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Centre for Community
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Stuck in the middle: what can youth development programmes do for the 1.5-generation Asian immigrants in Aotearoa New Zealand?

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The challenge

1.5-generation Asian immigrants often feel “suspended in-between” cultures, navigating unique identity and adjustment issues. They experience dual realities and entangled belongingness, being neither fully Asian nor fully Western.

In the middle of being an Asian and Western ...

I would describe myself as suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian; embedded in the West yet always partially disengaged from it; disembodied from Asia yet somehow enduringly attached to it emotionally and historically. I wish to hold onto this hybrid in betweenness not because it is a comfortable position to be in, but because its very ambivalence is a discourse of cultural permeability and vulnerability which is a necessary condition for living together-in-difference

(Ang, 2001, p.194)

The above quote depicts the unique challenges Asian migrants face, particularly those who belong to 1.5-generation Asian immigrants. As can be seen from the quote, the experience of being ‘suspended in-between’ creates strong hybridity, an experience of living dual realities (cultures, languages and identities) and entangled belongingness, without the ability to achieve none completely – neither Asian nor Western.

This group of immigrants is culturally somewhere between home and the host country, and the majority and minority are in the host country (Roh & Chang, 2020). This in-betweenness presents the 1.5 generation with unique migration-related identity and adjustment issues.

1.5-generation Asian immigrants and Aotearoa New Zealand

Understanding the unique experiences of 1.5-generation Asian immigrants and developing effective strategies to support their integration and participation within the broader community have multiple significances for Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa). Within its multicultural context, 1.5-generation Asian migrants emerge as a pivotal subset. While Asians are the current largest ethnic migrant group in the country, they are predicted to grow significantly, reaching 1.16 million by 2028 and between 1.44 and 1.77 million by 2043. In addition, 1.5 generation Asian immigrants in Aotearoa are those who were born in an Asian country and relocated to Aotearoa during their formative years, typically between the ages of six and twelve, a crucial developmental period which is also referred to as “pre-adolescence” (Kim & Agee, 2019; Lessard-Phillips & Li, 2017). This age range is significant as it coincides with the commencement of formal education, a pivotal period in most individuals’ cultural attachments and identity. However, few studies have been done on this group in Aotearoa. Another reason the experience of 1.5-generation Asian immigrants matters in Aotearoa relates to its aim for a socially cohesive country and its commitment to inclusion. Aotearoa has ratified several international conventions founded on eliminating discrimination and protecting rights, and it has introduced policy frameworks to ensure the equality of people’s treatment (Singham, 2006). The focus on equality and reducing disparity among the population is also reflected in the Strategic Direction and Intent for the Office of Ethnic Communities 2016-2020. With the vision, “Flourishing ethnic diversity; thriving Aotearoa” (The Office of ethnic communities, p.9), the office idealises Aotearoa as a culturally, economically and socially thriving nation in which social cohesion and mutual understanding are the norm.

Negotiating the in-betweenness

In the light of the literature, factors influencing 1.5 Asian immigrants' negotiation of their in-betweenness around three key dimensions: identity formation, goal setting/formation of aspirations and community engagement are explored below. The findings will guide youth development programmes in Aotearoa.

Family and schools

Family and school contexts are critical for identity formation, goal setting and community engagement. Adolescents spend a substantial amount of time in these spaces. Through the continuous interactions between the culture of origin and destination, these spaces also become crucial in negotiating the 'in-between' or hybrid identity of the 1.5 generation (Bartley, 2010; Roh & Chang, 2020). At home, parents facilitate the exploration of ethnic identity through cultural influence from their country of origin. For instance, when Asian immigrant parents move to Western nations, they prioritise upholding traditional family values like strong bonds and fulfilling responsibilities, placing even greater importance on these values while living abroad (Dizon et al., 2021; Kim & Agee, 2019; Roh & Chang, 2020). Such values may conflict with the Western values emphasised in schools, making the development of identity formation a challenging process and leaving them stuck between the two cultures (Bartley & Spoonley, 2008).

An adolescent's home and educational setting also influences their future aspirations. Consider Ip and Hsu's (2006) explanation of the prevalent expectations within Taiwanese culture, particularly for young men aiming for financial stability and social respectability after tertiary education. These cultural expectations significantly shape Taiwanese aspirations. Wu's (2022) observation of how schools as multicultural spaces could provide essential platforms for children, particularly immigrants, to develop their dreams and life plans that differ from their family values and culture. Wu believes diverse social groups with unique backgrounds can cultivate capacities for various aspirations and goals within educational spaces.

Racial injustice and discrimination

Encounters with racism and discrimination are influential in shaping adolescent ethnic identity. The experiences of discrimination affect 1.5 generations' sense of belonging, making them feel excluded in their home and host countries. Similarly, the 'model minority' stereotype significantly impacts the aspirations and goal-setting behaviours of 1.5-generation Asian immigrants. This stereotype imposes immense pressure, portraying them as highly successful and influencing their pursuit of goals. The pressure to conform to predetermined success ideals imposed by societal expectations further emphasises the impact of family dynamics and societal perceptions on the aspirations of 1.5-generation Asian immigrants (Tong & Harris, 2021).

Additionally, the pressure of preserving heritage languages creates a language barrier, limiting effective communication and participation in community activities and hindering their ability to integrate and engage fully in the host community. The cultural indifference (non-white status) creates a noticeable social divide between this demographic and the predominant population (Bartley, 2010). This divide often leads to exclusive friendships, primarily within similar ethnic or immigrant groups, showing a preference for familiarity and shared experiences (Endo, 2016; Kim et al., 2003). Experiences of exclusion bring emotional challenges (Wang & Collins, 2016) that may impact psychological well-being.

What can the youth development programmes do?

The findings from the study highlight the factors influencing the positive development of a vital youth cohort in Aotearoa. It also demonstrates the risks associated with discrimination and exclusion in achieving social cohesiveness for 1.5-generation migrants. Youth programmes can be key to positive youth development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Programmes taking this approach to mitigate the potential racial injustice and discrimination faced by 1.5 Asian migrants might adopt a socially just approach. Such an approach offers researchers, youth workers, policymakers, and youth an alternative lens to examine social problems (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This approach focuses on two main aspects. First, it attempts to understand better the daily needs and problems confronting youth while acknowledging that societal factors affect their psychological and mental well-being. Two, it offers young people opportunities to heal from the impact of the hostile and challenging environment. To achieve these, youth development programmes can:

Engage youth in social acts

To understand the daily needs and lived experiences of youth migrants, they can be provided opportunities to explore and express social issues by forming alliances and educating peers and adults through play activities (e.g. role play and concerts) (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Play encourages relationships and conversations among people of various ages and cultures (Langham, 2020). Within such acts, intercultural contacts between youth must occur where cultural differences are respected, and diversity is accommodated reasonably (Sibley & Ward, 2013). This allows immigrants to keep their traditional cultural heritage and identity while contributing equitably to the larger community.

Offer safe and brave spaces

To support youth in healing the psychological and mental stress caused by experiences of discrimination, racism and exclusion, they can be provided with supportive and inclusive spaces within youth education spaces. These can be physical meeting spaces where young people from the same culture meet and share experiences without being judged (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Such spaces can also be classroom settings that allow youth to negotiate their differences and challenge oppression safely (Boni, 2018). Those spaces are also culturally safe and incorporate culturally responsive approaches (Heckenberg, 2020).

Participatory design research

To account for the unique in-betweenness of the 1.5 Asian migrants, youth programmes can prioritise participatory research in collaboration with these youth, their parents, schools, government agencies, community organisations and cultural groups. Such partnerships can bridge cultural differences, support young individuals' aspirations and foster inclusive environments honouring diverse cultural backgrounds. In participatory research, 1.5 Asian migrants and their parents must be active co-design partners. This way, their lived experiences could be validated and respected (Bowler et al., 2021). Within the process, the 1.5 Asian migrants must be seen as resourceful rather than problems to be fixed. Young people believe that by listening to their aspirations and keeping them at the centre of programmes about them, teachers and communities could help them reach their future goals (Te Rourou, Vodafone Aotearoa Foundation, 2022). Outcomes from these programmes can be used as the basis for decision-making about 1.5 Asian migrants and designing tailored these adolescents from making meaningful friendships and participating in the community. Tailoring programmes to accommodate the unique needs and experiences of 1.5-generation Asian immigrants resonates with the overarching objective of the Youth Plan, amplifying the influence and involvement of young individuals in decision-making processes and contributing positively to the social fabric of Aotearoa.

Recommendations for youth development programs

Promote cultural integration:

- Facilitate activities that encourage intercultural interactions and understanding for staff and youth.
- Organise cultural events.

Create safe and inclusive spaces:

- Establish physical and psychological support spaces for sharing.

Support identity formation:

- Provide workshops on cultural identity and heritage.
- Engage families and programs to bridge cultural values and identity.

Address racism and discrimination:

- Implement anti-racism training and workshops for staff.
- Create support networks for youth experiencing discrimination

Foster community engagement:

- Develop community service and volunteer initiatives that include 1.5-generation immigrants.
- Encourage participation and local governance and community decision-making.

Enhance language support:

- Access and provide language resources for maintaining heritage languages for staff.
- Building opportunities for youth to practice English language during programmes for better integration.

Implement participatory design:

- Involve youth, parents, and community members in the design of programmes.
- Use participatory research methods to ensure programs meet the unique needs of 1.5-generation immigrants.

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