

School Based Program in Addressing Social Cost of Migration and Setting Up Batang Atikha Youth Savers Club

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Romlowel Villanueva, a son of a seafarer shared that the reason why he joined the Batang Atikha Savers Club (BASC youth savers club) was because his friends were members but he realized as he participated in the various workshops and play shops that it made him a better person. The various activities of BASC served as eye opener for him to realize the hardships that his father is going through as a seafarer. His savings also was able to help his family pay their monthly due for the house when the remittance of his father was delayed. "Dapat po ay mahalín nila ang kanilang mga magulang dahil sakripisyo talaga ang magtrabaho sa abroad, hindi ito madali dahil malalayo sila sa kanilang pamilya pero ginagawa pa rin nila para sa kinabukasan namin. (They (children of migrants) have to love their parents because working abroad is a lot of sacrifice and it is not easy since they are far from their loved ones, and our parents are doing this for our future)", was Romlowel's advise to other children of migrants and seafarers.

"Facilitating the school-based Atikha program proved to be such an eye-opener for me. I never really thought of it before, but I never thought there was a need to pay much attention to children of OFW workers and their needs. However, after being with the children for 13 Saturdays, and working with them on the workshop activities, I realized how important it was to address their needs and concerns and have a venue to voice out their thoughts and feelings about absentee parents, abusive guardians or their own personal conflicts. It was heartwarming to listen to the children speak about their experiences, as well as their hopes and dreams as they went through the different modules in the program. I learned a lot of things and it made me understand them more, and consequently, it also paved the way for a special kind of closeness, bonding and friendship that would be hard to establish in a classroom setting where one is limited to the time and subject matter allotted. It also was a big responsibility, but teachers are used to that. I found myself dedicated and committed as the school based coordinator. In my heart I developed a deeper empathy to the children of OFWs and because of that I was even mobilized by Atikha in conducting trainers' training in the Province of Cavite in order to replicate the special program for the OFW children in the said area." - Bernadette Daquil, Teacher

Atikha has been working with the children of migrants for more than 15 years. Being a community based NGO, we are witness to the issues, heartaches and challenges of the children left behind. In our work with them we were able to identify their problems and concerns and have developed various modules, play shops, workshops, and other creative learning activities to be able to help them verbalize and process their feelings and be able to cope with separation.

Atikha has identified the following priority themes in working with the children of migrant workers: 1) developing awareness on migration realities; 2) bridging communication gap; 3) instilling savings consciousness; 4) promoting the importance of education and setting of goals; 5) fostering gender sensitivity; and 6) promoting peer counseling.

Developing awareness on migration realities

Most children of migrant workers are unaware of the living and working conditions of their parents abroad. They know that their parents are working as household service workers, nurses, caregivers or seafarers. But they do not have the slightest idea of the difficulties that their parents are confronted with.

Most of the children even have the impression that their parents are living a life of luxury abroad. Their parents present only the 'positive picture' and do not tell them the problems, stories of discrimination, and other difficulties they have to cope with. Stories related and pictures sent show images of their parents in beautiful homes, riding expensive cars, partying with friends, and visiting beautiful places. Thus, many children grow up resentful that they were "abandoned" to a difficult life in the Philippines while their parents enjoy the beautiful life

abroad. Some of the children's anti-social behaviors like drug addiction or dropping out of school are deemed by people as signs of rebellion for being left behind by their parents.

Atikha has designed series of modules for children of migrants and integrated them into a Migration Realities Seminar. The seminar uses various creative forms like games, role play, art workshop, and other activities that children enjoy doing. It has given the children a balanced perspective of migration and made them appreciative of their parents' sacrifice and hard work.

Atikha is of the belief that children, no matter how young, should be provided with accurate information about their family situation. Awareness of the real situation of their parents abroad helps children cope with separation and makes them more responsible in doing their part to facilitate the return of their parents the soonest time possible.

Bridging the Communication Gap

Migrant workers usually do not tell their problems to their families because they do not want them to worry about their situations. Likewise, children, oftentimes, do not tell their parents about their problems because of the same reason. Both parties communicate but leave out important emotional details of their lives. Oftentimes, communication between them is reduced to financial matters, toys, and gifts that will be sent from abroad or bought from the money sent home.

The advent of advanced technology, cheaper and faster access to communication however, does not guarantee that the gap between parents and children will be bridged. There are people who spend hours talking over the phone about how the remittance should be spent or nagging children what to do or not to do. It is neither the frequency nor the length of communication but the quality of communication between parents and their children that really matters.

Atikha has developed modules that address the communication gap between children and their parents. Workshops entitled "Family Constellation" measures how close or distant the relationships are among members of a family. "Speed Dial", a game which shows the frequently called cell phone numbers, provides further insights on the quality of communication. There are cases in Family Constellation where the OFW parents are drawn by their children at the back of the page, an illustration how extremely distant relationships can be.

Communication is important in nurturing the relationship between parents and children. Children should be encouraged to share their feelings with their parents, no matter how difficult or hurting this might be. They should also be encouraged to share their everyday triumphs as well. Atikha encourages children to write to their parents because it enables them to share more important and emotional details of their lives.

Instilling savings consciousness

Migrants who are mothers feel guilty for leaving their children. To alleviate such feeling, oftentimes, they resort to buying consumer items for their children. They pamper their children with material things as an expression of their love for them. However, it develops consumerism among the children. Worst, children begin to equate their relationship with their parents with material things that their parents buy for them.

The monthly remittance becomes the symbol of their parents' love and affection for them. And since remittances are equated with love and affection, the demands of children for remittances become unending. From expensive toys, cell phones, and gadgets, they begin to ask for higher allowances, expensive birthday parties and more. This, in the long term, breeds dependency on the earnings of overseas Filipinos. Some children grow up expecting their parents abroad to pay for their education, weddings, and upkeep of their grandchildren.

To counter the growing consumerism and discourage dependency among children of overseas Filipinos, Atikha has organized the Batang Atikha Savers Club (BASC) which is an organization of youth savers. In the BASC, wise use and saving money are promoted among children.

Atikha has also developed a young entrepreneurship seminar which teaches the children how to earn from arts and crafts. The earnings they earn from their crafts are placed in their savings.

Promoting the importance of education and setting of goals

Among children of migrants, a growing disinterest in attaining higher education is observed. Education is being valued less. It is common to hear children comparing the income of their mother, a household service worker in Italy to college graduates who are locally employed.

Such is an irony because most migrants work abroad to ensure the education of their children. An Atikha study reveals that about 25.42% of migrant's income is spent on education of children (Dizon-Anonuevo & Anonuevo, 2002). In some of the communities in Batangas, some children of OFWs are even unable to finish high school. Further, a number of children stopped studying because their parents have brought them along abroad, before they turn 18 years old. There are cases that they are also forced to work as household service workers.

Migration of parents is often planned as a temporary measure to save enough money. However, due to lack of financial planning and goal setting of the whole family, the initial plan to work abroad for three to five years is easily stretched to 15-20 years. Goal setting could have prevented the overseas Filipinos and their children from spending the productive years of their lives apart from each other.

Atikha conducts a module on Goal Setting for both the children and OFWs. The module emphasizes that whether they will be working in the Philippines or will be with their parents abroad, they will be better off with a good education. A good education ensures that children will be migrating out of their own choice and not out of necessity.

Fostering gender sensitivity

The feminization of migration and the inability of men to assume the nurturing role in the family have placed a lot of responsibility especially on female children of migrants. Some are robbed of their youth and are forced to grow up and fulfill the role of the mother in the family. In extreme cases, there are daughters who have been sexually abused by their own fathers.

Bringing awareness about equality of men and women is a tough job. There is resistance from adults especially from the male members of the family brought about by years of socialization that reinforces the 'superiority' of men. Atikha has tried to reach out to the husbands and fathers. (Atikha partners with Provincial Social Welfare who conducts gender sensitivity to fathers through the ERPAT program)

Atikha conducts gender sensitivity training workshops among children of overseas Filipinos. Such training seeks to make them aware of gender stereotypes and enables them to become major influences in making their families sensitive to gender roles.

Promoting peer counseling

We have observed that children of overseas Filipinos usually confide, not to their relatives, but to their peers. It is thus important that children of the overseas Filipinos have peers whom they can talk to and influence them in positive ways. This is the reason why peer counseling is part of our capacity building seminars. The children need to be trained to be good listeners and to help other children in similar situation. Peer counseling teaches them to help others to express their emotions, verbalize their problems, and make the right decisions.

Training in peer counseling does not only provide participants the knowledge and skills. At times, it also provides them a venue to share their own problems and ventilate their pent-up emotions.

Reaching More Children of Migrants Through Teachers Training Program

We are receiving a lot of requests to conduct seminars for the children left behind and faced with limited staff and resources we thought it would be good if we can train others specially the teachers in conducting the various activities that we are doing. We developed teachers training manual “ **Children’s Response to the Challenge of Migration: Teachers Training Manual on Migration Realities and Capacity Building for Children of Overseas Filipinos**”. The manual included the various modules and also the reference materials that Atikha has developed through years of work abroad. Atikha also designed a 5-day teachers training program to teachers who will manage the program in schools with high concentration of children of overseas Filipinos. EC-UN JMDI provided assistance to conduct teachers training to 69 teachers in Batangas and Pampanga who will manage the school based program addressing the social cost of migration on the children left behind.

The schools sign a Memorandum of Agreement with Atikha committing themselves to initiate the program for children of overseas Filipinos after the training program. Atikha visits the schools and monitor and mentor them after the seminar. Atikha has already trained 120 teachers in Batangas, Laguna, Cavite and Pampanga and we have 40 partner schools in these provinces. Our partner schools have a population of 20% to as high as 80% of children of overseas workers.