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.