

The Culturally-Sensitive Teacher and the Student from Iraq

by Terry Lee Marzell

When assisting an Iraqi student in an American school, it is helpful to consider the student's cultural perspectives. According to the Hofstede Scale, Iraqis exhibit an extremely high preference for hierarchical order and centralization. Iraqi culture is classified as a collectivist society, with loyalty to the group being of paramount importance, and it is a strongly masculine culture that emphasizes competition and achievement. Iraqi citizens typically exhibit a high avoidance of ambiguity and a strong concern for the establishment of absolute Truth. They usually prefer short-term rewards to long-term rewards, and emphasize work rather than leisure activities. Furthermore, unlike American society, Iraqi cultural norms emphasize considerable restraint and a preference for rigid codes for belief and behavior (Hofstede, 1980).



If the student is a recent immigrant to the United States, consider what they left behind. Besides a familiarity with their own language, cultural customs, traditions, foods, clothing, music, art, religious practices, and so on, this student would have left behind a life dominated by considerable social turmoil, random violence, political corruption, and the demolition of its infrastructure. In addition, the general health of the population has declined due to the destruction of hospitals and either the flight or the execution of most of the country's medical personnel. To a large degree, this chaos is a direct result of the 2003 Gulf War and subsequent US military activity (Lefko, 2014).

In 1982, Iraq was lauded by UNESCO for eliminating illiteracy within its borders and for developing an educational system considered one of the best in the region (Lefko, 2014). Since then, educational opportunity, and therefore literacy, has steadily declined. Many schools were damaged or destroyed, leaving behind deplorable building conditions and extremely limited resources such as textbooks and classroom supplies. In the face of never-ending war and insecurity, many parents kept

their children at home out of fear for their safety, and large numbers of these children went to work to help support their families. By 2007, Education International estimated the literacy rate in Iraq had fallen to 65%, with just 54% of the women and 74% of the men receiving a basic education (Lefko, 2014).



Knowledge of these basic circumstances becomes the basis for recognizing the instructional needs of the Iraqi student and for guiding the instructional practices of the culturally-sensitive teacher. In general, the teacher librarian should work conscientiously to build trust with the student. Be aware of the student's heightened need for personal safety, and be particularly observant of any possible health issues. Recognize that there may be gaps in the student's knowledge base which could be a reflection of the disruption of his or her formal education.

The teacher should also strive to incorporate strategies into the instructional program from all four stages of the culturally-responsive leadership scale: the contribution stage, the additive stage, the transformational stage, and the social action stage (Summers, 2010). Where possible, expose the Iraqi student to relevant reading materials about Iraqi culture in both print and electronic versions, and integrate additional resources such as images, music, movie clips, posters, art prints, databases, and web sites into the curriculum. With regards to language acquisition, attempt to secure some resources in the student's native language and some in easy-to-understand English. Suggest works by Iraqi authors, and ask your school's librarian to create visually appealing book displays of relevant books.

When designing lessons, keep the student's cultural preferences in mind (Farmer, 2012). For the Iraqi student, collaborative learning activities would be welcome, but when assigning group work, use Kagan-style strategies that require each student be responsible for a clearly-defined task that contributes to the

whole. Make sure learning objectives are explicit, especially if teaching a concept through games or play. Whenever possible, emphasize the structure of the learning task, even if there is flexibility with the outcome or finished product.

Working knowledgeable, responsively, and diligently, the culturally-sensitive teacher can help the Iraqi student navigate the American education system successfully.

Sources

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