

## Adaptation problems of Chinese immigrant students in New Zealand high schools

Sylvia Chu

### Introduction

Being uprooted from one's home country and settling down in a new one is not at all easy. Immigrants usually experience multiple transitional challenges. This article discusses some of the adaptation problems of Chinese immigrant students under the following three main headings: Acculturation, Problems for teenagers, What schools can do.

### Acculturation

According to Adler (1985), there are five stages in the acculturation process. These are:

1. Initial contact
2. Disintegration
3. Reintegration
4. Autonomy
5. Independence.

The initial contact with the new country is the "honeymoon" period, when the immigrant is highly excited about the new experience. This is followed by a stage of disintegration, when the individual experiences loneliness and can respond with depression, self-blame and withdrawal. When the third stage, that of reintegration, is reached, the immigrant initially may blame his or her own culture for the painful and confusing

feelings being experienced, but soon this blame is turned into rejecting and attacking the new setting, where nothing in the new country can compare with the homeland. The autonomy stage is reached when the immigrant can see both the strengths and weaknesses of the new country, and becomes more self-assured. Finally, the stage of independence ideally leads towards a bicultural or multicultural identity that includes competence in both the old and new settings.

Not all the immigrants reach the independence stage. Some may remain in stages three or four throughout their lives, and some, who fail to adapt, may choose to return to their home country. Much emotional stress is involved in the process. Immigrants who seek help from mental health professionals often report feelings of homesickness, rejection, depression, anxiety, loneliness and lack of confidence in adjusting to a new and strange culture (Eyou, 1997; Neilson & Liddle, 1997).

### Problems for teenagers

The situation is compounded for teenagers when they have to face both developmental changes as well as adaptation

problems. It is made even more difficult when they have not had a part in the decision to immigrate. This is usually made by their parents, and whether they like it or not, teenagers have to comply with their parents' decision.

Chinese immigrant students in New Zealand must adapt to changes in four major areas of their lives. These are the areas of: language, family life, social life and school learning (Ho, 1995).

*Language:* As English is their second language, Chinese immigrant students usually have difficulty in understanding spoken English and in communicating in everyday English. It is even harder when they don't understand the colloquial expressions and cannot match the speed of the native speakers. This language barrier directly affects their studies, their social life and their daily living (Ho, 1995). As a result, immigrant students feel diffident and inferior, which consequently erodes their self-esteem.

Students from People's Republic of China and Taiwan encounter greater difficulties than some other young immigrants because, in these countries, there are fewer chances of contact with Europeans and young people begin learning English only in junior high schools. Lower form students and those newly arrived in New Zealand usually have the greatest language difficulties. However, with time and with the help

of Kiwi friends, their English can gradually improve.

*Family life:* Chinese immigrant students often feel torn between the conflicting values of Chinese and European people. For example, many authors have commented that Europeans stress "independence" whereas the Chinese value "interdependence" (Kitano, 1989; Turpin, 1995). Chinese parents expect their young people to be submissive, humble and self-controlled and to have high respect for authority. However, their New Zealand teachers encourage them to be independent, assertive and expressive and to exert their personal rights in their daily interaction with Kiwis. The result is often conflict within the family as family values and the young person's adjustments and cultural identity needs are out of balance, thus creating tension.

Further complications arise when Chinese parents, who may be educated, highly skilled professionals, cannot get satisfactory jobs in New Zealand because their qualifications are not recognised. Many are obliged to go back to work in their home country, leaving their children behind in New Zealand. This means that many Chinese adolescents are left in their new country by their father, and sometimes by both parents (*Asiaweek*, 1992). They feel hurt and lonely, and are without proper parental care. Very often they must shoulder the responsibilities of their absent parent(s), such as taking

care of younger siblings and managing the family finances. This creates a highly stressful situation for them.

*Social life:* Richardson's (1994) high school survey showed that 84% of Chinese students long to make Kiwi friends at school but, in reality, 79% of their friends are Asian. In contrast, only 27% of non-Chinese students consider it important to initiate friendship with new Asian friends and only 23% of non-Chinese students consider it important to share their own culture with others. The same study showed that cultural differences and lack of mutual understanding bring forth prejudice, racism and discrimination at school. Acts of blatant, overt racism, including taunting and rock throwing, were reported to be taking place outside the boundaries of the school. Within the school, the hostility was more contained and covert, such as pushing, hassling and unkind jokes (Richardson, 1994). In the face of this hostile behaviour, and because of their limitations in the English language, Chinese immigrant students tend to spend most of their time with people of their own race. This in turn slows down their progress in learning English (Tang, 1990).

Many new immigrant students also find life in New Zealand boring. Extra-curricular activities organised by schools are limited. Many shops are closed at night and on Saturdays and Sundays,

and public transportation is very inconvenient (Ho, 1995). So, most Chinese immigrant students stay at home after school and during holidays, leading a very limited social life outside of school.

*Approaches to learning:* Eastern learning is more knowledge-based (focusing on the absorption of learning materials) whereas Western learning is more skill-based (stressing the exploratory approach). Chinese immigrant students were accustomed in their home country to factual learning and memorisation. They learnt from teachers' handouts and textbooks. Teachers gave them specific guidelines and direct assistance. In contrast, the New Zealand education system tells them to research information independently from a variety of sources. They are told to think independently, criticise, evaluate critically and discuss their work with other classmates. They find this hard. Ho's (1995) study shows that many of them remain with their old learning method.

The Chinese are a hard-working people. They place strong emphasis on formal, academic education and parents have high academic expectations of their children. Many students spend endless hours studying at the expense of participating in school and social activities. The result is a lack of balance in their school lives.

Studies in the United States and Australia show Chinese students to be

outstanding achievers in gaining university places (Aubert, 1994; *Economist*, 1994). Chung's (1988) study shows that Chinese students in New Zealand in the 1980s surpassed all other ethnic groups in academic achievement. Such high achievements earn Chinese students a "model minority" image (Baruth & Manning, 1991). However, the stereotyping of the "model minority" image can have a negative effect, in that teachers and school counsellors may fail to recognise that some students experience learning difficulties. Problems arise for those students who do not have the ability to achieve or to meet sometimes unrealistic demands and expectations of their parents (Chung, 1988). Furthermore, while Chinese students usually have good grades in mathematics and science, they do not do so well in subjects which require a good command of English, such as economics and history (Tang, 1990).

The author suggests a multi-faceted approach to helping immigrant Chinese students. Schools with a high percentage of Chinese students must take a proactive role, and involve the whole school, including teachers, administrators, parents and students as well as counsellors. Staff development activities, parent education, school policies and counsellor-initiated activities should work hand in hand towards this goal.

### **What schools can do**

**Staff development:** Teachers and counsellors in multicultural schools need to be familiar with Chinese culture and cultural practices, in order to better understand the differences between Chinese students and their New Zealand peers. This may be achieved through educational talks and shared discussion during staff meetings on the general principles of working with Chinese students. With better understanding, teachers and counsellors are likely to be more able to empathise with their students, they will gain confidence in relating with Chinese students and, indirectly, they will act as role models to other non-Chinese students at schools.

With better understanding of the specific needs and problems of the Chinese immigrant students, teachers and counsellors can help them in more specific ways. For example, when they know the difficulties that Chinese students experience in their interactions with Kiwi students, they can be more conscious of keeping children mixed in as many activities as possible. During lessons, they can emphasise the value of cooperation, living in peace with one another and appreciation of the qualities of cultural diversity. This can also help migrant students maintain a positive attitude toward their own culture of origin. Inclusive classroom practices need to be supported by inclusive

practices throughout the school. With regard to Chinese students' difficulties in adopting the Western approach to study, teachers need to be sensitive to their need for help, encouragement and guidance. This is particularly important in the areas of researching information, thinking critically and integrating data scientifically.

*Working with parents:* To alleviate the adaptation problems of Chinese immigrant students, schools have to work closely with parents. They should keep parents well informed about the New Zealand education system, school policies, procedures and goals. To be effective, the setting up of a Chinese Parents' Network is meaningful and necessary. In the long run, talks for parents can be systematically organised. Topics may include:

1. Cultural values of New Zealand
2. Cultural differences between Chinese and Kiwis
3. Understanding the different teaching and learning styles in New Zealand
4. Parenting skills.

*School policies:* When the school personnel have better understanding of their Chinese students, they can be more empathic and can set their policies more in response to identified needs. School policies may include the setting up of a Chinese Parents' Network and more

actively encouraging Chinese parents to be involved in the Parent-Teacher Association, so that Chinese needs can be heard and supported appropriately. The inclusion of Chinese students on both the Student Executive Committee and on the Racial Harassment Team is one of the pertinent policies that needs to be implemented. In those schools with a high concentration of Chinese students, it should be part of the staffing policy to employ a Chinese school counsellor either full-time or part-time, if funding and resources permit.

*Foreign full fee-paying students:*

Although the focus of this article is on Chinese immigrant students, the author would like to comment on the situation of foreign full fee-paying Chinese students in New Zealand. In 1990, the government allowed high schools to begin recruiting foreign students from overseas. Since then, there has been a great increase in the number of foreign students. In 1997, there were 4,495 foreign Asian students enrolled in New Zealand schools (*NZ Education Gazette*, 1997). Of this number, around 2,000 were Chinese. According to Shen (1997), this is a popular way to increase revenue for some schools. Despite the very high school fees (about NZ\$10,000 per student per year), schools do not seem to have made much provision for their foreign fee-paying students and the high school fees do not necessarily match

with the quality of education gained. Immigrant students need a great deal of help from ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes to improve their English.

*Counselling:* There is an urgent need for Chinese counsellors to help students cope with their adaptation problems. Could those schools allocate some of the money they receive from the high school fees for the employment of more ESOL teachers and for the employment of part-time or full-time Chinese school counsellors? This question is worthy of serious consideration. However, studies show that Asian immigrant students (including Chinese) seldom resort to school counsellors in spite of their numerous adaptation needs (Neilson & Liddle, 1997; Richardson, 1994). To them, there is a social stigma associated with seeking individual counselling (Soong & Au, 1990). Therefore, alternatives to individual counselling need to be considered.

*Alternatives to individual counselling:*

There are at least two alternatives to individual counselling for Chinese immigrant students. One alternative can be life-skills programmes and another peer-support programmes. The author proposes that life-skills training programmes be introduced to assist the adaptation and integration of new students into New Zealand schools. She is herself currently running such pro-

grammes in some high schools. The aim is to help students attain the necessary skills to develop as individuals and to adapt successfully to life in New Zealand. Each programme comprises ten sessions of educational, preventive and developmental group activities.

Newly arrived immigrant students may feel lonely, powerless and fearful of reaching out for help. School counsellors could set up peer-support systems by recruiting caring senior Kiwi students and training them as buddies to recent immigrant students. Buddies can provide information about school policies and practices, as well as offer advice on choosing subjects and joining school sports teams. If, in the buddy training, they are encouraged to share their own experiences, this will help create a bond with the new student. Buddies may also serve as a bridge between the immigrant students and other Kiwi schoolmates.

Why does the author propose life-skills training programmes? Why are such kinds of structured group programmes preferred to individual counselling? Firstly, they are more acceptable to Chinese, because there is no social stigma attached to participation in an educational programme for personal growth. Secondly, group programmes are cost effective. With people of similar needs working together, they are especially suitable for schools, which are being confronted with a sharp increase in Chinese students and with limited

funding and resources. Thirdly, a group setting offers support for new behaviours and encourages experimentation (Corey & Corey, 1992). Group members from similar backgrounds and with similar problems feel supported and encouraged to try out different behaviours and responses.

If such programmes are successfully implemented, mutual cooperation and respect between Kiwis and Chinese can be established. Ultimately, a Chinese/New Zealand Friendship Club could be set up, so that both groups can learn from one another. While Kiwis may be able to help Chinese students with English and language-related subjects, Chinese students may be able to help Kiwis with their mathematics and science subjects. As for sports, Chinese are good at table tennis whereas Kiwis are good at rugby. They can even share ideas with each other about Western and Chinese cooking!

In conclusion, assimilation-based policies and approaches still exist in many schools, which can create inflexible barriers for migrant students. If a more inclusive approach is espoused, the qualities of diversity can be beneficial to all school students.

## References

- Adler, P. (1985). The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44, 272-279.
- Asiaweek* (1992). Growing up all alone. 24 January 1992.
- Aubert, E. (1994). Higher ed class barriers still exist: Asian students find ethnicity no problem but social class exists. *Campus News*, Monash University.
- Baruth, L.G., & Manning, M.L. (1991). *Multicultural counselling and psychotherapy: A life span perspective*. New York: Merrill.
- Chung, C.Y. (1988). Chinese students – model students: A myth or reality? *New Settlers and Multicultural Education Issues*, 5 (1): 17-19.
- Corey, M. & Corey, G. (1992). *Group process and practice*. Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole.
- Economist*, The (1994). The ruling class. 17 September 1994.
- Eyou, M. L. (1997). *Cultural identity and psychological adjustment of adolescent Chinese immigrants in New Zealand*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education, University of Auckland.
- Ho, E. S. (1995). *The challenge of culture change: The cross-cultural adaptation of Hong Kong Chinese adolescent immigrants in New Zealand*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Waikato.
- Kitano, H. L. (1989). A model for counseling Asian Americans. In P. B. Pedersen, J.G. Draguns, W.J. Lonner, J.E. Trimble (Eds), *Counselling across cultures*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii: 139-151.

- Neilson, G., & Liddle, V. (1997). Life at a strange school, in a strange city, amongst a strange people. *Mental Health Quarterly*, 14-15 April 1997.
- Richardson, A. (1994). *The challenges, needs and difficulties for recent Chinese immigrants in a New Zealand secondary school: Development of a model for guidance counsellor response to these needs*. Dissertation submitted for the Degree of Master of Education in Counselling, Department of Education, University of Auckland.
- Shen, C. (1997). *Opening doors, opening minds: The perceptions and experiences of Chinese full fee paying students in selected Auckland secondary schools*. Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Education, Department of Education, University of Auckland.
- Soong, C., & Au, S. (1990). Towards an indigenous approach to counselling. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 15 (1): 13-17.
- Tang, C. (1990). English the "alien" language. *Deadline*. Nov. 1990.
- Turpin, A. L. (1995). Literature review: Cross-cultural issues – Chinese clients with the mental health system. *New Zealand Journal of Counselling*, 17 (1): 17-26.