DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 131 161 UD 016 562

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TITLE A Broad Look at Programs That Serve Vietnamese Refugee Children.
PUB DATE 20 Feb 76
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Cultural Factors; Educational Needs; Educational Problems; *Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); *Immigrants; *Indochinese; Language Handicapped; *Program Development; Refugees; State Boards of Education; Student Attitudes; Student Distribution; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *New York

ABSTRACT

Resettled Indochinese refugees are widely scattered across New York State with the only major concentration in New York City. At the elementary and secondary levels, the refugee students are enrolled in about 150 of 750 school districts, with few districts having more than an average of five children scattered through the K-12 grades. Outside New York City, the largest concentrations are in Rochester, Syracuse, Jamestown, and Binghamton--except for one small rural district in the north that enrolled 19 children. At the onset, based on visits to several schools, numerous phone calls, and other reports, it was found that the experience in the vast majority of schools has been excellent. In fact, many of the other 600 school districts would have benefited from facing up to and coping with the problems posed by children from an Asian culture who did not speak English. Teachers in the many school districts that have not needed previously to provide English as a Second Language programs or to try to understand and cope with such cultural differences have developed new skills and appreciations that will make them better teachers for all children. A wide variety of accommodations have been made in different school districts to cope with the entrance of refugee children. (Author)

A Broad Look at Programs That Serve Vietnamese Refugee Children

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Albany, New York
February 20, 1976

Last summer it seemed entirely fitting and proper to our State Commissioner of Education that, since the Department had granted my request for a leave of absence to undertake an assignment for the U.S. Agency for International Development to work with the Ministry of Education in Vietnam in 1973, I should be given responsibility for relating to the educational problems of Indochinese refugees in New York State this school year. I welcomed the assignment and the experience has been very satisfying.

As is true in most other states, with the notable exception of California, the resettled refugees are widely scattered across the state with the only major concentration found in New York City - where the total number still seems to be growing steadily. At the elementary and secondary levels, the refugee students are enrolled in about 150 of our 750 school districts, with few districts having more than an average of five children scattered through the K-12 grades. Outside New York City, the largest concentrations are in Rochester, Syracuse, Jamestown, and Binghamton - except for one small rural district in the north country that enrolled 19 children.

At the outset, based on visits to several schools, numerous phone calls, and other reports, the experience in the vast majority of schools has been excellent. In fact, I have concluded that many of the other 600 school districts would have benefited from facing up to and coping with the problems posed by children from an Asian culture who did not speak English. Teachers in the many school districts that have not needed previously to provide English as a Second Language program or to try to understand and cope with such cultural differences have developed new skills and appreciations that will make them better teachers for all children. In general, most teachers who have been working with refugee children have reported that it has been a most satisfying experience.

Perhaps the best way to approach an understanding of both the present problems and successes in our American schools is to consider the report that has been most publicized from Oceanside, California, on the achievement of 33 Vietnamese elementary and secondary school children on selected items from two standardized achievement tests in mathematics. In the three parts - arithmetic computation, arithmetic concepts, and application or usage of basic skills - the average Vietnamese child scored in the 93rd, 95th, and 91st percentiles - compared with the much lower scoring in each category for the average Oceanside pupil. When a reporter for a national paper called me to see if we had similar "hard data" from any district in New York State, I indicated that we did not, to my knowledge, but that the Oceanside results were in agreement with all of the conversations I have had with our school personnel since September. Generally, the principal or teacher indicated, with some expression of surprise, that the refugee children are "better in mathematics than most of our own kids." To anyone who is at all familiar with the educational system in Asian countries, especially in East Asia, it comes as no surprise to find this competency and level of achievement in refugee children. In fact, one of the first things I suggested to school personnel who contacted me when the children first enrolled was to have them do some simple mathematical exercises to determine if they had attended schools in Vietnam. On the basis of my experience in Vietnam, I expected that most of the refugee children would have been in schools - some obviously with interruptions - and would demonstrate competency. I also emphasized that such an activity would be reinforcing to the students in a strange school who could show others in the class, in an area where the language is universal, that they had acquired skills in their Vietnamese schools.

Few Americans in this country heard anything about education in Vietnam during the 1954-1975 period after the Geneva Accords, or even during the 1962-1975 period when the United States was heavily involved. Even many raised questions with me when I accepted the AID assignment that implied that there just couldn't be schools in that country after the 30 years of almost constant warfare. It came as a surprise to almost everyone later as I returned with descriptions and

pictures of schools and colleges and the enrollment figures that showed over 3 million enrolled in elementary schools and nearly 900,000 in secondary schools - with almost as many girls attending as boys.

Neither did we hear of the USAID educational assistance program - about the schools and colleges that were built or rebuilt or the 30-40 million copies of textbooks that were written, printed, and distributed - especially at the elementary school level, including some excellent ones in mathematics. An examination of such books indicated clearly the generally higher level of competency expected grade by grade in a subject such as mathematics. One didn't find any "new" math - which may be fortunate as we ourselves move from the old math, to the new math, and now to the "after" math - in which Vietnamese refugees now find themselves.

Excerpts of my 1973 report to AID describing the Vietnamese school system were included in one of the early releases from the Clearinghouse in Washington - publication #III of the General Information Series entitled "Education in Vietnam; Fundamental Principles and Curricula." Although early stages of reform were underway as the result of AID-sponsored projects at all levels, the basic pattern remained much the same as inherited from the French with a 5-4-3 organization for the 12-year program - which, according to recent reports has now become a 5-5 organization, matching that in North Vietnam. The enrollments rose steadily and rapidly during the 1960's with many schools operating on double sessions. In the Saigon area, most public schools were on triple session from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and students were visible in the cities and in the Delta areas on the way to or from schools throughout the day. I visited large secondary schools enrolling 4,000-5,000 boys or girls in Saigon, Cholon, and cities in the Delta - Can Tho, Long Xuyen, and Vinh Long. Master schedules for such schools on multiple sessions reflected, in themselves, fascinating exercises in logistics.

Invariably, class sizes were large, generally at least double those in our schools, and the mode of instruction was teacher-centered. Except in those elementary schools where textbooks were available, and even there, the teacher lectured, using the blackboard as the only visual aid, and the students took

notes or copied material from the blackboard. A few teachers who had received some training here could be found trying to have some participatory activities, but most soon reverted back to the usual pattern.

Especially in the 1st cycle (grades 6-10) and 2nd cycle (grades 11-12) programs, few courses were offered each day of the six-day week. A typical student normally might be scheduled for as many as 13 different courses during the week, some meeting only for an hour on one or two days a week. The study of the Vietnamese language and of a second language introduced in grade 6 received daily attention. Mathematics, natural science, physics, and chemistry introduced in grade 6 was required of all students through grade 12 with the most emphasis on mathematics. Since over 80% of all students enrolled in the experimental sciences or mathematics tracks in grades 10-12, heavy emphasis was placed on these courses in recent years.

Rather than detailing the K-12 curriculum, it is more useful at this point to relate the previous school experiences of refugee students to their current experiences in our schools. First, I want to identify a number of general factors that I have seen as important as teachers have worked with refugee children which relate to their previous schooling. Some of these have proven to be positive factors; others have caused problems.

Obviously, the language problem is the most common barrier, but one factor that has helped to some extent is that the Vietnamese language was romanized by missionaries over the past three centuries. Interestingly, they found it necessary to use Portuguese diacritics to represent tones and some vowels. Children are able to master the 26-character alphabet quite easily since only four new characters are needed - f, j, w, z. This advantage seems to serve students well in reading and writing, but, since the letters represent different sounds in each language, it is necessary to teach what <u>sound</u> the letter represents in English. Thus, a Vietnamese student might be able to read and understand the sentence "The dog saw the cat." But, when he attempted to say the same thing, it would sound to us like, "Za sak shaw sa ke," An experienced ESL teacher realizes the implications of this problem and resists pressure from the students in an English language

development class to move too rapidly from the oral-aural approach to reading. At another time, knowing that a Vietnamese student in a regular class doing arithmetic problems may have difficulty understanding directions given orally, a teacher may elicit help from one of the student's classmates to write out the directions.

Another factor that helps the Vietnamese students as they learn new sounds is related to the tonal nature of their language. The same sharpness in listening ability used in discriminating tonal differences that made it possible for Vietnamese TV and nightclub singers to imitate American vocalists so well you could identify the model also help children as they try to imitate new sounds. But, again the experienced ESL teacher has a role in helping the children with new lip formation, tongue positioning and usage, and differences in aspiration.

When the above factors are considered together and related to the adult education problem, it is easy to see why it is much more difficult for the adult refugees to master English by themselves or even from tapes.

Some other general factors have been identified by teachers that have been assets as the refugee students cope with their new learning environment. Teachers report that the children are anxious to learn and that parents are supportive. This fact is not surprising in a culture rooted for centuries in the Confucian tradition of scholarship in the mandarin system. Unfortunately, upper level secondary students who have been under pressure for years often have trouble adapting to the lessened pressure in most American schools and be willing to take the necessary time to master an adequate level of competency in English.

One result of pupils prior experience in the Vietnamese system is reflected in teachers' reports that they exhibit a longer attention span and are able to concentrate longer on tasks than the typical American child of the same age. While much of this is undoubtedly the result of the teacher-dominated classroom, some cultural factors are also operating that relate to the different concept of time. While the American child usually hurries to complete a task as soon as possible, the time factor is more elastic to the Vietnamese. In that culture, time in the linear sense is not a way of life.

In addition to mathematics as a strength that teachers have identified in the refugee children's educational background, there is almost always reference to the artistic or creative talents that show up as various activities are undertaken. Specific comments have been made as to the excellent hand-eye coordination, high development of small muscle skills, excellent penmanship, and general neatness in all written work. Teachers report time after time that the Vietnamese students are very creative in art experiences, and examples are plentiful in classrooms to verify this talent. Again, anyone who has seen Vietnamese artisans and craftsmen at work and their products understands the high value placed on hand crafts in that culture. I have seen a fourth grade Vietnamese student demonstrating intricate paper folding to classmates around a table, most of whom didn't have the patience to follow through to complete the object. When such talent is shown it provides another opportunity for reinforcing attitudes on the part of both the refugee students and their classmates who generally respect such talent in their peers. The same reinforcement occurs when a boy demonstrates his skill in soccer, table tennis, or badminton. Negative results are to be expected if a boy or girl is expected to perform as well in such sports as basketball or softball that were rare in most schools in Vietnam.

Not all factors have been positive, however, and teachers have frequently reported that many children were shy or timid, sullen, withdrawn, or otherwise not adapting. Many of such refugee children have been identified as from families of fishermen, farmers, or small businessmen that left the coastal areas, but even within this group there are other reports of satisfactory adaptation. Generally, children from the Saigon area and others who had some contact with Americans or those from other western countries, have been more open and responsive, but they also are still typically more reserved and respectful of adults than most American children. I have advised teachers to expect that it would take time for the refugee children to become active participants in class, but most at the elementary level have adapted fast to the less regimented classroom.

It took some time for teachers to discover that girls and boys should not be paired for language drills or other activities. The tradition of separate schools in Vietnam and the different perceptions of the role of men and women in that culture explain why a variety of problems exist at all levels, including in mixed adult education programs.

Several reports were made of difficulties arising between Vietnamese children from different families. Local school officials were at a loss to explain the persistent problems. In some instances, I found that the problem existed because one of the families was of ethnic Chinese background and the conflicts reflected the same subtle discrimination often evident in Vietnam between the Vietnamese and those who were ethnic Chinese. In other cases, it appeared there were class differences between city, middle class professional families and those of farmers or fishermen.

Taken in the main, however, reports from the vast majority of schools indicate that most children are fitting in well and making remarkable progress. Of course, there are major exceptions such as two girls ages 15 and 16 who had not been enrolled in school in Vietnam for over 5 years. Providing a suitable school experience for them is obviously more difficult than for other students.

As expected, the younger children are adapting best. There have been several problems with secondary level students who lack competency in English. Students have had most difficulty with such subjects as social studies, English literature, and advanced science. The easiest subjects have been mathematics, art, music, physical education, practical arts, and some science. I have generally recommended that students having difficulty can well afford to be given additional English language experiences at the expense of social studies or literature which they will master in short order once they are competent in English.

Guidance counselors frequently raise questions about grade placement and marking practices. In most cases, it is recommended that the student be placed in the same grade he would be in Vietnam. Because of the typically small size of the children compared with their American age-mates, some mistakes have been

made in placement of the children in a class two or three grades lower than desirable. On the other hand, where childrens' education has been interrupted, the size factor makes their adaptation at a lower level easier than it would be otherwise. Assistance from bilingual Vietnamese parents or other adults is helpful in analyzing these problems, but much more can be accomplished if a competent experienced Vietnamese teacher is available to serve as a trouble-shooter when serious problems are identified.

A wide variety of accomodations have been made in different school districts to cope with the entrance of refugee children. In most districts, the small number of children who are scattered through different grades makes it difficult to provide an adequate program. We have recommended that the children have daily experiences with a teacher with some experience with ESL programs, but in many schools this has not been possible and a variety of teachers, sponsors, or other volunteers have been used. Most of these individuals have learned as they have gone along, helped the most by the materials made available from the National Indochinese Clearinghouse. Some of the most effective volunteers who have served as aides or tutors have been persons who spent some time in Vietnam or some other Asian country and who have strong empathy for the refugees.

Experienced ESL teachers, when available in a school district, have usually dealt mainly with Spanish-speaking children or occasionally from other European countries or from non-Asian countries. These teachers have found that normal beginning ESL activities and materials are useful and effective. The different phonologies, however, have required extensive use of aural/oral/visual procedures with the sounds always used in words and the words in sentences. This stress on sentence patterns has been a common practice because of the differences between the patterns in the two languages. Teachers early discovered also that the Vietnamese language does not use articles or prepositions and that extra stress needed to be placed on such differences. Most teachers made effective use of visual aids such as antonym cards, ESL development kits, rhyming pictures, etc. Over all, a wide variety of materials have been used with varying degrees of success.

An example of a program used in Westmere Elementary School near Albany that enrolled six boys illustrates one way the problem was handled where no trained ESL teacher was available. The teaming approach and open classroom arrangement permitted placing two pupils in each of three different environments which provided some mutual support during the regular classes. The six pupils as a group were taken out of the regular program three different times during the day for English language development. One half-hour period was spent with the teacher who is regularly assigned as teacher of the hard-of-hearing children. She worked entirely on aural/oral exercises and adapted techniques as she went along to cope with the problems she discovered. The pupils spent the other periods with groups of children who also were in programs to improve their English language skills. The program, though far from perfect, has been effective, and no particular problems have arisen as the pupils gradually have overcome the language barrier.

The best program that I have observed is in Syracuse where an ESL center program has been set up as a part of the Special Needs Program. Currently, the program is serving 40 students, ages 5-17, not only from schools in the city but also from three suburban districts. The center concept was initiated in preference to a tutorial approach in the students' home school with the parents' approval. It was felt that the provision of a comfortable cultural climate and the advantages of contact with other students in a class situation would permit students to learn faster, retain more, and become more proficient in second language learning.

One group of 20 students is bused to the Center in the Special Projects Building for a 2 1/2-hour session in the morning for intensive ESL instruction and back to their home schools to attend classes with their American peers for the remainder of the day. The second group comes in after the morning session at their home schools for the ESL program in the afternoon. An excellent ESL teacher and teacher aide have had remarkable success in a program that includes not only English language development but also art, music, and other activities. Fortunately, the Center has support help from two bilingual Christian Brothers who spent considerable time in Vietnam.

It is impossible to describe the details of that program in this presentation. The teacher, Mrs. Pat DeLany, has written a report for me that I will make available to those interested. As one reads her report, it is clear that the empathy of the teacher and her interest in the individual children have been key factors in the success of the program. The report indicates that the students who were in the program for four months "have all progressed from being non-English-speaking to being able to make themselves understood in most situations - the survival English level as measured by the Bilingual Syntax Measure. All who are of reading age are reading in English, usually more competently than they can speak. Their social adjustment at the Center, with us and their peers, has been positive and generally happy. Adjustment in their home schools had followed the same pattern." You will find her report well worth reading, but even that doesn't convey the full picture that a visit to the Center provides.

In nearby Rochester, however, parents opted to have their children remain in their neighborhood schools where they are provided with ESL support services from teachers and tutors or aides. The reports from Rochester are similar to those from other schools and the children are progressing well. The programs in the two cities provide examples of two different delivery systems, and it will be interesting to compare the results. Both present advantages and disadvantages, and the results will be affected by too many variables for definitive answers to all questions.

One of the most common concerns of teachers in all schools is that of marking or grading the students. We have recommended that they not penalize pupils for language deficiencies. There have been difficulties when students were given low grades after having been top students in schools in Vietnam. For the Asian student, this is seen as a major catastrophe and can be devastating in its effect. An usual practice is to give S for satisfactory or M for monitoring during the time the student is seriously deficient in English. In general, successes need to be rewarded and failures soft-pedaled. For example, a student might well be expected to do well on a test on vocabulary development one day and fail miserably on a test

of comprehension a few days later. Overall, the student is making progress and more will follow with time.

In closing, it is obvious that I have focused on teaching English as a Second Language to Vietnamese students. We have considered it essential to give ESL top priority this first year at the expense of a bilingual program. The lack of bilingual teachers or teacher aides has dictated this approach, but it also seemed to be the expressed desires of the parents. We are well aware, however, that bilingual experiences need to be provided, and we have a few schools where competent bilingual teacher aides are already helping in classrooms. In one school, we were fortunate to be able to identify an experienced Vietnamese teacher of English from a near-by community who was employed as a teacher assistant when a group of 13 children enrolled this winter. The report from the school's principal, however, reveals that there may be some different types of problems. In answer to a question on a survey questionnaire I sent out recently to find out what ESL practices and materials have been most effective, the indication was that "ESL (was) not applicable" and that "we use our own educational materials." That reply shows some misconceptions, but not quite the problems revealed by another person who called to find out what ESL stood for so they could complete the questionnaire.

It has been an interesting and rewarding experience for me. The problems faced by the children have been numerous, but the successes have far outweighed the failures. From all reports, however, the problems facing their parents and other adults are far more difficult to resolve. Most of the refugees are here because they do not want to be there. All of us can help them as they strive to make a new life. I have had much satisfaction this year, and I hope others find it equally valuable as they discover the rewards it brings.