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 expectation. 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.