



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.