



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

This document is provided by the BRYCS Clearinghouse.

Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment

By Carol Ascher

Reproduced with permission of ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York, NY

© 1989



BRYCS is a project of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS)

1-888-572-6500/ info@brycs.org/ www.brycs.org

ED306329 1989-00-00 Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 51.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 51.....	1
ADOLESCENT REFUGEES OR REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS.....	2
SCHOOL SUCCESS.....	2
PREJUDICE.....	3
THE PACE OF ASSIMILATION.....	3
SYMPTOMS OF STRESS.....	3
PARENT INVOLVEMENT.....	4
CONCLUSION.....	4
REFERENCES.....	5



ERIC Identifier: ED306329

Publication Date: 1989-00-00

Author: Ascher, Carol

Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.

Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 51.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

Over the last years, the adjustment of adult refugees has tended to be evaluated by two elementary standards: economic sufficiency and proficiency in English--minimums for survival in a new land. Similarly, the adjustment of student refugees has been judged by how well they do in school and their fluency in English. Yet, refugees of all ages know that they need far more than jobs, grades, or even English to feel at home in their new country. They must be accepted and respected by the native population, and must adapt to a new culture without relinquishing the heritage that had been fundamental to their development so far.

ADOLESCENT REFUGEES OR REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS

Most teenagers from all the Southeast Asian ethnic groups have adopted the dress, hairstyles and manners of American teenagers. Like many newcomers, they first take on the outward cultural traits of their American peers. Yet, internally, particularly among those who arrived in the United States as adolescents, the ethnic identity of Southeast Asian youth remains strong and specific: they see themselves as Hmong, Khmer, Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, or Lao. Not only do they rarely make friends with American students, but they have few cross-ethnic friendships with other Southeast Asians (Goldstein, 1985; Peters, 1988). For example, Vietnamese youth who participate in gangs do so largely among themselves (Peters, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Whether refugee teenagers are considered successful Americans or problem Southeast Asians, it is important to realize that they are operating out of four identity systems that at times overlap but more often are in conflict:

- o Southeast Asian

- o American

- o refugee

- o adolescent Adolescents who migrated after the age of 11 have suffered particular stress. This is because they simultaneously had to pass through the developmental crisis of "identity formation," characteristic of adolescence, and the historical crisis of becoming a refugee (Nidorf, 1985).

SCHOOL SUCCESS

Southeast Asian students have a reputation for having positive attitudes toward education and doing extremely well academically. In reality, though, not all students are

excelling, often because of school-induced problems, such as indiscriminate age-grade matching, poorly designed and staffed English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) programs, premature mainstreaming (often into low-achieving classes), and general insensitivity of the school system to their special needs (Goldstein, 1985; Peters, 1988). Coming from much more authoritarian education systems, Southeast Asian students can also sometimes see their American schools as having no behavioral limits, and so become discipline problems (Wehrly & Nelson, 1986).

PREJUDICE

The significant influx of Asian immigrants and refugees over the past decade has led to anti-Asian sentiments, and even acts of violence around the country (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1988). No different from their elders, white, black, and Hispanic students can be extremely intolerant of the new Southeast Asians (Peters, 1988; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Wehrly & Nelson, 1986). In some cities, name-calling and other taunting has provoked Southeast Asian students to fight back, and Vietnamese students have a high rate of school suspensions caused by self-defense in such situations (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

This prejudice against Southeast Asians creates a vicious cycle. When Southeast Asian students feel hostility from native teenagers, they either act out, become apathetic, or turn all the more determined to preserve their cultural identity--any of which, not surprisingly, leads to further nonacceptance (Goldstein, 1985).

THE PACE OF ASSIMILATION

Peer pressure on immigrant students is even greater than on the American-born. Southeast Asian adolescents quickly take on the outward cultural traits of those around them--at the expense of their own cultural heritage. At home, these new traits often cause friction within families, who rightly want to preserve some of their own traditional heritage.

School counselors can help refugee youth slow the process of assimilation to a rate acceptable to both them and their parents. Teachers can alleviate peer pressure by working with all students to help them understand cultural differences, and by using multicultural teaching materials and methods (Yao, 1985).

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Although school personnel have expressed a need for better clues to stress symptoms among their Southeast Asian students (Wehrly & Nelson, 1986), these adolescents often manifest problems in ways that look American: gang behavior, drugs, suicide, alienation, family conflict, poor achievement in school, the adoption of extreme dress and makeup. In addition, Southeast Asian students can show stress through depression, somatization, withdrawal, and, in the extreme case, psychotic symptoms (Nicassio, LaBarbera, Coburn, & Finley, 1986).

Whatever the outward manifestation, it is important to understand that the underlying causes of refugee students' problems may be their particularly stressful experiences both in Asia and in this country. These experiences include:

- o pre-immigration factors, such as their ethnicity, class status, and general cultural values;
- o migration factors, such as their time of departure, and their escape, camp, and migration experiences, and
- o post-migration factors, such as whether they now live with their own family, how different their new environment is from the one they were used to in Southeast Asia, and the

reception of the host community (Nidorf, 1985). Not surprisingly, Southeast Asian adolescents who emigrated with their parents, or are in foster care with other Southeast Asian families, do better in school and are much less depressed than are those adolescents placed with American families or in group homes (Porte & Torney-Purta, 1987). School personnel should also be aware that, while refugee youth may have coped well during their initial post-settlement period, the trauma, hardship, and stress of disruption and resettlement may show up later, after the basic needs of safety, housing, jobs, and language are met (Robinson, 1985).

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Involving parents in the school can help decrease the tension between the culture of the home and that of the school. Schools can also offer special sessions to acquaint parents with the school system. Unfortunately, many school projects have failed because there were no native language speakers. To be successful, parent involvement efforts must be spearheaded by bilingual personnel. So far, schools have created ties with parents through afternoon and evening ESL and high school equivalency certificate classes, parent-teacher conferences, multilingual newsletters and handbooks, and theater trips. Because the Hmong and Lao, who have little formal education, are the least likely to be involved with English outside the ESL classroom, special efforts may often be necessary to get these parents involved. Conferences with bilingual teachers are particularly important.

CONCLUSION

Although Southeast Asian refugee youth may look a great deal like any American adolescent even when they show signs of stress, it is important to remember that their

lives have been extremely different, and that the stress of adjustment continues to be great long after their survival needs have been met. Like all teenagers, these refugees are struggling to develop an adult identity, but those who have arrived in the U.S. during adolescence must also work through the trauma of being refugees.

REFERENCES

- Goldstein, B.L. (1985). Schooling for cultural transitions: Hmong girls and boys in American high schools. Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.
- Nicassio, P.M., LaBarbera, J.D., Coburn, P. & Finley, R. (1986, September). The psychosocial adjustment of the Amerasian refugees: Findings from the Personality Inventory for Children. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Diseases*, (174) 9, 541-44.
- Nidorf, J.F. (1985). Mental health and refugee youths: A model for diagnostic training. In T. Owan & E. Choken. *Southeast Asian mental health, treatment, prevention, services, training and research*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement. ED 266 199.
- Peters, H. (1988, January). A study of Southeast Asian youth in Philadelphia. Final Report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Porte, Z., & Torney-Purta, J. (1987, October). Depression and academic achievement among Indochinese refugee unaccompanied minors in ethnic and nonethnic placement. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, (57) 4, 536-47.
- Robinson, B. (1985). Evaluating mental health services for Southeast Asian Refugees: Cross-cultural methodological issues. Working paper prepared for the Pacific Asian-American Research Methods Workshop, Ann Arbor, MI, July 29- August 23, 1985. ED 267 129.
- Rumbaut, R.G. & Ima, K. (1988, January). The adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee youth: A comparative study. Final Report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Wehrly, B. & Nelson, W. (1986, October). The assimilation and acculturation of Indochinese refugees into Illinois schools. ED 278 741.
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1988). Recent activities against citizens and residents of Asian descent. Clearinghouse Publication No. 88. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Yao, E.L. (1985, February). Adjustment needs of Asian immigrant children. *Elementary School Guidance and Counseling*. This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under

OERI contract no. RI88062013. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

Title: Southeast Asian Adolescents: Identity and Adjustment. ERIC/CUE Digest No. 51.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Descriptors: Academic Achievement, Acculturation, Adjustment (to Environment), Adolescents, Asian Americans, Bilingual Teachers, Ethnic Bias, Ethnicity, Limited English Speaking, Parent Participation, Peer Influence, Psychological Needs, Refugees, Stress Variables, Youth Problems

Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Immigration Impact, Southeast Asians, United States

###



[\[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page\]](#)