

Halifax refugee students - the troubles continue

by Kevin Charles Little

'Boat-people' who have left their Asian homelands to come to Canada have been living in Canada now for up to three years. The difficulties these refugees have in integrating into Canadian society are no doubt plentiful. In Halifax, the education system has been trying to help refugee students overcome the most fundamental problem, that of the English language.

How can Nova Scotia's education system be fair to a group of students who do exceptionally well in most subjects, but are cut off from attending university because they are behind their peers in one fundamental subject?

Through interviews with the 23 refugee students at Queen Elizabeth High School in Halifax, their teachers, and administrators at Dalhousie, I gained some insight into the complexities faced by refugee students trying to find their way in a school system not yet equipped to allow them access to university.

Many of the students, who wish to remain anonymous to protect relatives still in their native country, came in overcrowded boats. Most had to pay up to \$1200 to make guards look the other way. Once aboard the ship, one youth spoke of being stopped by pirate ships twenty-two times.

The students range between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. They have part time or full time jobs and work sixteen hours a day on their school work. They also live on their own for the most part, with their brothers and sisters.

The biggest barrier to students trying to integrate into Canadian society is language, a situation that is not only an impediment to academic progress but also very exasperating.

This is what our school systems face now - teaching English to students who know little or none at a grade level where their natural class-mates can be eight or nine years ahead in ability.

When students arrive in Can-

ada they are placed in a grade level appropriate to their knowledge of English, their maturity and last completed year of school.

Most of these students live independently, without parents. Since they have problems with English, most of these students take mainly science courses. They study about 16 hours a day and marks range from the mid-eighties to ninety-nines.

The students are frustrated and disheartened in constantly attempting a course that is years ahead of them. Compared to science, English is extremely difficult to grasp as the prerequisite is years of practise and writing development.

A program called ESL (English as a Second Language) has been implemented to help these students work towards a better understanding of English.

Starting with the students at their current level, their progress has been quite amazing. As Alan McDermaid, a Queen Elizabeth High School teacher involved in the ESL program, said, "These are very bright kids we have here. When many of them fled their countries they were the top students there too."

However, ESL is not an accredited English course but an extra-help workshop and therein lies the controversy surrounding the program. A student who takes ESL receives no credit for the course. Meanwhile, the student cannot pass the required regular English course, which is needed in order to enter university.

A proposal by the Public School system would make ESL an accredited English course for students who have been involved in the school system for three years or less. The Public School system is upset because the students are bright, and are being held back by

what Bernard Conrad, co-ordinator of ESL at Queen Elizabeth, called "Governments who are dragging their feet."

Both McDermaid and Conrad would like to see ESL made the equivalent of a grade twelve academic English course.

When the students face grade twelve English, a course which presupposes a certain degree of knowledge, the students are lost and make little headway. This is another reason why McDermaid is promoting the accreditation of ESL. "When these students see their progress they are given more incentive to work than if they are constantly being frustrated in the regular English course."

Dr. W.D. Courrier, who works in Dalhousie's Registrar's office, questioned the feasibility of the proposal. "If these students can't pass grade twelve academic English how are they going to cope with an English course at Dalhousie?", he asked. However, said Conrad, it was up to Dalhousie and other universities to offer a course just as challenging. Conrad said, "If we (the Public School system) can offer a course which requires a lot of time on our part they too can offer something on their end." He suggested the universities offer a course to follow the level of ability in the ESL program.

Ted Marriott, Dean of Student Services at Dalhousie, was not aware of the seriousness of the situation. Not many of the students have come to the university yet, but more students will be facing graduating from high school shortly.

Marriott was hesitant about "quickie" solutions. He felt employers would be prejudiced against students who graduate with a specialized English course, while others take the standard course. He said he didn't want to give them "the

kiss of death". Dean Marriott expressed interest in sitting down with representatives from all three sides: the government, the Public School system and the Universities, to iron out the problem.

Dr. John Orkar, the International Student Coordinator at Dalhousie, said he has rarely seen a refugee come into his office, as he deals mostly with students who came to Canada specifically to study. He is, however, very open to helping the refugee students.

Students who come here to study do not face the same problems with English because it is taught in the school system in their countries, Orkar said.

Mickey Woodward, who heads the public school system on behalf of the government, was almost totally unaware of the problem. Somewhat reluctant to the suggestions of the Public School system, Woodward worried about "lowering the standards" of English taught by the school system. He also said, "I wouldn't want to be the one who tells a Canadian kid he wasn't qualified for his grade twelve certificate and give it to another kid, with the same ability in English, from another country."

He expressed confidence that with immersion into every day school life the students would eventually gain a working knowledge of English. Woodward said the Nova Scotia government would be pleased to discuss the situation with the Public School system.

The administrators responsible for Nova Scotia's education system appear willing to find a solution to the situation. However, as of yet little communication appears to be taking place. Meanwhile, the 23 refugee students at QEH are accepting of the situation but are concerned and uncertain of their future.

Student representatives ask for 10% increase

Atul Sharma, the appointed student Board of Governors representative, received the support of Council in recommending a 10 percent tuition increase to the Board of Governors. The Board is examining a proposal to raise tuition 15 percent.

Sharma reported that his group, organized to study numerous reports and make an independent proposal, found students could only afford a 6 percent increase even though the Board of Governors was looking at a figure more than twice that. However, the Financial Committee for Tuition decided to compromise and reached the 10 percent figure, stating they would not stand for an increase of more. A report by the committee was presented to the Board of Governors on April 8th.

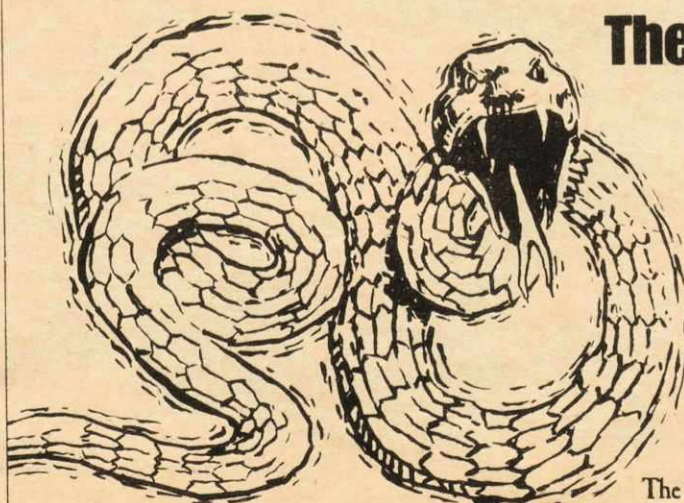
Council support of Sharma's plan was unanimous.

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