

Factors Affecting Third Culture Kids' (TCKs) Transition

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ABSTRACT

As the number of people moving abroad increases, enrollment in international schools ensue and Third Culture Kids (TCKs) transition becomes challenging for both the student and the school. The programs implemented, or lack thereof, are imperative to the successful transition of TCKs into their new, diverse, multicultural environment. Research has been written on the positive effects and challenges faced by TCKs' transient lifestyle. Although international mobility can expose students to unique experiences, it can also prove to be stressful for children, especially during their formative years.

This paper addresses two factors affecting TCKs' transition - programs and counselor - and concludes with a model of a transition support program that may assist international schools in addressing the challenges accompanied by TCKs' transition into international schools.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids (TCKs); Expatriates; International Schools; Transition Programs; Counselors

INTRODUCTION

There has been a rapid increase in the number of families moving from their home country to foreign countries due to employment, education, or military assignment; these global nomads are often called expatriates, or expats. During the 2006-2007 academic school year, it was estimated that about 273,000 students were enrolled in one of the 520 identified international elementary and secondary schools in 153 countries (International Schools Services 2007). The children who accompany their parents or guardians on the global excursion are called Third Culture Kids (TCKs). The educational need of TCKs becomes apparent and the international schools that TCKs attend affect their transition into the multinational arena, in particular, international schools (Bates, 2013).

International schools' populations are characterized by (a) multinational composition, (b) high student turnover due to parents' employment, (c) students will not complete their education in the country in which the international school is located, and (d) students' cultural development will be influenced by the culture of the host country (Langford, 2012). Therefore, it is imperative that international schools have, in place, programs that will assist TCKs' transition into their culturally rich, diverse environments.

This article is a review of the literature of factors affecting the transition of TCKs' transition programs and counselors.

Third Culture Kids

In 1963, the Useems pioneered the research on third culture kids (TCKs) by coining the term third culture kid (Fail et al., 2004). However, other researchers have come along to provide a concise definition of TCKs, such as Pollock's definition (Pollock et al., 1999):

An individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience (as cited in Fail et al., 2004).

As Pollock's definition denotes, TCKs develop a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any element. The development of relationships is affected by a TCK's transient lifestyle because it becomes "too difficult to formulate solid and lasting relationships because there is an internal desire or restlessness to 'change the scene' every few years" (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2003, p. 165-6). A TCK's mobile lifestyle may challenge their establishment of relationships during their adult life (McLachlan, 2007). The challenges and issues faced by TCKs have resulted in research of the third culture phenomenon.

Although there are benefits to living overseas, there have been studies reporting issues and problems faced by TCKs (Ahmed, 1999; Fail et al., 2004; Reeves, 2006). For example, Pollock and Van Reken (2001) claim that students transitioning from schools and countries during their adolescent years is difficult for children during their stage of personal and cultural development. Pollock and Van Reken's research echoed McCraig (1996) and Eakin (1998) that moving during teenage years can cause challenges for children (Reeves, 2006). Therefore, the challenges of managing transience by international schools must be better understood in light of the challenges faced by TCKs' transitional period.

International Schools

Diversity is an inherent characteristic of international schools, not only in learning styles, but in cultural identification. There are various types of international schools; consequently, there have been several attempts at defining such schools. For the purpose of this discussion, international schools, as defined by Chesworth and Dawe (2000), will be considered:

An international school is specifically established to cater to students from a wide variety of cultures who are likely to be internationally mobile as their parents move from country to country. . . the staff also represents a mixture of nationalities. . . Such schools normally teach an international programme of study or one or more national programmes (Hayden, 2006).

This definition will provide a helpful image and a backdrop for the type of international schools that will be at the center of this discussion.

Within the international school setting, there exist a cornucopia of cultures, languages, ethnicities, and educational curriculum. At the center of this multifaceted environment are teachers, administrators, and staff from various backgrounds responsible for educating, guiding, and preparing TCKs. Through the use of successful transitional programs, TCKs do not have to face the daunting challenge of assimilating into a "what may appear to be terrifying at times" foreign environment.

Successful Transitional Programs

The mobility of TCKs is inherent to their lifestyle and a few international schools have implemented such programs in assisting TCKs' transition. Pollock and Van Reken (2009) describe a transition experience as consisting of five stages – involvement, leaving, transition, entering, and involvement. Several studies - and literature - indicate the importance of transition programs for students in international schools (Davis et al., 2010; Langford, 2012; McKillop-Ostrom, 2000; Pollock and Van Reken, 2009; Risch, 2008). Risch revealed that one out of five international schools had no transitional programs and those that did, were established in easing transition to the school. In a subsequent study, Bates (2013) focused on the success or failure of three components - in particular, professional development, orientation and departure programs, and the use of transition teams. The results of this study suggested the lack of transitional program in schools. Consequently, it is crucial that developing a comprehensive support program for students in transition is necessary to the success of TCKs.

Risch (2008) describes a formal transition program as:

A clearly articulated and labeled transition program that provides activities and events to help students and families transition to, within, and from international schools. Such programs also provide them with strategies to manage their transitions (p. 52).

In identifying the effectiveness of transition programs, Bates (2013) investigated three common transitional forms of support for TCKs in international schools - professional development, transition teams, and orientation and departure programs. She concluded that more schools offered orientation programs for arrival than departure and only one school offered transition support teams. However, all three programs were viewed as successful. In summary, Bates' findings were consistent with that of Risch (2008) - "lack of awareness for the problems associated with transition and TCKs" (p. 99). Despite the lack of transition programs for students, current literature suggests that faculty and staff lack the tools necessary to adequately meet the multiple needs of TCKs (Bates, 2013; Inman et al., 2009, Rifkenbary, 1997).

Personnel: Counselors

The need for qualified teachers and staffs - in particular, counselors - has increased due to the increased number of international schools. In a recent exploratory study that examined international school counselors' view of students' mental health needs, their own professional needs, and challenges and opportunities in their relationships with parents, teachers, and principals, it was revealed that coping with cultural transitions, lack of professional development, and lack of knowledge of counselor's professional role, respectively, were the major challenges faced by international school counselors (Inman et al., 2009). The multicultural population indicative of international schools is not relegated solely to international schools. In a recent study of counselors working in the southern United States, school counselors' perception of their multicultural competence was assessed (Mayorga et al., 2013). The results "suggested that adequate emphasis on multicultural and diversity issues is lacking in the educational backgrounds of the participants" (p. 47). The findings above indicate that school counselors must take necessary actions to continuously improve and maintain their multicultural counseling competency.

Case Study: A Working Model

In creating and implementing an effective transitional model for TCKs, the aforementioned factors should be considered. In the event that international schools do not know where or how to start and implement transition programs, the adage, "no need to reinvent the wheel" can be applicable in the current discussion. Carolyn Reeves (2006), a former international school counselor in Germany, in conjunction with her colleagues offers a comprehensive transitions support program for international students and their families.

Reeves' program entails the following components:

- A proactive student involvement group - Ambassador Group – is responsible for planning and organizing ways to help new and leaving students.
- A two-day new family orientation exposes students to the school, faculty, procedures/expectations, extra-curricular activities, and offers an opportunity to meet other students.
- A "Welcomer", who is responsible for taking care of the new student during morning break and lunch and introducing him/her to other students, is assigned to each new student on the first day of school.
- Late arrivers are contacted by an Ambassador or Welcomer and the school counselor tries to meet with him/her before his/her first day of school.
- Ongoing support is also given to the parents of new students.
- A leaving student meets with a counselor before departure, the school counselor makes contact with the new school's counselor to facilitate a smooth transition, and the student is given a "Leaver's Book" which contains messages from other students.
- Leaving parents are given the opportunity to meet with counselors before their departure.

Although Reeves' program is not comprehensive, it can serve as an impetus for international schools interested in adopting transition programs for their students and parents. Reeves advised, "No matter how challenging the situation is for families, with the right support and guidance, attending an international school can be a very positive experience" (p. 34).

CONCLUSION

International schools' multicultural diversity requires a transitional program that will assist TCKs in addressing and adapting to the multicultural impact that is indicative of international schools. Schaetti (1995) posits that the most insightful [international schools] now accept that they cannot educate internationally mobile children without addressing the impacts of that mobility on families (as cited by Mclachlan, 2007). In order to educate international mobile children, well-qualified counselors with significant levels of multicultural competence are necessary in order to ensure educating TCKs. Pendersen (2002) posits that "with the level of multicultural diversity that is facing counselors in today's society, it has become imperative that counselors maintain their own level of multicultural competency throughout their professional lives" (as cited by Mayorga et al., 2013, p. 46). Although Pendersen references counselors, all stakeholders' multicultural competency must continuously be maintained in order to ensure a TCKs transition is seamless and successful.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Antonio Morales is currently a high school teacher for QSI International School located in Shenzhen, China, and is currently working on an Ed.D. at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. His dissertation topic addresses intercultural sensitivity of high school students attending an international school and its relationship to time spent in international school(s), gender, and ethnicity. Email: antonio-morales@szn.qsi.org or amorales1210@yahoo.com

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NOTES