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 of 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.