

Acculturating Soviet Youth: A Bi-Lingual Youth Consumer Education Program

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The bi-lingual component in the program was seen as an essential ingredient for learning in both social and individual concerns. Comfort with one's language provides a model for less anxiety and becomes a haven to be turned to in a society that often feels new and strange and that sometimes denigrates plurality and underscores homogenization.

The Bi-Lingual Youth Consumer Education Program intent is to provide Soviet Jewish immigrant children a socialization and acculturation experience through weekly small-group interaction with other Soviet Jewish children with the guidance of Soviet-Jewish teen leadership who in turn are supported by adult professionals.

It is the intent of this program developed by our JCC to provide the children and teens with an increased awareness and understanding of consumer education skills in their adaptation to a new society. It is posited that the group experience will increase the youth's feelings of self confidence and worth as well as generating stronger bonds within the immigrant community.

Some areas of content that are covered that have relationship to youth needs are:

1. Health Services
2. Schools and languages
3. American holidays and customs
4. Jewish holidays and customs
5. Home safety—first aid
6. Food, the market place, products and nutrition
7. Recreation: movies, music, sports, arts and crafts, TV
8. Economics: money-banking
9. Transportation

The service team originally comprised five backup adult supervisors, a driver, project Coordinator and project Director. Most of the backup staff were conversant in Russian. Weekly training meetings were held for the teen leaders for 1½-2 hours one

evening a week. The overt objective of these sessions was to go over prepared program content as well as to work with group issues. A weekly training meeting was held with backup supervisory staff also to go over content and group issues. Contacts with families of children were developed. Ongoing advisory committee meetings with professionals from the community and Soviet-Jewish adults were held. Family programs were developed which included children, teens and parents, e.g. a Purim party and Model Passover Seder.

To the point of this writing, forty-four children and 12 teen leaders have participated in the program. One leader dropped out due to excessive pressures of an after-school schedule, 11 leaders continued to attend.

Staff was constant except for the change of Project Coordinator who left for another position after three months with the program.

The children and teens reflected the full spectrum of Soviet immigration to the Boston area. Approximately 20 percent of both children and teens attended Jewish day schools, with the remainder attending public schools.

A number of pertinent issues have been confronted during the program.

1. Developing group leadership skills with a middle-adolescent group who were experiencing their first paid work-experience.

2. Interpreting and developing program content for children based on consumer

information appropriate to their stage of development.

3. Recording and interpreting material through the efforts of the teens and back-up staff.

4. Dealing with degrees of motivation and involvement of children, teen staff and back-up staff through normal periods of resistance, conflict, stress and undoing.

5. Noting and evaluating indices of change, e.g. children's behavior, comprehension, attendance, teen understanding.

6. Understanding the differences of learning and values that are expressed and contrasted in life experiences in the Soviet Union and that of the United States.

Developing Group Leadership

A job description was developed and distributed to Soviet teens at the Center, public high schools, and day schools, as well as through personal contacts. Teens applied for the position and were selected in a thorough employment process which included a personnel interview as well as use of references. Eleven teens were selected, 5 males and 6 females ages 14-16, who by and large are very bright, eager and conscientious young people bringing many skills to the group. Back-up leaders were mainly adult professionals, e.g. educators, graduate students and Soviet immigrant professional staff who had general group experience skills. The project Coordinator had extensive group-work skills and experience. Weekly training meetings settled into working with teen-children's group issues in addition to focussing on the needs and concerns of teens themselves, the life of their group and the development of their understanding and knowledge. As had been indicated earlier, teens would be both clients and providers. It became clear that the teens needed active role models. The direct work of back-up staff with teens, contacts with families and trouble-shooting with children became an important ingredient in the program. It was not meant to supplant

teen leadership, but to provide teens with supportive and active models for learning.

The attendance of teens at training meetings was extremely high with leaders being absent less than five percent of the time, even to the point of attending during a bad snowstorm in February. The teens shared freely and easily comparisons between the Soviet Union and the U.S.A. They were open and eager to learn, though testing limits in typical adolescent ebullience. Various models of training were utilized, such as role-play, guest speakers, active games, audio-visual materials, trips, teen presentation, crafts, etc. No model stood out as more effective than the others. They fully enjoyed an assertive and provocative style of teaching with challenges and free discussion involved.

Skill in group leadership is, of course, essential in providing a positive learning climate. Active involvement, support limits, and care were important in work with this group. The effectiveness of the social group work model of training was most helpful in the overall area of staff development.

The value and potential of teens as leaders have been demonstrated in the program. Professional support is an important ingredient in their unfolding and growth.

Soviet Immigrant Children

In the initial phase of the program, a number of meetings and community contacts were established. During advisory committee meetings it was decided that publicity would be carried primarily through the schools and community and personal contacts. If necessary, visits to individual homes would be made to explain the program. Information on the program was distributed to the Jewish Family and Children's Service, Jewish day schools and public schools. Follow-ups were made through phone calls, personal contacts, and then parents' meetings. Meetings were developed for some parents by the bi-

lingual staff of the local school system. At these meetings, parents were informed of the program. Application forms were distributed and answers to questions or problems that they might have were addressed. Meetings were also held with Soviet immigrant parents of children in Jewish day schools. Parents' major concerns about the program were:

1. The provision of a hot meal or snack (the school does not provide a hot lunch program).
2. Transportation arrangements.
3. Curriculum content.
4. Selection of those who were to train the teenagers.

After these concerns were addressed, many parents signed their children up for the program.

Thirty-four children began the program, ages 6-11, 60 percent female, 40 percent male. Additional children joined the groups as the year progressed. Composition of the groups was often dictated pragmatically rather than by a priori criteria. Public and day school children were put into the same groups due to practical time and after-school pickup considerations. Seven groups were established with each of four of the seven led by two teens and one led by a single teen. Five of the groups were single sex and two others were co-ed, more related to the location of the child's school and residence, than by design. Conscious attempts were made to develop the groups as single sex in composition.

In one study, teenagers shared their perceptions of the children with respect to their attendance; relationship with leaders; relationship to each other; enjoyment of activities; and unusual behavior.

The majority of children scored high in the positive range of participation. In relation to unusual behavior, some of the children were indicated to have problems of behavior in the group and at school. The groups were sound diagnostic indicators of problems. Often the training discussions

were focused on understanding such behavior. Interventions were indicated in a number of situations, e.g. home visits or contacts with schools.

This part of the program showed need for more help, as the preparation of both the teen leaders and back-up staff had not been sufficient for expending additional time to reach out to families and community agencies. Children displaying disruptive aggressive behavior were most difficult for the leaders and backup staff. Children who displayed passive and often "peculiar" behavior were most tolerated and developed stronger relationships with groups and leaders. The children and teens spoke both English and Russian during group meetings.

Program Content

Preparatory to the beginning of the children's groups, staff and advisory committee meetings were held to discuss program content. It was decided to focus on those areas of consumer education which have impact on youth as well as adults. Some of the areas were modeled after the successful adult bi-lingual consumer education handbook of our agency.¹ Initially, it was noted that the curriculum would be developed or modeled around units of learning, e.g. education, health care, food, nutrition and the market place. As the program progressed, it was indicated that material could change but the focus would be on those major areas of consumer understanding which are listed above.

The program began with a communication unit. One of the great concerns of the parents was the fear that the children would lose their primary language, Russian. The initial programs began with visits to the Center's Russian language library. The

¹ Brookline, Brighton, Newton Jewish Community Center, Branch of Greater Boston Jewish Community Center, Bi-Lingual Consumer Education Handbook, 1980.

children signed out books. Teens and children shared in story-telling. They stressed the utilization of books in the Russian language at home. During the training session, differences in the library system in the U.S. and Russia were discussed. One teen exclaimed that "In Russia, there is no charge for overdue books; however, if you lose a book you pay double the price." The significance of books in the Jewish tradition was explained. The value of books was stressed. The mechanics of both the Center's library system and other library systems were discussed. In this session, as in all others, information was given and discussions encouraged in Jewish as well as general contexts.

It was in the discussions with the teens to plan activities that deeper feelings were expressed and new understandings and insights were gained by the teen leaders and project workers around the differences between the teens' experience in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. It is important to underscore that the leaders themselves were relative newcomers who had been in the U.S. two or three years and whose first 11-13 years of life had been in the Soviet Union. Their areas of residence were Moscow, Kiev, Odessa and Leningrad. They spoke poignantly and nostalgically about these cities.

All Jewish holidays and customs were observed in the project. For example, the significance of the Tu b'shvat holiday was discussed at one session; how it is observed throughout the world and in Israel. The teens spoke of the custom of tree planting in the Soviet Union. Mock activities were developed with the teens related to the importance of trees and plants. A sample activity was engagement in making trees and paper flowers from newspaper and tissue. Teens and children were involved in a Center-wide Purim carnival, staffing booths and participating in activities. They were also involved in a major project Purim party which involved 125 people,

children, parents, leaders, and staff. Performances in Russian were presented, such as skits, dance, readings and piano recital by groups, children and teens. The local high school Russian class presented a theatrical performance. The mood was joyful and spirited. Parents particularly expressed the wish for continuance of the overall program next year.

Visits to a dentist were programmed as well as trips to the supermarket. A nutritionist from the State shared material with the teens and helped them with the program. A professional in the use of games and activities met with the teen leaders. American holidays and celebrations were discussed. A program commemorating Martin Luther King's birthday was developed.

A study done with the teens in relation to the differences in the consumer education between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. stressed the major discrepancies between the two countries in selection and quantity of food; observance of Jewish holidays and availability of varieties of recreation—"medium" discrepancies in money, transportation and health services—low discrepancies in schools and education, natural holidays, home safety and sport.

The program content was eagerly sought by the teens themselves. Their learning was an ongoing accepted activity. For the children, the utilization of program content and its implementation were different. Working with the child's attention span and the group interaction made very special demands on the leaders. The teen leaders protested sometimes that the activity was boring and that children did not pay attention. Conversely, at times, the teens' enthusiasm and involvement were positively responded to by the children. The teens themselves were absorbed in the teen training experiences, but more ambivalent in their roles with the children. The teaching of this complex skill in program involvement to young leaders must be an ongoing

endeavor. It cannot be done simply, recipe-like, and with even progress; it is an incremental process without prepackaged results.

Contacts With Families' Institution Advisory Committee

The project Coordinator and professional Russian-speaking staff developed ongoing contacts with numbers of people actively involved in the program. Parents' meetings were held at the Center to explain the program and involve families in activity with the children. Advisory committee meetings were held every two months to evaluate the progress of the program and make recommendations. Meetings were held with both public and private school administrators and faculty. The involvement of the local high school Russian class in the Purim celebration was an important program feature of the project.

Evaluation materials need to be developed with communal participants in relation to the program. Some preliminary impression was that an increased involvement of parents and community leaders would be of profound benefit for the immigrant community, so that for example a major outing was planned for family and children in early summer. The Purim celebration is evidence of the need for assertive involvement. The real difficulties of parents and children were quickly brought to the surface during the project, demonstrating that follow-up activity on the part of professional staff is essential in such a program.

Needs of Children

The program validated the need of children for wholesome supervised after-school activity. It was helpful for the immigrant child to have the opportunity to learn and communicate with other children in the nuances of language—Russian and English, English or Russian. It was important that the child be exposed to a

Jewish community center where the experience in Jewish group life leads to their development as members of the Jewish community, as well as in the fullest expression of American citizenship.

Other common needs of children were realized, such as nurturance, protection and supervision. Often the child may be a "key child"² coming home to an empty apartment, in some cases, without supervision until the parents come home from work. In the U.S.S.R., such an experience was relatively unknown.

Needs of Teens

The program targeted real needs of the adolescent immigrant. It provided them with an opportunity of real work with real pay and real responsibilities. It was an initial employment experience in the transition to adulthood. It provided them with the opportunity to feel confident and positive about themselves as bearers of knowledge and caretakers of their society, responsible to the young and culture mediators with the old. It developed an esprit de corps, good feelings, about their capacity to understand and interpret their adjustments to a new culture, with an opportunity to ventilate their struggle and progress in a socially acceptable arena. It brought them closer to understanding and caring about themselves and their Jewish identification. It enabled them to find real status in the eyes of their peers and family. It enabled them to challenge, successfully confront and accept limits of authority vested in the adult world and society. It enabled them to share feelings about themselves and reminisce about their lives within the context of a supportive group. It also brought attention to issues of their own individual concerns, e.g. one youngster's concern about size and power. Three out of five of the male teen leaders were members

² Michael Rutter, *Changing Youth in a Changing Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

of the karate class at the Center. Counseling around school concerns, peer concerns, camps and Jewish knowledge was provided. This group of teens were astonishingly intelligent, conversant and sophisticated. They represent the essence of the quality of the future of the Jewish community. They and others should continue to be nourished in significant caretaking community service functions.

A brief vignette from a teen who had interviewed the Center Director for a paper in her English class is informative:

The paper was on the Function of the Jewish Community Center. As the Director was walking along with her looking at the activity in the building, she asked what kinds of difficulties and problems the Jewish Community Center has. The Director answered that the problems are the same kind as most agencies have—budget, space, society. She wrote "Now we came into the huge room with modern-fast music and I saw older people who were dancing, as fast as teenagers do. I was rather surprised because the older people in Russia not only look old, but feel old too. They don't enjoy themselves as much as older people do here and they don't have such a good time. The next thing the Director showed me was the gym. It was huge—like three school gyms put together. Jewish boys were playing basketball there. It looked like they were enjoying themselves."

Evaluation and Conclusions

1. The program is viable, but needs a longer demonstration experience—3 years—than the single year reported here.

2. Selecting teens as leaders and employees represents a sound agency policy. Immigrant leaders are particularly suited to work effectively with immigrant children. Cultural experience and language are essential variables.

3. More, not less, supervision is essential for teen leaders.

4. Separate training in supervision and development of back-up leaders in the group work method are essential.

5. The program is effective in transmitting Jewish education, knowledge, and values.

6. Increased help with problematic children including reach out and follow-up is indicated.

7. Increased contact with parents and community schools are also to be noted.

8. Increased usage of cultural resources, trips and museums are demonstrably useful.

9. An intensive month or two-month training and orientation period preparatory to the work with groups is clearly beneficial.