

# A PRIMARY PREVENTION PROGRAMME FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN IN A QUEENSLAND HIGH SCHOOL



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## INTRODUCTION

"To reveal one's own emotional state to someone outside of the family, such as a social worker, or psychiatrist, is foreign to the usual repertoire of responses of Asians when in need of psychological support." (1) This assertion, made by two Asian-American mental health workers, is supported by the authors, based upon their social work experience with Indo-Chinese refugees in Queensland.

The fact that Asian-American students have unique characteristics and problems (for example, lower development of verbal communication skills), has been confirmed by recent investigations.<sup>2</sup> (Addressing himself to the

American education system, Watanabe writes:

"The Asian student often pays a high price in adapting himself to an Anglo-Saxon oriented school system. When he first enters school, he is likely to find himself in strange and confusing surroundings. Teachers who do not understand his situation — and a curriculum that ignores his people — only heighten his feelings of isolation and inferiority. The Asian student comes to see ethnicity as a handicap and tries to reject the Asian part of himself in a vain effort to conform to the Occidental mould. He tries to deny his perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and his very appearance, because he is 'different', and he is

told in many subtle, and not so subtle ways that the system will not tolerate this difference. In the process he destroys traits that, in a freer environment, could be sources of personal and intellectual strength." (3)

Following a request for social work intervention with a group of newly-arrived migrant and refugee students, a five week preventive programme was undertaken in a Queensland high school. The theoretical model that was followed was based upon Yee and Lee's mental health education programme with Filipino-American youth. The goal of that programme was to work with normal individuals of Asian-American cultural backgrounds, experiencing the stresses of everyday life in a culture different from and often counter to their own. In a sense, the students were in a continual process of learning to live in two cultures, of which their own was less dominant.

Similarities can be drawn between the Filipino-American experience, and the situation of the group of migrant students (predominantly Indo-Chinese) involved in the Queensland programme.

While it may be considered culturally inappropriate to reveal one's own feelings to people outside the kinship-friendship network, (4) an educational

programme such as that described in this paper, may offer a more acceptable medium for focusing on a student's personal and cultural heritage.

## **PRACTICAL BASE OF THE PROGRAMME**

The Primary Prevention Programme developed as a result of an invitation which came from the teachers of migrant children involved in a final English course. The teachers felt that as well as English acquisition during the ten-week study block, it was desirable that the students be allowed some time in which to explore and discuss issues related to being a student in an Australian secondary school, which may have been causing them some concern and anxiety.

The facilitators initially showed interest in the teachers' suggestions, but on further discussion and reflection realised that there was a danger of introducing students to issues which were considered important to teachers and counsellors, but which had yet to be encountered by the students themselves. This could unnecessarily and prematurely raise their anxiety levels at a time when they had no experiential base upon which to resolve such anxiety.

These concerns were discussed with the teachers who were unanimous in their opinion that the programme was not premature. It was considered that these were issues which the students were already confronting and that they may appreciate help in the identification and resolution of these issues.

The issues put forward by the teachers were such things as name-calling, cheating in class, playground disputes, and reticence to become involved in group discussion and activity. The facilitators accepted these as valid issues, but felt that many of them were related to broader, more important issues. Thus the programme was seen as encompassing issues related to the experience of being a non-English-speaking migrant child in Australia, coupled with issues which face all adolescent children. It was, however, remembered that the programme was contained within certain inflexible natural social settings, that is, the school environment, and so therefore activities within the programme had to be directly related to that setting. Thus the practical base of the programme developed and broadened from the original requests and suggestions of the teaching staff, in the expectation that it would be of greater appeal, interest and effect for the participants.

## **SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS**

Yee and Lee maintain that because programmes in primary prevention are directed towards a "generally healthy

segment of the population", they operate most effectively in the settings of everyday life — schools, workplaces, and homes. The need to respect and work within the ecology of the natural setting is stressed.

For this reason, the authors tried to be flexible in modifying the programme's methods in order to remain in harmony with the students' needs, the school's changing timetable, and the teachers' evaluation of the programme.

A profile of the secondary school in which this programme was set, was made on first of June, 1980. It indicated that 20% of the students surveyed were born overseas in a non-English-speaking country. 21% lived in households speaking a main language other than English.<sup>5</sup>

The programme participants were predominantly of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Chinese origin. However other students came from Italy, France, Sweden, Holland, Finland and Cyprus. (Refer to Table 1.).

The students involved in the primary prevention programme were divided into two classes and were undertaking the final ten-week stage of a forty week programme of intensive English. For the final stage, classes were moved into the grounds of the secondary school many would subsequently attend.

## **ROLES OF FACILITATORS:**

The group facilitators of the programme were two Australian social workers, and one Chinese social work student. As social workers acting in the school setting, their function was described as educative.

Following the definition used by Yee and Lee, it was explained that, "A project geared for primary prevention is not intended to solve personal problems or diagnose for clinical referrals."<sup>4</sup> This was an important position to maintain because social workers had previously been involved in casework with individual students and their families. It was necessary, therefore, to extend the teachers' understanding of the role of a social worker, beyond that of a 'problem solver'.

The facilitators emphasized from the outset to the students that they were not teachers, and that their roles were totally different from those of the teachers. This was underlined by an insistence by the facilitators that the students were free to address them by their given names, and that the time used was not to be regarded as a formal class, but rather as an informal discussion time. As part of their roles, the facilitators made attempts to present themselves as people, with whom the students could identify. The facilitators shared with the students information about their backgrounds and private

lives, for example, age, full name, family composition, marital status, activities and interests. This was done to present the facilitators in a manner which would allow the students to relate to them, and by example, to encourage students to feel free to share personal information about themselves.

The roles of the facilitators were also related to their ethnic backgrounds. Having two Australian and one Chinese facilitator meant that they could at times consciously use their ethnicity to form links with Asian and migrant students and with the Australian host culture. This was particularly utilized in a sessions which dealt with generalisations and stereotypes. Ethnicity of facilitators was sometimes used as a caricature, and sometimes as a valid representation of particular cultural values.

The facilitators also emphasized that they were not employed by the school and as such were able to offer themselves as an impartial link between the students and the school environment.

Although the programme was not seen as having an individual problem-solving function, the facilitators did offer their assistance as social workers if the students wished to make contact outside class time.

## **GOALS:**

The broad aim of the programme was to assist the students in identifying areas of concern related to their experiences of being newly-arrived, non-English-speaking migrants, and to offer and discover alternative ways of coping with and resolving such areas of concern. Specific goals contained within these broad aims are as follows:

1. To encourage students to identify and take pride in their cultural heritage.
2. To encourage to identify and work towards resolution of personal dilemmas, problems and difficulties.
3. To discuss and offer alternative courses of action for situations students would face as they experienced being migrants in Australia.
4. To discuss and offer alternative courses of action for situations students were facing within their network(s) of relationships.
5. To discuss and look at alternative courses of action for specific areas of concern related to the school environment.
6. To offer insights into positive aspects of life in Australia.

## **METHOD:**

The facilitators covered four general areas over a five-week period, with weekly sessions of 50 minutes each. The areas covered were exploration of stereo

types and generalisations, self and identity, emphasizing positive perceptions of self, different perceptions of and reactions to common experiences and realities, and exploration of feelings. Each session commenced with an introductory exercise and a summary of what had transpired the previous week.

There was a fairly heavy emphasis placed on games and activities of a non-verbal nature, especially in the early sessions, as it was felt that verbal exercises may pose too much of a threat and thus inhibit the session's effectiveness. Use was made of pen and paper exercises, however, in the later sessions, the emphasis shifted to activities based on verbal discussion in order to encourage self-expression.

Wherever possible, the children were encouraged to converse with the ethnic Chinese facilitator in Chinese as it was felt that they would be more likely to openly express themselves in their own language.

When students were expected to break into small groups or pairs they were encouraged to form their own groups and they were also encouraged to interact with each other in their own language(s). The concept of role-playing proved to be a new one to many of the students. The facilitators consciously made use of themselves in role-play situations in order to heighten the sense of the facilitators' participation in programme activities. All three facilitators made conscious use of their various ethnic backgrounds to emphasize certain themes within the programme.

## DESCRIPTION:

### Session 1.

1. Introduction of the programme. The workers briefly explained the aims, methods, tasks and expectations of the programme, and then proceeded to introduce themselves, giving details of names, ages, occupations, ethnic background(s), language abilities, interests etc.
2. Introduction of students to each other and to workers. Method — Each student was asked to write on a card his/her name, age, birthplace, family members' names, languages spoken, length of time spent in Australia. The group was then asked to subdivide into pairs for approximately one minute, during which time each person read, discussed and attempted to memorize the data on his/her partner's card. Participants then came back to the larger group and several members were asked to share the information he/she had learned from their partners. The aim of this step was to highlight the difficulties, regardless of ethnic background, of re-

membering information which is foreign and difficult to pronounce. It was emphasized that inability to remember key information such as names and birthplaces does not always indicate lack of interest.

3. Relaxation, communication and trust exercises.
  - (i) A cigarette packet was passed around the group and each person was asked to use it to represent something different, e.g., the packet may be a swimming pool, an electric shaver, a television set, etc.
  - (ii) Participants were asked to have a game of basket-ball with an invisible ball.
  - (iii) Trust games, such as walking an obstacle course blindfolded, relying on verbal instructions from other group members.
4. Summary of Session 1 and introduction to future sessions. The students were asked what sorts of behaviour they had observed in Australians which they considered to be unusual or strange. Facilitators shared with the students observations of Australians about Vietnamese behaviour which they considered to be strange or unusual. The students were informed that these were the sorts of topics which would be discussed during the next four weeks.

### Session 2.

1. Breaking down stereotypes. One of the workers gave an introduction to herself, claiming to have qualities which contradicted those qualities suggested last week by the children as aspects which Australians would regard as strange about migrants. Students were then asked to name characteristics about themselves which they consider to be un-Vietnamese, un-Chinese, un-Greek, etc., after listing typical aspects of their own cultures. The purpose of this step was to highlight the danger of allowing generalisations to become stereotypes.
2. Names Exercise. The children were asked to write down all the names by which they were known, including formal and informal names, nicknames, family names etc. They were then asked to think of names which they disliked and to tell the group who called them by those names. The students were then asked to share how it felt for them to have their names anglicized, and how it feels to have their names mispronounced by Australians. They were also asked if they would like to have Australian names.
3. The session was concluded by the

facilitators stating that there are some things which we are forced to accept such as names which we do not like, because that is what is expected of us by our family, culture and peer group. They were told that in the next sessions they would be asked to look at more of the things which we are expected to do and how we feel about them, that is, the manner in which the individual fits with his/her culture.

### Session 3.

Positive perceptions of self — Self and Identity.

1. (a) The group was asked to list things which they notice or know about a given worker, and ask them to compare their lists with a list which the worker compiles of things which are important to him/her. The lists were compared and contrasted and the worker concerned shared how others' perceptions and misperceptions made him/her feel.
  - (b) The students were asked to suggest the first thing which they felt other people notice about them, and to share how that made them feel.
  - (c) The students were asked to list the things which they felt were important about themselves. They then discussed how their own perceptions may differ from others' perceptions of them.
2. This step was aimed at demonstrating the manner in which our actions influence the way others perceive us, that is, the way positive and negative perceptions are engendered by our reactions. A passive reaction can encourage retention and confirmation of prejudices and stereotypes.
 

Method. Two of the workers, one Asian, and the other Anglo-Australian, enacted role plays which demonstrated alternative reactions to stereotypes.

  - (a) Outspoken and ill-informed statements based on stereotypes greeted by a passive reaction.
  - (b) Outspoken and ill-formed statements based on stereotypes greeted by similar statements from the members of the minority group being labelled.
  - (c) Outspoken and ill-informed statements based on stereotypes greeted by assertive and firm reaction which attempts to confront stereotypes in a non-threatening manner. It was extrapolated from these role-plays

that by confronting and challenging stereotypes in a non-threatening but assertive manner one is vicariously speaking out for the rest of one's culture-group.

#### Session 4.

1. Different perceptions of a single reality. In the first exercise the students were shown a poster and asked to write what was happening in it. The facilitators highlighted the fact that each person's perception of what was happening was different but that all perceptions were valid. The facilitators then related this exercise back to the exercise done in Session 1 with the cigarette packet.
2. (i) The children were asked to name one thing which they felt was great about their lives.  
(ii) The children were asked to name one thing which they would like to change about their lives.
3. It's okay to be afraid. The students were asked to write down something which they were afraid of, and when completed they put their papers in a box and some were selected at random, and read out to the group and discussed. In this manner the fears were rationalized, and lessened by sharing with the entire group, at the same time preserving the anonymity of the authors of the fears.
4. The students were asked to role play situations where they felt they had been stereotyped, and the ways in which they reacted. These were related to the role plays conducted by the two workers the week before and the observation made that any one situation can have more than one possible reaction, and that different reactions engender different responses.

#### Session 5.

Exploring Feelings. The activities of this session were an attempt to assist the children to explore their feelings, and to share and verbalise situations where they experienced different feelings. It was a summarising session and the group facilitators, in the discussion which arose from the role plays consciously attempted to link back to the topics and aims of the previous sessions.

Exercise. A number of pieces of paper, each with a different feeling written down on it, were placed in a box, and several of the students were requested to select a piece of paper. They were then asked, without telling

the whole group the feeling they selected, to quickly develop a role play which would illustrate this feeling. The rest of the group then had to guess which feeling was being acted out. The role plays could be individual or group activities.

After each role play, the students were requested to discuss the feeling which had been acted out, and to share with the group any situations or experiences which they had had where they experienced this feeling. The students were assisted to feel that most feelings are common to all people at some time, and that there is nothing strange about having feelings.

The feelings discussed were: anger, happiness, sadness, loneliness, boredom, excitement, peace, hurt, rejection, pride.

#### ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION:

##### 1. Ethnic Composition of Participants.

The ethnic composition of the students who participated in the programme, in some ways, militated against total group cohesion, as it was felt that there were some key issues which were pertinent for the Asian students, who were in the majority, but were not of such great significance to the European students. For example, it would seem that labelling and stereotyping is a greater problem for a Vietnamese child in Australia, than for a German child in Australia, as many of the assumptions upon which stereotypes are based relate to physical differences.

The variety of ethnic groups in each class had both positive and negative influences on the group process. (For figures on ethnic composition of groups see Table 1.). In one way, this variety served to illustrate similarities and differences across and between cultures, that is, the universality of some experiences. It was a multi-cultural Australian society in miniature.

It was felt that there was a tendency for the focus of group activities to be upon the more vocal European students. Kaneshige, in a study of group participation of Japanese-American students, states:

"The Japanese group member is deterred from directly confronting other group members because he has been taught that it is impolite to put people on the spot, that is, presumptuous on his part to be assertive; and that the group leader is the most knowledgeable person and all should therefore defer to his greater wisdom and judgement." (7)

This is also true of Indochinese students, and points to one of the difficulties of having various ethnic group members in a class group; that is, the European members tend to monopolise group discussion, and there is a tend-

ency by the facilitators to expect and encourage this.

##### 2. Stage of Resettlement.

Most of the participants had lived in Queensland for only 6 - 8 months. They had mixed predominantly with their own ethnic group at the migrant hostel, and they had attended a special migrant school since arrival. Therefore, they had not experienced, to any great extent, the reality of living as a migrant in Australia.

The students were at a difficult developmental stage, in that they were coping with their developing identities as adolescents, in addition to the pressures of learning a new language, settling into a new school, and a new country.

It was not assumed by the facilitators that the primary prevention programme should be closed-ended. Many issues, such as intra-family and inter-generational culture conflict, changing sex roles related to the migration experience, etc., were barely touched upon. This was because, as stated earlier, the facilitators attempted only to explore issues which had already been confronted by the students. It is therefore considered desirable for continuing programmes to be instigated for students who have had longer periods of residence in Australia, as there are some problem areas which do not appear until fairly advanced stages of settlement. Because of the students' newness to Australia and their relative lack of fluency in English, the scope of the programme was necessarily limited.

A basic dilemma faced by the workers was to find a balance between the "migrant versus the individual" orientation. While the goal was to address both issues, the challenge was to place sufficient emphasis on each. In an attempt to resolve this dilemma, the first few sessions focussed on the students as 'migrants', while the later sessions focussed more on their personal identities as individuals, adolescents, etc.

##### 3. Contribution of the Programme for the Participants.

- (a) The goal of the programme (i.e. "to assist students to feel comfortable in Australia, with their cultural and personal heritage"), is considered to be a valid one for the students at their initial stage of resettlement.
- (b) The programme was a vehicle for presenting students with insights into the cultures of other group members.
- (c) Similarly, the programme offered insights into the Australian culture.
- (d) The programme provided students with an opportunity to consider issues that are not usually focussed on in their regular curriculum.

TABLE 1

NATIONALITY	SEX		TOTAL
	MALE	FEMALE	
SWEDISH	1	1	2
FRENCH	1		1
GERMAN	1		1
ICELAND		1	1
INDIAN		1	1
ITALIAN	1		1
FINNISH	1		1
VIETNAMESE	7	3	10
VIETNAMESE/ CHINESE	11	8	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>37</b>

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN PROGRAMME: 37.

(e) The programme offered involvement in informal discussion groups which are a common feature of Australian secondary schools.

#### 4. Role of Social Workers.

The role of the social workers, who acted as facilitators in the programme, evolved with the programme. The programme offered an opportunity for social workers working in the field of migrant welfare to:

- (a) be exposed to newly-arrived migrants and refugees and their needs.
- (b) be involved in a preventive programme which could have long-term positive effects on the students' resettlement.
- (c) introduce social workers as approachable, helping persons whose roles were different from those of teachers.
- (d) use group work skills to assist students to express their feelings.
- (e) provide feedback to teachers on any insights gained about the students.

It seems to be desirable, in primary prevention programmes, for social workers to maintain the role of group facilitators as resource persons, rather than

acting as individual problem-solvers. It seemed to be valid for the social workers to be Anglo-Australian, as this allowed them to present an Australian perspective to the students, as well as permitting them at times to appear to be unfamiliar with the students cultural backgrounds, thereby encouraging them to share information pertaining to their culture(s).

While sometimes presenting an Australian viewpoint, it is important to note that Australian social workers involved in such programmes should avoid becoming what D.W. Sue terms "the culturally encapsulated counselor", that is, one who is not prepared to step outside his/her own culture, and who expects the client group to assimilate the dominant cultural model.<sup>8</sup>

#### 5. Role of Ethnic Worker.

It was of particular value to the programme to have an ethnic worker acting as a facilitator, particularly as she shared a language with many of the participants. This enabled her to provide valuable feed-back to the social workers on the students' experiences as migrants, their perceptions of the programme, and the cultural factors influencing their behaviour.

The ethnic worker provided for some of the students a role model and point of identification, particularly as she shared in group activities some of her experiences in resolving some of the issues which were discussed.

#### 6. Recommendations.

Based on this first primary prevention programme, are several recommendations. It is hoped that the programme will provide incentive for further programmes, not just aimed at children in the initial phase of settlement, but also those studying in mainstream high schools, who may be at a later stage of adjustment.

Specific recommendations are as follows:

- (a) the programme be an integral part of the school curriculum.
- (b) further programmes of an on-going nature be instigated.
- (c) ethnic facilitators be included in future programmes.
- (d) increased involvement of students and teachers in programme planning and feed-back.
- (e) greater range of innovative techniques be developed to maximize group facilitation in future programmes.

The authors hope that the primary prevention programme will not be seen as an unnecessary appendage to the English programme, but that it will be perceived, as its name suggests, as an exercise in preventive intervention. The existing education and welfare system does not adequately cater for migrant and refugee students who are undergoing the pressures involved in resettlement. The authors assert that it is desirable to offer a preventive programme at the initial stage of resettlement, which may reduce the need for remedial, problem-solving intervention at a later stage.

**ADDENDUM**

As a result of the initial primary prevention programme, the authors were invited to return to conduct a similar programme of longer duration.

**FOOTNOTES:**

- (1) Yee, T., & Lee, R., "Based on cultural strengths, a school primary prevention program for Asian-American youth." *Community Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 13(3), 1977, p. 239.
- (2) Sue, D.W., & Kirk, B.A., "Psychological Characteristics of Chinese-American students." *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 1972 6, pp. 471 - 478.
- (3) Watanabe, C., "Self expression and the Asian-American experience." *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, Vol. 51 No. 6, Feb. 1973, pp. 392 - 393.
- (4) Barker, M., "Vietnamese Refugees in Australia." *Social Work Honours Thesis*, November, 1980.
- (5) Survey: Profile of Oxley State High School, 1.6.80.
- (6) Yee, T., & Lee, R., op. cit., p. 241.
- (7) Kaneshige, E., "Cultural factors in Group counselling interaction." *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, Vol. 51 No. 6, p. 468.
- (8) Sue, D.W., "Counselling the culturally different: a conceptual analysis." *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 7, p. 423.

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