Karen live in Karen state, and thousands are in refugee camps in Thailand.



### **Language**

Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Burmese, and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Karen people have traditionally placed a high value on Western-style education. In 1962, private schools were outlawed and since then, due to lack of funding, schools in Karen areas have been unable to provide a high standard of education. Since 1997, ethnic groups have tried to provide basic education to displaced communities.

In a basic Karen school, lessons include three languages (Karen, English, and Burmese); math and general science; and social studies. Students also receive classes in hygiene and civics, domestic science, and gardening.

Most Karen refugees were able to attend school in camp, so many speak some basic English and have some background in math and science. However, they are likely to struggle with critical thinking concepts, writing, and American history. Karen culture values land and resources like water, so Karen students may excel at units on ecology.

Students are expected to show respect to teachers by listening without interrupting, disagreeing or making eye contact. If a Karen student knows you are saying something incorrect, they will probably not disagree with you because it would embarrass you as the expert. Karen students may show respect by lowering their heads when walking in front of others, passing items with two hands, and crossing their arms in front of them.

It is considered rude to step over another individual. Be careful to walk around students and ask other classmates to do the same. Students are not used to being asked questions directly or in class. It's a good idea to re-ask questions that have not been answered or think of other ways for students to participate.

Karen refugees tend to prize communal rather than individual values and may at first do better in group activities rather than competitive activities or entrepreneurial activities.

Karen students may feel uncomfortable with praise or may have a hard time talking about their individual skills and strengths.

### **Family/School Engagement**

In Karen culture, people are expected to decline initial invitations. If you hope for a Karen family to join an event, you may need to ask repeatedly. Saying “no” is typically a way to show you are being modest. In reality, many Karen will not actually want to refuse a request or invitation from a teacher because that would be considered rude. Instead, they would probably reply indirectly but then not attend the event.

Karen tend to address one another by titles, such as “Auntie” or “Uncle.” You can show respect for parents by addressing them this way. Even if parents do not speak English, you can find ways to engage them using their traditional knowledge. For example, many Karen value the land and environment and would be good volunteers to help lead school recycling or environmental efforts. They also value their heritage. 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.

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

Elders are highly respected in Karen culture. Karen youth show their respect by walking behind elders. Teachers, parents and religious leaders are typically viewed very highly by Karen individuals. Community is also very important within Karen culture, and community members are often thought of as extended family members. Around 70% of Karen are Buddhist or Animist. The remaining 30% are Christian.

Families generally eat meals together, but often in silence rather than as a time for conversation. Food is often viewed as a way to help cure diseases or sickness. If you are working with your school counselor to support a student, you may suggest including this and asking the family what foods they may need to support their student.

## Karenni refugee students: Cultural background profile

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s.

Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, with some of the most well-known being the Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Rohinyan, and Mon. The Karenni live in Karenni state, and thousands are in refugee camps in Thailand.



## Languages

Karenni, Burmese, and English

### Teaching in the Classroom

All camps have primary and, to a lesser extent, middle or high schools. Most students in camps attend schools because they are free. Teachers drawn from the refugee community are paid very modest salaries by nongovernmental organizations. Teachers are typically not trained. International volunteers may sometimes improve students' English levels but do not necessarily have long term positive impacts on the overall education system. Camp conditions—overcrowding, poor facilities, a chronic shortage of books and equipment—make learning and teaching a challenge and contribute to relatively high dropout rates. Moreover, the lack of work opportunities has reduced enthusiasm for the value of education among older children since students who do graduate still are unable to work or attend university.



In surveys carried out by UNHCR in late 2005 and 2006 of more than 6,000 adult Karenni refugees who applied for resettlement to the United States and other countries, about two thirds reported having received primary, middle, or secondary education, and about one third reported having received no education. Fewer than 100 people had received vocational training or attended university.

## Family/School Engagement

Karennis are not likely to ask for help, even if they need it. It will help families if you can provide referrals to community agencies that provide schools supplies etc., but be sure to explain these resources are available to any family and that you are not singling out their student or family.



Karenni culture places a high value on respect for elders and duty to parents. Karenni tend to address one another by titles, such as “Auntie” or “Uncle.” You can show respect for parents by addressing them this way, such as “Auntie Bathesheba.”

Karennis are very community- and family-focused. Community members are often thought of as extended family members. Karenni refugees in the US continue to highly value their families and cultural heritage, and Karen communities highly value their traditions and independence. One of the best ways to engage families is to create activities and after-school programs that promote traditional culture, such as asking community leaders to teach traditional dancing. 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.

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

The probable background of your Karenni families before they went to the refugee camps was poverty-level agricultural work.

The Karenni are traditionally animists, many of whom have converted to Christianity but retain their original animist belief system based on the appeasement of spirits, which requires a variety of rituals and sacrifices. The Karenni believe that a person possesses a number of souls, *kla*, and that it is vitally important to retain the *kla*, which might flee for various reasons (in connection with a mental breakdown, for example).

Parents share responsibility for raising children and decision-making, but men typically communicate decisions to the public and are seen as the leaders of the family. Karen men may be looked down upon or teased if they do not appear to be the leader of the wife. In the camps, however, women’s groups play an important role. They push women’s concerns at the camp leadership level, promote education and work opportunities for women, and provide support for the many vulnerable community members, such as orphans, widows, and the victims of domestic violence.

## **Laotian refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Language**

Lao and some Hmong Daw and Mong Njua.

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Laotian Americans 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 US school system for several years. Most of their parents probably spent many years of their adult lives in camps.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Before coming to the United States, your students' parents may have known life almost exclusively in refugee camps.

Although handshakes are common among men, they are less so for women. Looking people in the eye or 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 United States, 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 United States, it is common for Lao women to work outside of the home.

Buddhism is the predominant way of life of most Laotians. In the United States, many Laotian-Americans 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.

## **Liberian refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Language**

English, Mande, Mel Kru, Goa, and Kreyol.

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

English is used for instruction in all public and mission schools and in universities. Education suffered as a result of war and the Ebola outbreak in 2014. Prior to the war, access to formal primary schooling was limited to missionary schools. In rural areas, secret societies (Poro and Sande) relied on “bush schools” to teach history and genealogy along with training in herbalism and midwifery. Higher education opportunities are limited, especially for indigenous people. In refugee camps educational opportunities were also limited.



Many children learn through listening and memorization since many indigenous languages are oral.

Primary and secondary schools are free and compulsory in theory. The school year runs from September to December and February to May or June. In primary school (grades 1-6) students learn basic reading, arithmetic, general sciences, and sometimes English and Bible studies. Secondary schooling is divided into two levels: lower secondary or junior secondary and upper or senior secondary. Lower secondary schools (grades 7-9) are mainly found in Monrovia and at missions in rural areas. Students take Algebra, Chemistry, Geography, Geometry, and Physical Science. Upper secondary schools (grades 10-12) are almost all in the capital city. High school students prepare for universities and take the advanced version of courses taught in junior high.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Many Liberians have an exaggerated sense of familiarity with American customs, language, and cultural norms because of Liberia’s historical connections to the US. You should still reach out to parents and invite them to be involved in their children’s school life. It is important to also 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.

Greetings vary by location and ethnic groups. Many Liberians greet by giving a basic handshake. It is common to stretch out one or two hands, shake warmly, and then hug. Only shake hands with people in the same age group. For many ethnic groups, young people must bow slightly at the knees when greeting an elderly.

The “snap-shake” greeting is done when shaking hands with someone. You grasp the middle finger of the other person’s right hand between your thumb and ring finger, and bring it up quickly with a snap. This practice originates from freed American slaves. It is also used as a way to greet dinner guests by Liberian Americans. Due to the Ebola outbreak, the Liberian way of greeting one another was modified for health reasons.

Public displays of affection are taboo between men and women. However, people of the same gender may hold hands as a sign of friendship. When joining a small group, people apologize for disrupting the discussion and proceed to shake hands with everyone in the group.

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

Linguistically Liberian tribes can be divided into 3 groups: The Mende (north and east), the Kru, including the Krahn, (east and southeast) and the Mel (northwest). A person’s last name is indicative of one’s ethnic heritage. Although a minority, former American slaves (Americo-Liberians) have a higher socio-economic status than indigenous groups and have a sense of entitlement and prestige over others.

Men are dominant and assume the role of warriors. Women carry out household chores and participate in agricultural labor, which gives them some power and status. Traditionally, women are viewed as the property of their husbands, but civil marriages grant inheritance and property rights to women. Children are viewed as potential workers and are expected to take care of their parents and other elders. Childrearing is a collective responsibility. Corporal punishment is an acceptable form of discipline.

## **Mon refugee students: Cultural background profile**

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, with some of the most well-known being the Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Rakhine/Rohinyan, and Mon. The Mon come from Mon state, but there has been a mass exodus of Mon people to Thailand.



### **Language**

Mon and Burmese

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Formal education in Burma is provided through government-led Basic Education schools. Basic Education schooling lasts 11 years: 5 years of primary school (Kindergarten to Standard 4) and 6 years of secondary education. Students graduate at 16 or 17 years old. The government maintains a ban on the Mon language after primary level in state schools. The cost of School uniforms, books and extra fees create a barrier to accessing free education. Parents with struggling students must pay extra tuition fees for after-school help. This is costly and discouraging, especially for poor parents who cannot afford basic fees.

There are also various school systems unique to Mon regions. There are national Basic Education Schools, Mon National Schools and 'Mixed Schools'. Mixed Schools are essentially government Basic Education schools that, through an informal partnership with the Mon National Education Committee, teach additional courses on Mon language, culture and history.

Education remains inaccessible for poor children in rural communities. High dropout and resource constraints are major challenges for rural Mon groups. In rural villages, over a third of children who stated when they had left education dropped out before completing Primary School. Another third dropped out immediately following Primary School completion, failing to make the transition to Secondary Education. Three quarters of students who gave reasons why they had dropped out from education reported issues related to livelihood difficulties. Low income children sacrificed school for work to assist the family, the cost of education is unaffordable, family labor migration and poverty are all factors influencing educational attainment. Many rural schools struggle with insufficient teaching materials or human resources.

## **Family/School Engagement**

Many of the larger cultural norms practiced in Burma can be found among the Mon people. For example, traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named Htay Maung might have a wife named Win Swe Myint and two children named Cho Zin Nwe and Than Tut. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in Western countries.

Furthermore, students in your classroom who are ethnically Burman may have parents who experienced severe political persecution, though they themselves may have been born in the US or been very young when their families came to the US. Literacy rates of adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the US are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

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.

Respect for elders is important. Thus, younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect. Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person.

Don't touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body.

Burmese tend to be reserved until friendships are formed. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

The Mon are considered to be one of the first peoples in the Southeast Asia and the earliest one to settle in Burma. Mon are devout Buddhists and they follow their own ceremonial calendar of Theravadin festivals.

In general Burmese society, traditions and customs not only expect a woman to bear and care for the children but she is responsible for the child's general wellbeing, must keep order and discipline, provide love and sympathy, and ensure each member of the family is healthy, happy and if possible wise. Women's reputations in relation to sexuality and chastity are important and encourage the practice of forced marriages between women to the men who have sexually harassed or assaulted them. Gender discrimination and cultural norms favor men over women.

## **Nepali refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Language**

Nepali, Newari, Tibet-Burman languages, Indo-Aryan languages, and English

### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Nepal's curriculum from the 1950s to the 1970s was influenced by US schools and developed with help from UNESCO. Many teachers are untrained, however. Education is not compulsory across the country, but the government does provide free primary education for children of all castes between the ages of five and 12, although most students bore some costs for examinations and had to buy uniforms. The government reported that more than 95% of school-age children attended primary schools.



A gender gap in education persisted with a reported two-thirds of adolescent girls in rural areas not attending school. Literacy rates for women were approximately 44.5% as opposed to 71% for men. Many school-age girls do not attend school due to the absence of separate or proper toilets. However, according to the State of the World's Children 2016 report, this gender gap is narrowing. For example, today 90% of boys ages 15-24 are literate and 80% of girls 15-25 are literate. Also, 62% of girls are enrolled in high school as opposed to 58% of boys who enroll in high school.

Despite good progress in enhancing equal access to basic education (grades 1-8), children, especially the poorest, do not continue to post-basic education, and the quality of education at all levels remains a problem. Access, repetition, dropping out and truancy are the remarkable issues in rural areas. Significant segments of the child population are still not attending school. However, it is still the generally held belief that education is a gateway for better life and everyday living.

### **Family/School Engagement**

The most common type of asylum claim from Nepal is one based on fear of harm from the government. Many applicants claim that they have suffered past persecution or fear future persecution on account of their political opinion. It is good to be sensitive as a teacher that parents may have a particular fear of government.



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.

In Nepal, people especially women, do not normally shake hands when they greet one another, but instead press palms together in a prayer-like gesture known “Namaste”. To show gratitude and respect, use both of your hands rather than one when giving or receiving something, even money. It’s seen as a gesture of respect. Among Hindus, avoid touching women and holy men. Raising your voice or shouting is seen as extremely bad manners in Nepal.

In Nepal, the first meal is served around 10:30 a.m. and the second shortly after sunset. The slaughter of cows is forbidden, and Nepalese do not eat beef. A custom in Nepal is *jutho*, which translates as “contaminated” and requires people not to touch others’ food and drink with either their hands or their spoon. When drinking water, Nepalese people will not touch the bottle or glass to their lips so that others can drink from it also. Don’t eat from someone else’s plate or offer food you have taken a bite of.

Another custom is the idea that the foot is ritually dirty and therefore stepping over food or pointing the soles of your feet is disrespectful.

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

The majority (over 80%) of Nepalis are Hindu. 9% are Buddhist, and a significant portion of the population may identify themselves as Buddhist and Hindu, the beliefs of which intermingle without conflict. 4.4% of Nepalis are Muslim and 1.4% are Christian.

One basic concept in Hinduism is that of *dharma*, or natural law, which holds that people should play their proper and determined role in society. The caste system is an integral part of *dharma*. Each person is born into a particular caste, whose traditional occupation is graded according to the degree of purity and impurity inherent in it.

The rigidly patriarchal system that dominates Nepal is demonstrated through women’s general subservience to men in virtually every aspect of daily life. While there are exceptions to this among particular ethnic groups, women fulfil traditional roles such as fetching water, doing farm work, and cooking meals.

## Nicaraguan refugee students: cultural background profiles

### Languages

- Spanish (official)
- Miskito and other dialects



### Teaching in the classroom

School attendance is required and free in Nicaragua for children ages six to twelve years old, but access to education varies across social classes.

UNICEF estimated in 2015 that approximately 75% of Nicaraguan children age 3 to 17 attended school but older children and children in poor rural areas were much less likely to be in the educational system. Many young children – perhaps 1 in 6 – work. You may see a variation in literacy levels among Nicaraguans. The Nicaraguan curriculum includes patriotism, internationalism and productivity and the principles of personal sacrifice for social or national interests.

### Family/school engagement

When greeting Nicaraguans, it is important to remember that Nicaraguans have two family names: the mother's family name, which functions as the last name, followed by the father's family name. For example, Juan Garcia Lopez would be greeted as *Senor* (Mr) Garcia. Garcia is Juan's mother's family name, while Lopez is his father's. Other greetings used for females are *Senora* (Mrs) and *Senorita* (Miss).

Nicaraguan culture is quite informal, and you will find that modes of speaking are generally relaxed. Handshakes are acceptable and it is common to see light hugs or a cheek kiss amongst Nicaraguan friends and family.

Family ties are strong and Nicaraguans rely heavily on family support regularly. This communal culture means that families are involved in students' lives. When addressing any particular issue with students, it is normal to speak with family members to better understand the situation or seek insight into offering alternatives, solutions or ideas.

Nicaraguan communication styles are direct in speaking or asking about trivial topics and indirect when being asked about the same topics. It is important to be clear and specific when asking questions. In general, Nicaraguans may tell you what you want to hear out politeness. It is important to be mindful of this and encourage honest feedback.

Personal space amongst Nicaraguans can be less than one arm's length apart during a conversation, especially between family and friends, but it is better to allow for a lot of personal space in the beginning for both Nicaraguan students and parents. Women are generally more reserved in conversation so as not to be seen as flirtatious. There is very little touching during initial meetings other than a handshake.

Physical gestures are common modes of communication in the classroom for Nicaraguan students. They can sometimes point with their lips by puckering or raising the chin toward the intended direction as well as waving a finger to catch someone's attention. Crinkling of the nose means, "I don't get it." They may use hand gestures, such as sweeping the hand with the palm facing downward in an attempt to bring someone towards them.

Because of the agreeable nature of Nicaraguans, it is better to avoid saying "no" when someone offers you something to eat or drink. It can be seen as a sign of disrespect or offensiveness.

### **Culture, gender and family**

The majority of Nicaraguans are Roman Catholic or Evangelical. The predominant ethnic groups include Mestizo, which are mixed American and European descent, as well as a small percentage of white, black and Amerindian groups.

Nicaraguan attire is often formal or conservative, and a clean appearance is highly regarded. For men, it is common to see khakis, slacks and button-down shirts. For women, it is common to see dresses and skirts or blouses. Presenting oneself in cleaned, pressed clothing is an important aspect of Nicaraguan culture.

Hierarchically, roles of men and women are traditionally viewed. However, opportunities for women to work depend on social class and have evolved historically. In rural families, women are perceived to have more domestic roles and men are the breadwinners. In more urban families, the traditional expectations are less common, but there are still perceptions of traditional gender roles culturally. Because of this variation, you will see varied perceptions of personal expectations across students from urban or rural families.

## Pakistani refugee students: Cultural background profile

**Languages:** Urdu, Punjabi, and English



### Teaching in the Classroom

Fewer than 65% of children finish primary school, and only half of all adults are literate, the literacy rate being significantly higher for males than for females. Literacy drops in areas of violence and displacement.

Further, even a substantial proportion of those who are literate have not had any formal education especially girls. The share of females in education progressively diminishes above the primary school level.

The use of child labor in Pakistan is widespread, but children who do attend school in Pakistan place high value on education. Children in school typically attend class, help with chores, and then study. In Pakistani schools, memorization is heavily emphasized, not critical thinking and classroom participation, so students might need coaching in these areas as they adjust. Citing references and keeping track of sources in academic work are not emphasized in Pakistan. Also, due to the emphasis on memorization, there are few repercussions for copying work from other classmates or from books.

In Pakistan, students usually have homerooms and teachers rotate through the classrooms. Students often have the same teacher for more than one subject area. Pakistani culture requires students to have very formal behavior with teachers. There are no jokes, no slacking off and no non-curricular discussions. Teachers are addressed as Sir or Madam, and students show respect by standing up when the teacher walks in or stopping walking when the teacher passes by.

Most students do not socialize with the opposite gender. It is culturally acceptable for boys and girls to hug, shake hands or jest just with members of the same sex. Girls may cover their hair with a *hijab* or scarf. Changing in a locker room may be uncomfortable, and Pakistani girls may choose to wear full-cover clothing in gym class.

Pakistan is a diverse country but it is also a hierarchical one. It might take some time and discussion for a student to adjust to the different social norms in the U.S. Many Pakistani children (especially girls) are accustomed to very direct guidance from their parents so when decision-making is required, it can help to offer two or three choices, at least at first, to help develop this skill. Students may need time to adjust to a very time-oriented U.S. culture where it is important to schedule events to be on time.

Students are generally used to more indirect communication styles and are likely to rely on context and nonverbal indicators to convey a message. It is important not to offend, and this can mean telling the listener what the listener wants to hear, especially people

in higher positions, so they can save face. Closed statements followed by some silence, rather than questions, may be better at getting students to open up.

It is also polite for your Pakistani student to refuse things that are offered (food, for example) with the expectation that it will be offered several times before they can accept. Likewise, when told “no”, students may argue/ask repeatedly after being told “no,” since this is what they think will bring the expected result.

For the noon prayer, a private space can be provided for the student to pray undisturbed. Many schools allow the students to use a corner of a room designated for study hall or a counselor’s office. From the United States, Mecca is southeast.

### **Family/School Engagement**

The Pakistani family discipline system is very strong—children pay respect to their parents and don’t argue with them. Children are encouraged to attend religious education classes held on weekends and during the summer vacation. Pakistani parents prefer same-gender social gatherings for their teenagers to socialize. Mixed gatherings may be avoided by parents as well. Pakistani parents will typically have a lot of input on the appropriateness of friendships. Usually friendships are of the same sex, formed over many years, and a student’s friends become part of the family.

Parent-teacher meetings are held in Pakistan, but parents aren’t as directly involved. Pakistani mothers generally attend to their children’s educational needs. Although Pakistani parents often visit schools to see their child participate in sports and co-curricular activities, they may not be very involved overall.

It is expected that you will use a person’s title and their surname. First names are used mostly just among close friends. It is best to ask a person how they wish to be addressed. Eye contact is one of the basic principles of communication and it is highly regarded in Pakistani culture. However, it is considered a symbol of respect by the youth to not maintain eye contact while talking to grandparents and respected elders.

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

Most Pakistanis are devout Muslims. About 75% are Sunni and 20% are Shia. The remaining 5% includes Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus. Modern Pakistan’s population can be divided into several ethnic groups, the single largest being the Punjabis. Family means everything in Pakistani culture, and personal reputation as it reflects on family reputation is always considered in Pakistan. All peer relationships reflect on the entire family. In a Pakistani family, the mother is usually the caregiver and homemaker whereas the father is typically the authority and provider. In general women and men are kept very separate and women may feel uncomfortable outside of these situations. There may be several generations under one roof.

## **Puerto Rican students: Cultural background profiles**

### **Language**

Spanish and English are the official languages. There may be slightly different intonations and accents than other Spanish countries.



### **Teaching in the classroom**

The education model is very similar to the US: Puerto Rico has to follow federal laws and regulations, including mandatory education for ages 5 to 18, and ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act). Public school instruction occurs in Spanish. English is taught as a mandatory second language at all levels of schooling. Although English is required, you may find that students may not be proficient and may be uncomfortable speaking English.

High school students have very structured schedules, with minimal electives. As a result, students tend to take all of their classes with the same classmates. Switching classes and classmates may add extra confusion or anxiety. Ensure that students understand their schedule or have a peer that they follow for the whole school day.

Wealthier families who can afford private schooling often choose that route. Many families believe private schools are more rigorous and will improve their children's chances of succeeding at school. Many are convinced that in the mainland US, public schools are better than private schools. Overall, students in Puerto Rican schools perform lower than their US counterparts, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2005). Only 12% of students in Puerto Rico scored at or above "basic" level in fourth grade compared to 79% of students in the US mainland.

High school dropout rates are estimated to be around 60% in recent (2014) data. However, over recent decades, the rates of high school and college degrees are increasing and becoming more important in the culture for job placement. Puerto Rico is atypical in that more students graduate with college degrees than the labor market can absorb. Many college graduates find jobs off the island.

Much of the population (over 90%) is located in urban areas with access to public schools. Due to Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017, many public schools have closed indefinitely in urban and rural areas.

### **Family/school engagement**

An estimated 93 percent of Puerto Ricans are literate. Teachers should take the time to reach out to parents, giving access to Spanish and English materials, keeping in mind that Spanish is the dominant language.

It is important to keep in mind that many recently arrived Puerto Rican citizens may lack access to a car, so transportation may be a challenge. In addition, the recent hurricanes have hampered students' abilities to retrieve records of schooling, birth certificates, and other common requirements for enrollment. Consider adopting waivers or allowing enrollment prior to receiving these documents so that students do not miss school upon arrival.

Puerto Ricans are generally indirect communicators and tend to find public conflict to be rude and abrasive. They may partake in a joking form of indirect criticism to convey potentially negative information. If a child is having issues at school, or if information could be seen as negative, it is important for teachers to address the parents in private. Maintain strong boundaries of respect, and pre-identify statements that convey your concern without coming across as rude or aggressive. Gestures and animated conversation are preferred over stoic, neutral conversational tones.

Elementary students tend to need more physical contact. They may be clingy and affectionate. Older female students do not want others to touch them and may be very verbal about anything that "crosses the line."

Puerto Ricans have an event-based idea of time and may not identify lateness as rude or improper, so teachers should explain the value and standards pertaining to punctuality in the U.S. Time is important for image purposes and health; other events have more flexibility with being "on time."

### **Culture, gender and family**

Puerto Ricans love their children, elders, flag, and heritage. Puerto Ricans are the second-largest Latino group in the US. In Puerto Rico, 99 percent of the population is Latino. Puerto Ricans are US citizens, whether they were born on the island or on the mainland. They are considered migrants rather than refugees or immigrants. Although Puerto Ricans do not vote for the US president, Puerto Rican residents pay taxes and have one voting representative in the House of Representatives. The statehood of Puerto Rico was most recently discussed in a close vote in 2012 after many previously failed votes. Adolescents are engaged and passionate about the issue of Puerto Rico's statehood.

Gender roles are increasingly egalitarian. Women are active in public and intellectual settings. In fact, Puerto Rico elected the first woman legislator in the Western Hemisphere in 1932. The majority of Puerto Rican residents are Roman Catholic. The culture celebrates many holidays. Students love technology, dominoes, fashion, music (including merengue and salsa), and the latest musical trends and dances.

## Rakhine refugee students: Cultural background profiles

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, with some of the most well known being the Burman, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Shan, Mon, and Rakhine/Rohingya. The Rakhine and Rohingya live in Rakhine state, also called Arakan. The Rohingya are Muslim and the Rakhine are Buddhist.



## Language

Arakanese, which includes three dialects: Sittwe–Marma (spoken by two-thirds of Rakhine), Ramree, and Sandoway.

## Teaching in the Classroom

Formal education provided through government-led Basic Education schools. Basic Education schooling lasts 11 years: 5 years of primary school (Kindergarten to Standard 4) and 6 years of secondary education. Students graduate at 16 or 17 years old.

Rakhine's education system is highly marginalized and ranks very poorly for both primary and secondary school attendance, as well as for gender parity. Common barriers to education are dilapidated buildings, overcrowded classrooms, shortage of teachers, inadequate facilities and the absence of teaching and learning materials.



Rakhine offers alternative educational institutions:

- Self-help schools for younger children in remote areas
- Short-term Basic Literacy Education drives try to give children and adults basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills.
- NGO-run adolescent spaces offering basic vocational training and life skills
- Churches offering literacy and numeracy teaching to younger children in the areas they serve.



But by far the most prominent educational institutions in Muslim areas are community-funded mosque schools, or madrasahs. They provide a religious education to younger children of both sexes, and to mostly male adolescents. Most lessons focus on memorizing and interpreting religious texts and not on literacy or numeracy. Madrasahs usually function in parallel with the government education system rather than in competition with it, with classes timed in order to avoid clashes with government school timetables. Muslim parents see madrasahs as important and valuable but not as a preferable alternative to the formal education system. However, for children in areas where government schools do not exist, or when parents are too poor to afford costs associated with education, madrasahs provide their only education.

### **Family/School Engagement**

In Rakhine state, there have been particularly bitter tensions between the Rakhine people, who are Buddhist and make up the majority of the state's population, and Muslims, who are mostly Rohingya. You will need to be aware of this divide when interacting with families from Rakhine.

Many of the larger cultural norms practiced in Burma can be found among the Rakhine people. For example, traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named Htay Maung might have a wife named Win Swe Myint and two children named Cho Zin Nwe and Than Tut. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in Western countries.

Furthermore, students in your classroom who are ethnically Burman may have parents who experienced severe political persecution, though they themselves may have been born in the US or been very young when their families came to the US. Literacy rates of adults in Burma are estimated at approximately 60%. However, Burmese adults in the US are likely to be more educated than the average Burman.

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.

Respect for elders is important. Thus, younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect. Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person.

Don't touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body.

Burmese tend to be reserved until friendships are formed. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing.

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

There is an emphasis on family and community and a respect for elders and ancestors. In general, men and women do not interact in public. Arranged marriages are acceptable. Extended families live together in one house, with men commanding the most respect. Women, however, play an important role in Rakhine society, often making decisions for the family.

There is a distinctive Indian influence throughout the culture, in particular with regard to its food, music and literature. Rakhine people have their meals in the late morning and early evening. Like most Myanmar cuisine, plain ingredients are enhanced with the use of chilies and spices. Rice and vegetables tend to be the order of the day, along with meat and fish when supply allows.

## Rohingya refugee students: Cultural background profile

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups. The Rohingya are an ethnic and religious minority from Rakhine (also called Arakan) state in Myanmar. Many thousands of Rohingya are internally displaced within Burma, where they are persecuted and killed, or in refugee camps in Bangladesh, where conditions are dire.



## Language

Rohingya

## Teaching in the Classroom

According to the Arakan Project, over 60% of Rohingya children have never been to school due to poverty, government restrictions on their movement, and lack of schools. In addition, over 70% of heads of households report having no formal education.



The few students that were able to attend schools typically were allowed to attend for half a day and went to under-resourced schools. Most students do not have textbooks, and government-funded teachers often do not receive pay. Rohingya students are also not allowed to attend universities in Burma. Some Rohingya communities have started mosques and religious schools in their villages.

Students living in refugee camps or as IDPs generally do not have any opportunities to attend school—the Bangladeshi government does not permit secondary schools in camps. Today international aid organizations are currently working to increase educational opportunities for Rohingya in camps. These schools have about equal enrollment of male and female students.

## Family/School Engagement

Rohingya parents repeatedly state that more than anything, the one thing they want for their children is an education. However, most Rohingya parents have never attended school, know little about American systems, and tend to supervise children less than American parents. Additionally, girls' education is not traditionally valued, and girls are typically taken out of school at puberty.

Rohingya in the US are often disconnected from other refugees from Burma due to historical persecution, so you will want to be aware that your Rohingya family may be dealing with more isolation than other groups. Some women may be fearful of leaving home by themselves so it is best to invite the entire family to school events. Rohingya children are often expected to work at an early age due to family economic needs so parents will need to understand why getting an education is important for their later economic success.

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.

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

Traditionally, most Rohingya were farmers. Due to discrimination and laws preventing them from land ownership, many Rohingya in Burma are landless.

Rohingya typically have a strong social bond that comes from their Islamic faith; community members work together to support one another such as providing food to families in need and helping the poor.

The majority of Rohingya follow a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. Men typically have beards, and most women wear a hijab. It may be difficult for your student to adjust to co-ed classrooms.

Schools should make an effort to provide space and time for students to pray during the day. Traditionally, men pray in congregations and women pray at home. Rohingya culture also has a strong Indian influence especially in regards to food and music.

Rohingya women and girls are subject to serious gender-based restrictions due to societal attitudes and conservative interpretation of religious norms in their male-dominated community. The birth of a son is generally favored. Women and adolescent girls typically remain in their homes and are discouraged from participating in the economic sphere. Women are excluded from decision-making in community matters. Divorced women and widows are often looked down upon. Arranged marriages often operate successfully among Rohingyas, but forced marriages are not uncommon.

## **Russian refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Languages**

The United States accepts refugees from the former Soviet states. These countries include Georgia, Ukraine, Russia, and Armenia, among many others. Their many languages include: Russian and other East Slavic languages, Baltic languages, Georgian, Estonian, Armenian, Azeri. About two-thirds of Russians speak English at varying levels.



### **Teaching in the Classroom**

This educational profile applies to the country of Russia only; educational standards vary widely throughout other former Soviet nations. In 2015, Russian education was ranked 13th best in the world. School is free and mandatory until university. Many schools are aging facilities with inadequate resources, but students are well trained in world history, foreign languages, music, mathematics, and science. Education is extremely valued and considered vital to economic success.

Literacy rates for both men and women are nearly 100% and about half of Russian adults have graduated college, which is the highest rate in the world. Foreign languages are taught from the fourth grade through the end of high school, with English being the most popular.

School years are highly ritualized, with the same events and celebrations happening year after year. Students will likely be highly motivated to succeed academically, so teachers should do their best to provide challenging and appropriate curriculum to keep them stimulated. Obedience is valued over creativity so teachers may want to encourage students to engage in art and music-based activities.

Nearly all elementary school teachers are women. School culture is formal, so it might take students time to get used to colloquial conversations with their American teachers. Students may need extra support when changing classrooms between subjects and assimilating to new groups of students frequently. Female students will likely need encouragement to pursue professions that are considered more masculine in Russian society.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Teachers in Russia are valued so parents will likely be very open to communication and suggestions. Because Russia has a world-class education system and a competitive job

market, many parents' primary concern is their children's academic success. Their wish is for their children to obtain the most desirable jobs and eventually, help support them in their later years.

Russians are not as used to the openness and instant rapport practiced by many other cultures. Many of their personal and business relationships are built up over a lifetime of association, and they prefer to get to know people slowly. When conversing, Russians value direct eye contact and firm handshakes. They may not be extremely talkative or smile excessively at first. Teachers should be friendly while avoiding topics that may be deemed too personal in the early interactions with the family. Due to experiences in their home country, many Russians may not trust authorities.

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.

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

The concept of family is extremely important in Russia (and the former USSR) and child rearing is considered a responsibility of both the family and society. Russian homes frequently house several generations. Russians are very hospitable and prefer home-cooked food, typically eat three meals a day, and rarely go out to eat. One challenge incoming students may have is getting used to "snacking."

Non-academic activities and expectations may be structured in terms of gender. Girls and boys are given different responsibilities. Girls are encouraged to be quiet, friendly, and mutually supportive, while boys are expected to be noisy, boisterous, and competitive.

Orthodox Christianity is the most common religion in former Soviet nations, followed by other forms of Christianity and Islam.

## Shan refugee students: Cultural background profile

Burma (Myanmar) has suffered civil war, political oppression and ethnic conflict since the 1950s. Burma includes over 100 different ethnic minority groups, including the Shan. With an estimated population of 6 million, the Shan live primarily in the Shan State, Burma's largest ethnic state, located in the northeast of the country. During conflicts with the Burmese government, many Shan villages have been destroyed and their inhabitants internally displaced or forced to flee into Thailand. Unlike the Karen or Karenni, however, they are not recognized as refugees by the Thai authorities, and instead many work as illegal or undocumented laborers. There are approximately 100,000 Shan refugees in the border region who are not in camps. Shan refugees only make up approximately 2% of total registered refugees along the border. The one Shan refugee camp that does exist is in a very remote region and has had less international aid than other camps for refugees from Burma. Shan make up a very small percentage (less than 10%) of total refugees from Burma resettled in the US.



## Language

Shan

## Teaching in the Classroom

Education in Shan state is limited. Schools are under-resourced and there are not enough teachers. Young boys may attend monastic school. Most students report they see school as important and valuable but also realize they have limited opportunities for further education. Modern Shan parents often try to teach their children to read and write in their native language as a political statement and commitment to their culture.

Many Shan refugees are classified as illegal migrants in Thailand. A very small percentage may have had access to refugee camp schools, but most likely they either attended migrant schools in Thailand or did not attend school. The original Thai government policy prevented westerners from actually working as teachers in camps, but instead to only serve as advisors to teachers. Students who do attend camp schools attend in semi-permanent buildings. Students are not allowed to study materials that contain political ideas or values. There are typically no tables, chairs or textbooks.

## **Family/School Engagement**

Shan parents are likely to have limited educational experiences. Most Shan have not completed high school.

Shans are used to travelling and visiting friends so may be an easier group to engage than other parents. Shans typically introduce one another using a polite address, often “*Sai*” for men and “*Nang*” for women.

Shan culture has many traditional dances: some involve young children and some involve groups of young men. Inviting parents to teach these dances during after-school or school hours may help Shan families feel connected to the school community. Music may be another area to engage and connect with Shan families, who may know how to play drums, gongs and/or bamboo flutes.

Sports are very popular for men in Shan state, including martial arts and *takraw*, a ball game similar to hacky sack but with a larger ball. These extracurricular activities may help parents feel welcome in your school, especially if they do not read or write. Shans also enjoy films and may be interested in attending movie nights at your school. If you are hosting a parent teacher-conference, you can help your parents feel welcome by offering them tea.

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.

## **Culture, Gender and Family**

Most Shan are Theravada Buddhists. Many Shan boys have tattoos, which are thought to protect the individuals from illness or disease. Cleanliness is very important to most Shans.

In traditional Shan culture, men take on public roles while women are responsible for the home and children. While women may sell at markets or engage in some work outside of the home, men tend to make large financial decisions. Shan men are expected to take strong leadership roles in their families. There is a saying in Shan culture that if a man is dominated by his wife, he will be in debt.



## Sierra Leone refugee students: Cultural background profiles

Many educators teaching diverse students report that they do not receive enough cultural background information on their students. If you are teaching refugee students, it is important to be aware of newcomers' backgrounds. The information below is meant to provide an overview of key highlights, so you develop culturally responsive teaching strategies that are in tune with your students' unique learning styles.



### Language

English, Krio, Mende, Limba, and Temne

### Teaching in the Classroom

Grades 1-3 are taught in the students' community language and higher grades are taught in English. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) play a major role in education in Sierra Leone. Almost 75% of primary schools in Sierra Leone are owned and managed by FBOs. Unfortunately, FBOs have insufficient funds.

The first 9 years of education are compulsory and free in theory. However, there is a shortage of facilities due to the years of war and so students are not able to attend school. At the end of grade 6 students take the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) to advance to secondary school, which is divided into two levels, junior and senior, lasting three years each. Senior secondary has two tracks: academic and vocational. The system favors urban children, and rural girls are worst off since many have limited access to schools and/or live in communities that oppose girls' education. Many students frequently miss school because they have chores to perform; this is particularly true for girls, who missed or left school to help out at home.

For students coming from refugee camps, educators should be aware that at some camps, children are abducted and used as human shields or sex slaves. Many refugees, including children, are victims of mutilation. Orphaned children are targeted for manual and domestic labor as well.

New subjects have been added to the curriculum in Sierra Leone – for example, indigenous languages and Sierra Leone studies. The government is still struggling with providing services, and schools charge parents tuition fees to manage schools and pay wages.

Primary education is available in the refugee camps and may be the first formal schooling for many children. Teenagers who have never been to school attend elementary level classes with much younger students.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Typical greetings are elaborate. Sierra Leoneans are very polite and conscious of their manners. Much attention is paid to someone's appearance and neatness. Elders are treated with great respect. It is rude to look people, especially elders, in the eye. It is customary to engage in immediate settling of disputes so as to avoid hard feelings.

A good host is always generous and genuinely invites any passerby to join for meals. As a guest, it is polite to leave some food on your plate and thank your host countlessly for their generosity.

When you reach out to parents and invite them to school events, 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.

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

There are between 15-20 ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. The largest ethnic groups are the Mende (east and south) and the Temne (center and northwest). The Krio (descendants of former US slaves) are located in Freetown. These ethnic groups have generally had good relations.

Nearly two thirds of the population is Sunni Muslim and about one quarter is Christian. Religious leaders are greatly respected and trusted. Religion influences people's conduct, ethics, and morality while providing emotional, moral, and spiritual support.

Extended family households are common. Polygamy is also practiced in rural areas. Large families are treasured, and parents are affectionate toward their children. Raising children is typically a collective household responsibility.

Traditionally, men carry out manual labor tasks while women (and girls) perform domestic duties. Women are subordinate to men and have limited economic and educational opportunities. Nevertheless, they some collective power from memberships in Bundu or Sande societies, which are secretive and whose activities and practices are often off-limits to men.

Girls are circumcised, usually by a midwife or by members of the Sande or Bundu societies. Circumcision is perceived as a sign of purity, morality and cleanliness, as well as considered culturally appealing. This can cause legal and cultural issues once in the US.

## **Somali refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Language**

Somali, Arabic, some Italian and English



### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Many students will have no formal education before coming to the United States. 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.

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 US individualistic style of eating.

### **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 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 U.S. 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 stress the importance of promptness in the United States 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 U.S. law, including female genital cutting, which typically happens when girls reach puberty, and burning (scarring) to help with healing after an injury. Schools can help educate students about the health issues caused by these customs and conduct public health outreach to families. 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 U.S., 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.

## **South Sudanese refugee students: Cultural background profiles**

### **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 tend to speak to 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 Americans, being event-based rather than time-based, so teachers should 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. Teachers can encourage students to eat together to maintain a sense of community while practicing the new mealtime norm.

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.

## Syrian refugee students: Cultural background profile

### Language

Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, Circassian, French, and some English.

### Teaching in the Classroom

The war in Syria has displaced 12 million people since 2011. Before the war, Syria was developing a strong education system. School was compulsory and free for grades 1–9. Literacy rates were at 95% for 15–24 year-olds. Schools were strict in discipline and old-fashioned in teaching methods, with rote learning. School was taught in Arabic, with French or English being the most popular foreign languages. Children who had the opportunity to study foreign languages will have an easier time reading and writing due to being familiar with the Roman alphabet. Currently, most children in Syria, however, no longer attend school. Since the beginning of the conflict, school attendance has plummeted due to structural damage, lack of teachers, and insecure conditions. In some parts of Syria, only 6% of children are at school.



The summary of a 2015 report from the Migration Policy Institute explains that, among refugee children, “Approximately half were not enrolled in school in mid-2015; enrollment rates may be as low as 20 percent in Lebanon and 30 percent in Turkey. Even when they do enroll, Syrian children are more likely than their non-refugee peers to receive poor or failing grades, or to drop out. Children may struggle to bridge gaps in their learning after substantial educational disruptions, particularly when contending with language barriers or new curricula. Syrian refugee children are also at risk for a range of mental health issues, having experienced very high levels of trauma ... almost half displayed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—ten times the prevalence among children around the world.”

It is likely that Syrian students coming from camps will not have had access to education. It is important for teachers to give the children time to adjust, as the children have lacked structure in their lives for some time. Teachers can help assimilate their interests by using technology in their curriculum. Young Syrians tend to be very technologically savvy, especially with social media.

### Family/School Engagement

Syrian parents will likely be very interested in being a part of their children's education, as it is their belief that poor behavior or grades reflect poorly on the family at large. Syrian children will likely feel fortunate to have the opportunity to go to school at all, and will be enthusiastic about engaging with their new environment. 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.

Syrians do not have a strong sense of personal space. Individuals of the same sex may hold hands, touch, or kiss without sexual connotation. Strangers may bump into each other on the street or cut in front of others when standing in line. Gesticulating and talking loudly is common and should not be thought of as aggressive. Punctuality is not thought of as important so Syrians may be late to events or meetings. Teachers should take the time to emphasize the importance of being on time by explaining how tardiness may affect their child or other parents. Syrians likely have strong opinions about the ongoing conflict in their country so discussion of political or religious views will be sensitive.

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

Syrians are extremely family-oriented, and a lot of homes are multigenerational. Family members feel a duty to take care of each other; if one family member does something improper, it is thought to bring shame on the family.

Syrian food is a social activity and food is shared with one's eating companions. Men pay when eating outside of the home, and it is considered impolite to split the check. Coffee and tea are consumed often. Smoking is common although women do not smoke in public or in front of men.

Syria is a largely patriarchal society where it is the duty of the men in the family to protect the females. Gender roles within families vary according to economic class and location (urban vs. rural). In most rural and semi-urban homes, it is the duty of the woman to do the housework and child rearing. It is more common in urban homes to have hired help while the woman works outside of the home. In middle- and lower-class homes, women either do not work or are expected to leave their careers when they become mothers.

Religiously conservative families (Muslim and Christian) place emphasis on women staying home and discourage socializing with men in the outside world. While some men and women chose their partners, marriages are frequently arranged by families. Polygamy is not uncommon; about 9% of urban men and 16% of rural men have more than one wife.



## **Vietnamese refugee students: Cultural background profile**

### **Language**

Vietnamese, English, French, Chinese, Khmer, Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian.



### **Teaching in the Classroom**

Primary school is compulsory and lasts for 5 years (ages 6 –11). Secondary education is not compulsory. Secondary school has two tracks: natural or social sciences. Students must take an entrance and leaving exam. The school year lasts from September until May, Monday to Saturday. Primary school curriculum entails subjects such as Vietnamese language, math, nature and society, arts and physical education. Morality is taught to students in primary school. In higher classes, and in secondary education, students are introduced to a foreign language (usually English, but sometimes Chinese or French), history, natural sciences, technology, music and geography.

Refugees from Vietnam include a heterogeneous group of people from Chinese, Cham, Montagnard, and Khmer ethnic backgrounds. Educators should be aware that the divisions and prejudices continue after relocation to the U.S.

Most Montagnard (highland) children arrive with little formal education and little English (if any). They are often unfamiliar with how to behave or dress and may lack school supplies. Those who attended school in Vietnam expect a highly authoritarian class structure focusing on memorization instead of critical thinking and problem solving. Almost all students would benefit from tutoring and programs to help social skills.

### **Family/School Engagement**

Education is highly valued in Vietnamese culture, and the knowledge attained by children is viewed as a reflection on the entire family. The high value placed on learning leads a large proportion of young Vietnamese Americans to pursue higher education. In 2012, however, approximately 68% of Vietnamese immigrants (ages 5 and over) were Limited English Proficient (LEP). The proportion of Vietnamese immigrants who spoke only English at home was 7%.

Montagnard parents are unfamiliar with American public schools and the role of parent involvement. Parents are unable to help their children with homework or to develop appropriate behavior. Typically, children receive neither money for extracurricular activities nor encouragement to participate. School personnel complain that parents do not respond to notices, do not supervise their children at home, and allow their children to come to school sick. Normal teenage issues are exaggerated if parents do not speak English, do not understand American norms and methods of discipline (there is much

confusion about child abuse), and do not approve of dating. Intergenerational tensions are exacerbated when the children learn English more quickly than their parents and they become the culture brokers and interpreters for their families.

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.

Vietnamese will often arrive late so as not to appear overly enthusiastic. However, they are punctual to appointments in professional settings. To address people formally, use Mr. or Ms. or a title plus the *first* name. Many people greet by bowing slightly. To show respect, bow your head to a superior or elder. The depth of the bow is not a factor. Usually, elders or higher-ranking people (the family head) are greeted first.

Many Vietnamese smile easily and often, regardless of the underlying emotion, so a smile cannot automatically be interpreted as happiness or agreement. To avoid confrontation or disrespect, many will not vocalize disagreement. Vietnamese often laugh in situations that other cultures may find inappropriate. This laughter is not intended as ridicule. Praising someone profusely is often regarded as flattery, and sometimes even mockery. Most people are very modest and deflect praise. Breaking a promise can be a serious violation of social expectations. It is very difficult to re-establish a lost confidence.

Speaking in a loud tone with excessive gestures is considered rude, especially when done by women. Summoning a person with a hand or finger in the upright position is reserved only for animals or inferior people. Between two equal people it is a provocation. To summon a person, the entire hand with the fingers facing down is the only appropriate hand signal.

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

Vietnam has a variety of ethnic groups including Kinh (Viet), Tay, Thai, Muong, Khmer, Mong, Nung, and other groups. Culture is more concerned with status (obtained with age and education) than with wealth. Much emphasis is on collectivity, which includes an obligation to provide for the welfare of family members. Family members are expected to work and behave for the good of the group. Families may publicly denounce a member who is ill behaved; they may also pronounce family achievements. Each member has a designated kinship term, and these are used when addressing one another. Fathers typically worked outside the home and mothers are in charge of domestic duties. Vietnamese culture is based on a patriarchal system, meaning the husband acts as the head of the family and in charge of managing money and supporting the family. Due to migration and Western influence, traditional gender roles are changing.

## Yugoslavian refugee students: Cultural background profiles

### Language

Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Slovene, Albanian, Bosnian, and English.

### Teaching in the classroom

Most individuals in the countries that make up the former Yugoslavia are literate, and education is mandated through the 8th grade. The length of the school day and mandatory subjects are very similar to the United States, and children do not get to choose elective courses until late in elementary school or high school. The majority of elementary school teachers are women. After eighth grade is completed, students can opt for vocational school or academically oriented high schools.

School culture is very formal, with students frequently standing up when a teacher enters the room, not engaging with teachers socially, and viewing them with a high level of respect. Students do not question teachers in elementary school, but intellectual confrontation is not uncommon in secondary school or university.

Although the culture of the region is very collective, students rarely work in groups for projects. High value is placed on learning a foreign language, particularly English or German. Families are proud of their students' academic success, as it is often seen as the only way out of poverty.

Many students who live in small communities must move to the larger cities to attend secondary school. This means families are used to entrusting their students' education to teachers with minimal family involvement. There is a high value placed on education and succeeding in getting a college degree is challenging and rigorous with a high focus on tests and exams.

### Family/School engagement

Teachers are held in high esteem, so most parents will value your input and take your advice to heart. Former Yugoslavians are known as a friendly, hospitable people. Individuals from the nations that make up the former Yugoslavia are warm and direct in their communication style and not hesitant to express their emotions or opinions. Kissing on the cheek is a common form of greeting for both men and women.

Children are given less homework than in the United States and are expected to complete it with minimal supervision. There are fewer after-school sports and activities that children from the former Yugoslavia engage in, instead choosing to play sports



recreationally or focus on academics. So parents may need encouragement when it comes to helping with homework and encouragement to attend and help with children's extracurricular activities. 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.

Mothers would be more likely to attend parent conferences, which are also held several times a year in the former Yugoslavia, so it would be advantageous for you to stress the participation of both parents, or to reach out to the father separately.

### **Culture, gender and family**

Due to many years of political conflict, many Bosnian refugees (and others from the former Yugoslavia) stay within their own ethnic or religious groups once in the United States: Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (sometimes called Bosniaks, although not all Bosniaks are Muslim) all have separate communities.

If you are unsure of your student's background and religion, it is a good idea to ask. Generally, Bosniaks are associated with Islam, Serbians with Eastern Orthodox and Croats with Catholicism. If you have multiple students or families from this region, be aware of historical mistrust and use the proper terminology when speaking to them.

The culture is collectivist, and individuals frequently live in the same towns or cities their whole lives, forming deep bonds with their friends and neighbors. Facilitating potlucks or activities where parents of students get to meet each other may be comforting in fostering acceptance and a feeling of community.

Women are responsible for all domestic tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Women who work outside the home generally have lower-paying and lower-status jobs than men, although *there is not* a stigma about equal education and opportunity (except in some rural and/or traditional communities).