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A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work with a student that had recently arrived to the United States from Afghanistan. My mentor and I had been trying to communicate with Ava (pseudonym). She was having trouble with listening and respecting adults, especially teachers. We had several other students in our classroom that were from other parts of the Middle East and we had been especially mindful of cultural differences such as gender, schooling and experiences. Regardless of what my mentor and I did, Ava would not cooperate. Ava was very limited with her English and was not able to directly communicate with us. Many times, we would hear her whispering to herself in Arabic and other students who spoke Arabic would come and tell us that she was saying bad words or whispering angry phrases at us.

My mentor knew that a conference needed to set as soon as possible between Ava, the teacher and her parents. Ava lived with her uncle and he was the only one who spoke English in her family, so he was the only one willing to attend the conference. After the conference, my mentor confided in me that the reason Ava was having trouble with listening to adults and having motivation to learn in school was that she had no encouragement from her uncle. He felt that schooling was silly for a girl and that she was supposed to be a housewife and therefore no reason to excel in school. He gave her no confidence in her academic abilities and discouraged her from learning in school. Although this was heartbreaking to hear, it was a big piece of the puzzle we had been missing.

My mentor and I had known that sometimes men in her culture tended to have a different value towards women and their roles in a society. Now we understood our job...to encourage and motivate Ava. Regardless of what Ava wanted to do with her life, she deserved the opportunity to learn and explore just like every other student. Motivation is key to a student's success in the classroom and we needed to develop intrinsic motivation in Ava. She needed to realize that her education belonged to herself and she needed to take control of it in order to learn.

Having the information from her uncle, we were able to work better with Ava and she eventually started to cooperate. We stopped pushing against her and worked on building her confidence in her work she was completing. Once she started gaining confidence and completing work, her test scores, vocabulary and comprehension abilities were skyrocketing! She was developing the intrinsic motivation within herself and was setting her own personal academic goals. Additionally, we continued to attempt to explain to her uncle the role and purpose of schooling in the United States. We also updated the uncle to let him know that his niece was doing well in hopes that he would come around to the idea.

By the end of the semester, Ava's attitude was completely shifted. She was willing to do work in the classroom. She was still timid and not totally confident in her answers, but she had come a long way in her participation. She was speaking basic English and she had also learned that we were there to help her. We were able to develop mutual respect for one another. Instead of blocking us out and refusing to do work, Ava understood that we were her support team. She learned to use us as resources and to work hard at school when she had help available. Having

knowledge of Ava's culture and language practices were crucial in order for her academic success. Initially, Ava's culture had hindered her learning but after learning about schools and American culture, Ava was able to become more successful in learning English.

Having knowledge of a culture, its practice, beliefs and language practices is vital to the success of your students. If you do not have knowledge about those things, you are not able to help the student learn English as efficiently.