An Assessment of the Needs of Indochinese Youth

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1.1. I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the different circumstances of their migration, Indochinese resettling in the U.S. are undergoing much the same, painful and disorienting acculturation process as previous immigrant groups. The equilibrium lost as a result of sustained, intensive culture contact is not easily regained. Generations after their arrival in the U.S., many immigrant groups still suffer from unresolved cultural identity conflicts. This has been especially true of Asian and other non-white groups who remain more or less physically distinct and, therefore, tend to be viewed as foreign even when they are American-born.

The assumption of this paper is that children and the periods of childhood and adolescence are the battlefields over which and in which the most severe cultural conflicts emerge. Children are the key to any group's survival as a distinct cultural unit. As “New Americans,” immigrant children find themselves charged by their elders with maintaining what often appears to them to be an increasingly remote and irrelevant cultural heritage. Moreover, cultural identity is an important element in the formation of self-image for any child, and individual development can be hampered by the inability to deal with

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conflicting cultural demands. Thus, the acculturation process can be seen as socially charged and highly personal.

The purposes of this assessment are several. First, it will demonstrate that the fact that there are few programs and little apparent focus on Indochinese children does not mean that their needs are unrecognized or insignificant. It will also attempt to:

1. point out some of the factors which work against addressing their needs;
2. identify the areas of greatest need; and
3. suggest some possible responses.

The assessment procedure involved the use of a questionnaire as the basis for informal telephone interviews. The sixty informants were members of Federal programs and national support projects as well as local service providers.

The group under study was pre-school and elementary school-age children and secondary school-age youth resettled in the U.S. It was not the intent of this survey to address the special needs of Cambodian children and unaccompanied minors apart from general Indochinese childrens' need, since these subgroups are already receiving considerable attention. However, the issues raised certainly apply to them as well.

What follows is a sumamry of the findings of this brief study which is not intended to be conclusive but which will hopefully stimulate thought, discussion, and action.

1.2. II. FACTORS INHIBITING ACTION ON INDOCHINESE CHILDREN'S NEEDS

The lack of focus on Indochinese children's needs can be

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better understood in light of both the “cultural baggage” that the refugees bring with them from Indochina and the structure of the resettlement system here in the U.S.

Generally speaking, Indochinese cultures nurture, discipline and educate youth somewhat differently than Americans through roles and institutions whose continuity is jeopardized by the absence of traditional Indochinese community support systems here in the U.S. Family instability results from loss of or separation from loved ones, from changes in economic status, and from the parents' loss of legitimacy as cultural authorities in an unfamiliar society. At the same time, Indochinese parents are concerned with strongly disciplining their children fearing that, otherwise, they might become as “spoiled” as American children.

Moreover, Indochinese parents are accustomed to entrusting considerable responsibility for culture transmission to the schools. From their point of view, however, American schools cannot help but appear to be culturally subversive.

Traditional support systems are also lacking in the area of mental health. The Indochinese are not accustomed to the variety and professionalization of mental health services in the West. They find such services unfamiliar and culturally inappropriate and are little inclined to use them for themselves or their children. And yet, family and community support may no longer be adequate to work out emotional problems resulting from their stressful experience as refugees.

Certain biases in the federal refugee assistance program

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relegate the needs of youth to a secondary position. First of all, the model for the program is based on a social service approach designed to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of poverty in America. This model is applied to a wide variety of economically marginal groups in our society and is not inherently sensitive to cultural differences. However, the needs of Indochinese children in the U.S. are overwhelmingly socio-cultural rather than economic, a point that will be discussed in depth later in this paper.

Secondly, the goal of the assistance program is Indochinese self-sufficiency and, as such, involves a primary concern with adult male employability. According to one informant, especially in the area of social services, children are considered only when they “interfere” with provision of services to adults.

Thirdly, the programs are directed at (or extended to) In-Indochinese children are in the areas of English as-a-second-language (ESL), bilingual education, vocational training, and child welfare services. The underlying concern common to all of these programs is with “Americanization” with a minimum disruption to the status quo.

Indochinese self-help groups or mutual assistance associations (MAA's) are concerned about Indochinese children, and yet, most have had neither the lead-time nor the funds to develop desired programs. They are, for the time being, largely occupied assisting newcomers to their communities, seeking federal

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funds and services, and becoming organizationally stable. While one can find some MAA activity in helping unaccompanied minors and some occasional volunteer-based recreation or Indochinese language and culture programs for youth, for the most part MAA's have so far not yet been able to address to their satisfaction the specific needs of many of the subgroups of their population.

In summary, familial and institutional support systems for Indochinese youth have been undermined by the refugee experience and the resettlement system is not providing sufficient compensatory support.

1.3. III. GENERAL NEEDS OF INDOCHINESE CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Some of the general needs of Indochinese children are common to all immigrant and many uprooted children. First, they must physically and psychologically adjust to new living and learning environments. Second, they must acquire new linguistic and cultural survival skills as the basis for future self-determination. Finally, they must learn how to cope with new cultural forces and resolve subsequent conflicts with old ones on both intra- and interpersonal levels.

Another general area of need is unique to their particular experience as refugees. Many Indochinese have undergone sustained hunger, fear, deprivation, repression, and exposure to violence. The resulting traumas produce many responses including total denial, grief and guilt over the loss of loved ones, survivor's guilt, and chronic stress-related physical

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and emotional disorders.

Nor are Indochinese adults immune to the aforementioned problems. Often they themselves need special help. Their young, therefore, are at a kind of double disadvantage. In this sense, it is neither possible nor desirable to remove Indochinese children's needs from the larger context of family and ethnic community. However, in terms of program development, special attention to children can provide focus around which Indochinese family and community may be reinforced.

1.4. IV. SPECIFIC NEEDS BY AGE-GROUP

In attempting to get at more specific needs, it is useful to differentiate by age-group.

1.4.1. Pre-school

Indochinese pre-school children have needs which are very closely linked to their parents' physical and psychological well-being. The father's drop in status and the mother's isolation in the home and lack of adequate orientation may contribute to uncharacteristic child neglect, poor diet, or exposure to safety hazards in the home.

At this age, the child's physical and cognitive development needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis because of the possibility of delayed reaction to traumatic experiences as a refugee. Due to lack of data, there is uncertainty as to whether this age-group is the most at-risk for later physical and/or emotional stress-related disorders, but there is consensus as to the need for new screening techniques to prevent the

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development of major emotional disturbances.

Also, at this young age, a strong base in Indochinese language and culture is important to instill coherent cultural values and establish parental authority. Daycare and preschool programs that are ethnic-specific provide means of addressing this need. Many MAA's would like to provide daycare for their own communities, but funds are extremely limited. To date, the Indochinese community has made little use of Headstart, Homestart, or Child and Family Resource Centers. Moreover, there has been no concerted outreach effort on the part of these programs, although their focus on cultural sensitivity and parental involvement makes them logical alternatives to ethnic-specific programs and may be adaptable to Indochinese needs.

Pre-school-age Indochinese children need programs which are preventive in the area of health and conservative in their cultural approach. Children of this age have plenty of time for second language and culture acquisition. In fact, where conscientiously preserved, the loss of language and cultural values is inevitable. Therefore, the emphasis should be on family and ethnic community ties with the goal being the gradual acquisition of biculturalism.

1.4.2. Elementary School-Age Children (Kindergarten through Grade Six

Indochinese children who are elementary school age at the time of their arrival face much the same type of problems as teenage Indochinese youth. However, their time constraints

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are fewer and their needs are thus relatively less acute or complicated.

Not surprisingly, these needs center around school-life. First of all, academic placement and counseling is often very difficult due to inaccurate birthdates and either disrupted or total lack of education during flight from their homeland and is the cause of asylum. Placement either above their level of education (but with their age-group) or at their correct grade level (but with younger children) is often inevitable. Such placement poses additional obstacles to forming friendships or causes the child to feel inferior.

another major issue is access to ESL and bilingual education programs. The need for good transitional programs in the schools cannot be overemphasized. The inability to communicate creates a situation highly conducive to prejudice in the schools and also increases feelings of inferiority on the part of the Indochinese child who is struggling to adjust.

While ESL monies are available on a formula basis for schools with Indochinese students, bilingual program monies are discretionary. Thus, initiative for providing bilingual services rests with the local school district and existing federal guidelines cannot insure standardization of program availability or quality at this time. Consequently, while some schools do attempt to provide truly bilingual and bicultural programs, many others provide none or offer programs which are little more than remedial ESL, thus treating the

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Indochinese child as if he or she had a learning handicap, at least until proficiency in English is achieved.

For those children who do not have access to quality bilingual/bicultural programs at school, continued exposure to Indochinese language and culture in the home and community is especially important. MAA's and individual Indochinese adults are attempting to provide language and culture preservation programs, but these are the exception rather than the rule since they rely on volunteer time and energy.

Although this age-group is less apt to isolate itself as an ethnic slique, teacher training around multi-cultural values education and a positive integration experience is key to heading off later inter-ethnic and inter-racial hostilities in the schools. Very few programs of this nature are currently available.

Ideally, school counselors and teachers should be the ones monitoring the physical and cognitive development of Indochinese elementary students, rather than leaving the task to community health workers who have only infrequent, if any, contact with them. However, the reality in the schools is one of cutbacks in counseling staff, constraints on teachers' time, lack of tracking mechanisms and absence of training in relevant screening techniques.

In summary, preventive health measures are an ongoing concern and the promotion of fluent bilingualism and biculturalism both in and out of school is the goal for this age-group. Maximum input from each side needs to be accompanied by clear

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differentiation so as to avoid blurring in the form of cultural and linguistic “pidgin” and the subsequent inability to identify comfortably with either American or Indochinese culture.

1.4.3. Secondary School-Age Youth (Grades Seven through Twelve)

Indochinese youth who are in their teens upon arrival in the U.S. are widely considered to be the most at-risk and least served of the three age-groups under discussion. As adolescents they have a solid base in Indochinese language and culture but have very little time to learn English and to obtain the cultural survival skills necessary to function as self-sufficient adults in American society. They experience the problems seen on the elementary level magnified many times over and also have other needs unique to their age-group.

Proper grade placement, for example, is crucial but often nearly impossible due to years of interrupted education and life experiences greatly different from those of American high school students. Deserving of brief mention (since it is outside the age-group under study) is the need for special programs for Indochinese over eighteen who have not completed high school. They are often reluctant to return to school because of their age and need special incentives such as community college programs allowing for receipt of college credit while working towards a high school diploma.

Strong ESL and bilingual education programs are most important in easing transition and minimizing feelings of initial

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failure. Currently 80% of all bilingual education funds are requested by and allocated to elementary level programs. Because the infra-structure of trained teachers and bilingual materials is largely lacking on the secondary level, more money and energy is needed to start programs. Higher costs combined with what is viewed as less return to the system have worked against local initiative in secondary level bilingual programming.

School bilingual vocational education programs for Indochinese youth are also currently insufficient. With very few exceptions, vocational ESL (VESL) and bilingual vocational training projects are geared to adults. While out-of-school youth may enter, their need for special counseling, parent involvement, and different scheduling cannot be met. Vocational training options designed specifically for youth would be particularly useful to Hmong and other hill tribe teenagers who are less educationally oriented than some of the other Indochinese groups.

Cross-cultural counseling is another area of need which remains under-addressed. At a time when schools are generally cutting back on all counseling services, it is not surprising that those remaining are not culturally sensitive and rarely have the bilingual staff. Indochinese youth need more than academic and career counseling. Group counseling around sexuality and acculturation is being attempted with success by some unaccompanied minors programs and should be made available

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to all Indochinese youth. Parents also need to be involved in the counseling process since parental pressure to succeed in school and lack of appreciation of the acculturation tensions experienced by their children commonly results in family conflict.

Special grief and loss counseling is another unexplored area. The majority of unaccompanied minors and “shoestring minors” (those sponsored by a distant relative who are left largely on their own upon arrival in the U.S.) are teenagers. These and other Indochinese youth who have lost loved ones often suffer from survivor's guilt which effectively blocks their adjustment progress. Furthermore, observation has shown that among Indochinese youth, male and female manifestations of grief, receptivity to peer support, and counseling needs differ and must be taken into consideration in providing effective counseling services.

Ethnic peer group isolation is quite common on this level in schools with sizeable Indochinese student populations. Hostility between Indochinese and other minority youth is common, as are inter-ethnic conflicts among the Indochinese themselves. A two-sided approach to this problem is necessary. First, Indochinese youth need counseling which encourages them to take advantage of extracurricular social and recreational activities which would increase their contact with other students. As on the elementary level, there needs to be cultural pluralism and multi-cultural values education in the classroom as a preventive measure. However, on the secondary level there is an

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additional need for sensitive crisis intervention, since many conflicts cannot be prevented in time.

Second, Indochinese high school students often live at a distance from each other and have limited opportunities to interact outside of school. Programs need to be developed that provide appropriate activities and settings for them to meet with their Indochinese peers for socializing and recreation after school and on weekends.

1.5. IV. CONCLUSION OF NEEDS

The conclusion of this assessment is that, while needs can be identified which are specific to each of the three age-groups under study, Indochinese secondary school-age youth are the most immediately at-risk in regards to both intrapersonal and interpersonal adjustment.

Because of lack of data, it is still unclear whether or not younger children may be more at-risk in terms of emotional disorders that are expected to emerge with time. One recommendation of this study is that funds be sought from the National Institute of Mental Health for research on Indochinese emotional health problems in all age and ethnic groups, with the goal of development and distribution of special screening techniques and treatment for grief and loss. Youth would directly benefit from any increase in the knowledge and skills of school counselors or the development of ethnic-specific community health programs.

School is the inevitable center of a teenager's existence and is, therefore, the logical place to address many, but not all, of the needs of Indochinese youth. The role of the school

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in any society is a basically conservative one of culture transmission and socialization. Given the growing appreciation of the cultural complexity of American society, however, schools in the U.S. are increasingly called upon to do more than transmit white, middle-class values and norms. There are guidelines and precedents for quality bilingual programs, ESL, multi-cultural values education, and culturally sensitive counseling in the schools. It would appear to be largely a matter of putting additional funds and energy towards improving and standardizing services through existing infrastructures.

Also clear from this study is the need for the involvement of additional factors in assisting schools with their acculturation and integration tasks, as well as providing complementary, Indochinese-specific programs for cultural and linguistic preservation and transmission. Fluent biculturalism is unlikely to result if left to the schools alone, and it should not be viewed as solely their responsibility. MAA's, youth service agencies, other minority groups and sponsors need to be not only sympathetic but actively involved in advocacy and program development.

In some cases, innovative, but very small and informal programs addressing youth needs have been developed by concerned groups and individuals. Unfortunately, these have not had the funding and the visibility necessary to establish them as useful demonstration projects.

A final point needs to be made concerning the need for networking. Except on a limited basis among those working with

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unaccompanied minors, there has been very little communication about the problems of Indochinese youth and possible responses either among those working on resettlement or with traditional youth service agencies in this country. Therefore, this study also recommends a request for Federal funds to establish a small national clearinghouse project under the auspices of either an agency already providing resettlement services, or a traditional youth service agency which has not necessarily been working with Indochinese.

1.6. V. FUNDING OPTIONS

The remainder of this paper will address a final set of recommendations around coalition approach as to program development specifically targeting secondary school-age Indochinese youth and centering around increased MAA initiatives.

A joint approach makes great sense from a funding standpoint. The growth and increased activity and organizational stability of MAA's make them logical providers of services for the Indochinese population. Indeed, M.A.A. potential for a larger role in resettlement services has recently been recognized by the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services through which funds are being made available to them.

These funds are rather limited and probably will not result initially in services specifically targeting youth. However, MAA's could directly or indirectly approach a variety of other funding sources if they were to join forces with other youth service providers, both public and private.
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For example, MAA's and school districts are logical partners in working towards improved bilingual programs for Indochinese youth. MAA's have much to contribute in those areas where schools often need the most help to establish quality programs, namely, the areas of materials development, teacher training, and parent involvement. MAA's are not local educational agencies, and are, therefore, not eligible for Title VII funds. However, they may work through Title VII regional directors in identifying school districts that might be receptive to subcontracting their services as part of existing bilingual and ESL programs. There are numerous precedents for subcontract arrangements between schools and private, non-profit groups with educational purposes.

Ethnic Heritage Studies Program funding (Title IX) is also available through the Department of Education for ethnic-specific curriculum development and teacher training. Again, a joint school/MAA project would appear most productive and most likely to be funded.

Cultural preservation/transmission monies are available through the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Coalitions of MAA's or of MAA's with other minority groups might find these sources appropriate for soliciting support for a wide variety of programs. For example, Indochinese performing, literary, and visual arts programs might be developed to familiarize American communities with the different Indochinese cultures and contribute to the youth pride and participation in their ethnic cultural heritage.
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Other potential funding sources for bilingual/bucultural programs are available and are summarized in a publication out of the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education entitled *Resources in Bilingual Education—Guide to Government Agency Programs.*

Finally, MAA and youth service agency collaboration in establishing Indochinese student clubs or other social or recreational programs opens up yet another source of funding that has, so far, been underutilized by and for the Indochinese. Most of the largest and oldest youth service agencies in the U.S. are members of the United Way and may submit proposals to their local community United Way for the research and development of demonstration projects. Because of local autonomy within the United Way, the amount of money available and the definition of fundable projects may vary considerably. Projects usually are not funded over $20,000, but MAA's should take into consideration the fact that a partnership with a well-established youth service agency would probably greatly reduce the costs of staffing and facilities.

1.7. VI. PROPOSED LOCAL PROJECTS

In light of the needs assessed and the funding options available, it is the recommendation of this study that two demonstration projects be implemented on the local level to address the problems of secondary school-age Indochinese youth in an innovative and comprehensive way. One project would entail a joint school and MAA approach to providing effective linguistic
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and cultural survival skills with the aim of promoting smooth acculturation and integration. The other would be a cultural preservation project involving cooperation among MAA's, youth service agencies, and other minority groups.

Ideally, a community should offer the full range of youth support services encompassed by these two projects in order to facilitate biculturalism. By dividing the service between two projects in separate locations, it becomes necessary to choose the sites with care so that an overall balance of services is promoted in each community. *Therefore, one major precondition for site selection needs to be that a community already have some acculturation and integration programs in place if it is to serve as host for the cultural preservation demonstration project, and vice versa.* Moreover, strong, well-organized MAA's, school systems with bilingual education ifrastructures, as well as sympathetic youth service agencies and minority groups are key elements in both site selection and overall project success.

1.8. ACCULTURATION AND INTEGRATION PROJECT

This project centers on the high school environment and should include substantial MAA involvement in formal and informal transitional education programs and counseling services. There are four components to this project which could be largely covered by education:

1. Indochinese working in conjunction with one or two school districts develop an Indochinese bilingual education demonstration project in which an MAA subcontracts with the
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schools to provide parent orientation, materials translation, and teacher training.

2. MAA representatives and school counseling staff serve as advisors to American students and “old” Indochinese students in the planning and implementation of bilingual, school-based “survival skills” orientation and welcome program for new Indochinese students. The program might include orientation to school life, to local transportation and community points of interest, to the law as it pertains to minors, to health and safety, and to dating and sexuality. New arrivals would be paired with other students throughout an initial one or two month transitional period in order to facilitate their integration.

3. The MAA would also work with the school in developing an Indochinese ethnic heritage program to introduce Indochinese culture into the classroom. The MAA would act as the main resource in the development of a brief curriculum with an emphasis on activities, visual aids, and “hands-on culture”, as well as related teacher training.

4. Finally, the MAA would coordinate Indochinese culture-specific training of school counselors. This training would include presentations on Indochinese authority patterns, traditional family life, schooling, courtship, and attitudes towards mental health. It would also present information on the disruptive effects of the refugee experience, resettlement tensions, adjustment problems and special counseling needs. Parent

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involvement and peer group counseling would be emphasized.

1.9. CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION PROJECT

This project deals with the youth's environment outside of school and is chiefly concerned with Indochinese cultural preservation, peer support systems, and community relations. The three components of this project involve MAA initiative in enlisting the support of youth service agencies and minority groups.

1. An MAA would implement after-school Indochinese language and culture classes. This would include, but not be limited to, Indochinese literacy programs and cultural arts instruction. A major focus would be on the re-establishment of community elders as culture transmitters. The National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities are logical funding sources for this component.

2. The MAA would work with a local youth service agency in the planning, staffing, and implementation of Indochinese Student Club. Curriculum support might be the initial, legitimizing purpose of the club; social and recreational activities could be added as membership stabilizes. The facilities and staff organizational skills of the youth service agency would be key elements in the partnership. Informal counseling by the club advisors, and parental involvement in special events would be unique features of this program. Funding for this project might well be found through the United Way.

3. Finally, the MAA would either join or initiate a community minority coalition to share what the Indochinese have to offer

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as a new minority to raise the issue of cultural preservation. The coalition would be solicited for support in putting Indochinese cultural arts and traditions before the community and for enlisting media attention to Indochinese youth needs and how they are similar to and different from other minority youth needs. Integrating youth projects developed cooperatively by such a coalition migh inquire into Action mini-grants for funding.

Clearly, evaluation and dissemination of information about these projects will be essential. If implemented, the clearinghouse project proposed earlier in this paper would help inform both those working in direct resettlement services and those who have potential for contact with Indochinese youth in other areas of community life.

In conclusion, the combination of emotional health research, information networking, and local project development proposed in this paper represents a comprehensive approach to acculturation which has been historically lacking. To date, the “discovery” of cultural pluralism in this country has been largely a trial-and-error process, one which has been debilitating for both immigrant groups and the society as a whole. Increased attention to acculturation issues in the manner described would be a positive step towards minimizing inevitable intrapersonal and interpersonal stress.