



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.