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WORKING AMONG THE INDO-CHINESE STUDENTS: A CONTINUING MISSION

During the first half of 1975, the Republic of South Vietnam was invaded by the Northern Communist Vietnamese who took control of the entire country. At the same time, its neighbours to the West, Kampuchea (also called Cambodia) and Laos, fell to the Khmer Rouge and the Pathet Lao respectively. Indo-China came under total control of the Communists. This event resulted in the departure of hundreds of thousands of refugees to other parts of the world in search for freedom.

Since 1975, Australia has been generous in accepting Indo-Chinese refugees for resettlement on its soil. Even though Asian immigration is not new to this country and Australia's experience with refugees goes back to the immediate pre- and post-war years and the 1950's, the sudden and massive influx of Indo-Chinese refugee children into Australian schools has brought many problems for the teachers who have to teach them, and particularly for those who are not familiar with or not prepared for the situation.

On the other hand, it has been and still is a source of anxiety and fear for these children who have been uprooted from their homeland and transplanted into a totally new environment. Moreover, unlike the immigrants who may return to their homeland if immigration is seen to be a mistake, these refugees have to accept that they may never return home again. Whether or not their new environment is pleasing to them, they must make various adjustments resulting from many conflicts:

EMOTIONAL CONFLICTS

The experiences of war and recent memories associated with the trauma of escape, confrontation with pirates, danger of death, deprivation, and separation from loved ones, have left their imprint in the form of introverted personalities, unstable behaviour, and unfriendly or distrustful attitudes.

The changing role of parental authority is a confusing factor which often causes emotional conflict and insecurity. It is possible for children to be left without moral support from their parents who themselves are facing many difficulties in adjusting.

Resulting from such a sudden change of life style, loneliness, homesickness and isolation are daily problems which greatly affect the development of these children who become vulnerable to stress and psychological breakdown.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS

Conflicts are likely to arise when cultural and social backgrounds differ. If Indo-Chinese children are to live up to the expectations of both their parents and teachers, it is likely that they will experience conflict. Within their own culture, these children are expected to be obedient and respectful to elders, passive, modest, to do well in school and to study. At school, they are taught to be well behaved, polite, respectful to teachers, quiet, passive, formal in their approach and hard working. However, at school in Australia, they are expected to be polite, self assertive, independent, active, to ask questions, to volunteer answers, to participate in group discussions, all of which in many ways are in conflict with their own cultural traditions.

EDUCATIONAL CONFLICTS

Most Indo-Chinese children, being used to the teacher centered method of learning, tend to work the passive way by listening, watching and imitating. In Australia, they become confused when they have to learn independently and select their own subjects when at secondary level. Encountering such a situation, they often feel a lack of self reliance, self confidence, as well as difficulty in decision making. Worse still, teachers sometimes label them as "passive", "quiet", "unco-operative", "backward", so that they tend to ignore them and not give them the attention they need.

The language barrier is a big handicap for Indo-Chinese children. Although on arrival each child is entitled to three to six months of intensive English language teaching either under the New Arrivals Program or at the Catholic Intensive Language Centre, their knowledge of the language is insufficient for them to cope with studies particularly at secondary school.

AN INITIATIVE OF THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE

In 1982, in order to help alleviate some of the above problems, the Catholic Education Office in Sydney took the initiative of employing me as Liaison Officer for the Indo-Chinese Students working in 300 primary and secondary schools within the Archdiocese of Sydney.

I am attached to the Multicultural Education Program within the Special Purpose Programs which receive special funding to assist in the education of migrant children.

As Liaison Officer for Indo-Chinese Students, I am responsible to the Co-Ordinator of the Multicultural Education Program for developing and maintaining strategies designed to facilitate the integration of Indo-Chinese students into the catholic schools of the Archdiocese.

My duties are:

1) To assist teachers with the planning and implementation of programmes appropriate to the needs of Indo-Chinese students including:

- (I) the provision of cultural and linguistic background information.
- (II) the organisation of translators and interpreters as requested.

2) To establish contact and liaison with the following groups:

- Indo-Chinese communities,
- Migrant Centres/Hostels,
- Relevant Commonwealth and N.S.W. Education Departments,
- Catholic Immigration Office and Welfare organisations,
- Catholic Education Office personnel, Regional and Central.

3) To liaise with the Language Reception Centres regarding the placement of children in Catholic schools and educational continuity from the Centres to the schools.

4) To provide information about the existence and nature of Catholic schools to Indo-Chinese parents and to assist interested parents with enrolment of their children in Catholic schools.

5) To assist in gathering and collating statistics relevant to Indo-Chinese children.

6) To assist in inservice education courses as required.

7) To carry out other duties as assigned by the Diocesan Director of Schools.

It will be apparent that my work revolves around people's problems, many of which must, even after concerned effort, remain unsolved. As long as Australia accepts Indo-Chinese refugees there will be a need for a continuing mission to these people.

I personally obtain much fulfilment from being closely in touch with Christ's poor.

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