

Raising the Awareness of Shortfalls of Transition Programs in International Schools: From the Perspective of a Third Culture Kid

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Abstract

The rise of globally mobile families has led to an increase in the number of students enrolling at international schools. The students' parents expect these schools to provide a comparable education to what a student would receive in their home or passport country, but as Third Culture Kids, these students may face additional challenges compared with domestic students. This paper, focusing on one student's lived experience, comes from a larger doctoral research project focusing on the lived experience of English speaking Third Culture Kids who attend an international school where although the language of instruction is English, the language spoken by most of the students is not. Schools need to consider how they support Third Culture Kids and what strategies would ensure the transition experience is a positive one. By talking directly to the students, this interpretative phenomenological analysis research will specifically explore how, from Third Culture Kids' perspective, schools have supported their transition into a new international school. The paper discusses themes that international schools should consider when dealing with Third Culture Kids including managing the expectations of both the parents and the students. The paper also offers suggestions an international school could adopt that will improve the experience of a Third Culture Kid before they arrive at the school and after they begin as a student. This paper seeks to raise awareness of the negative experience encountered by Third Culture Kids through the voice of one of those students.

1. Introduction

A *Third Culture Kid* is a child living away from their home country. Their home country is their first culture, and the host country is the second culture. They develop the titular third culture because they no longer feel part of the culture they have left behind, nor the culture they have joined [1] [2] [3]. Third Culture Kids may face academic and social challenges that are profoundly different to those faced by domestic or local students such as situations resulting from cultural or language, differences, or their own personal concerns. It may be something as insignificant as being unable to

identify what is for lunch or as serious as not being aware of the fire safety requirements as the focal student's experiences will illustrate.

Traditionally military or missionary assignment resulted in families moving around the world, but today, the effect of globalization has required many families to become more internationally mobile as multinational organizations have required their employees to relocate around the world [4]. This has led to the increased need for international schools to provide an education in their new country comparable to one they would have received in their home or passport country [4]. Many international schools had their origins in the communities housing expatriate families accompanying the relocated employee. They also developed out of the perceived lack of suitability of local or domestic schools [4].

However, the role of international schools is fast changing towards serving the increasing market of locally based clients [5] [6]. Bryant states that for decades, the international school served as an oasis beyond the local education systems and subsequent societal cultural norms relevant to its location and without significant relevance to the local domestic school systems [7]. With English fast becoming the main language of international business and industry, international schools are providing a form of education proving increasingly attractive to not only the globally mobile expatriate families (for whom such schools were originally founded) but also those local families seeking a competitive edge for their child in the globalized market [4] [8]. This has led to an increase in the number of local or domestic students enrolling at international schools.

In this paper, an English medium, international school means a school offering an educational program, in English, to students of multiple nationalities. The curriculum may be one based on an English-speaking country (British, Australian, Canadian or American) or specific to an English-speaking exam board (International Baccalaureate [IB], Advanced Placement [AP], Cambridge, or Oxford AQA).

For the purpose of this research, I am differentiating between two categories of Third

Culture Kids: firstly, an English-speaking Third Culture Kid attending an English medium international school, and secondly, any other Third Culture Kid attending an international school from a non-English background. As an education professional working internationally, I was able to observe both types of Third Culture Kids. For example, I was part of the leadership team at an English medium School in China where I observed the limitation of the school transition program when no special considerations were given to the English-speaking Third Culture Kids attending the school as weekday boarders (they did not stay at school on weekends). I also observed the transition concerns of Chinese and Bhutanese Third Culture Kids (English was a second language) attending international schools as full-time boarders in Thailand and South Korea. As school leaders, we were either unaware of the issues these students faced or failed to act upon what we perceived to be a problem. Consequently, I believe we failed these students when they needed support. On reflection, there were issues that I traced back to two main concerns: (a) all Third Culture Kids require different considerations, and (b) specifically, acknowledgment that being an English-speaking student attending an English medium school in a foreign culture requires additional consideration.

This paper assumes research surrounding the experience of English speaking Third Culture Kids would be of value to international schools where even though the majority of students attending the school spoke a common language other than English, a percentage of their school population were English speakers and did not initially speak the dominant language of the school population. Schools should be concerned regarding the welfare of all students and even these students who are in the minority deserve consideration and attention to ensure their transition experience is a positive one. After an initial review of the literature, I further determined there were gaps in the professional literature, that of the voice and perspective of the Third Culture Kid.

2. Literature Review

The reviewed literature confirms movement between countries or schools (transition) and the fallout or consequences of these moves are a defining feature of the lives of a Third Culture Kid, requiring them to take on diverse and changing roles in each new environment. Researchers such as Lijadi and van Schalkwyk [9], Fail et al. [10], and Bates [11] conducted research relating to Third Culture Kids, however, their focus was on perceptions as an adult (adults reflecting on their time as a Third Culture Kid up to 50 years prior; teachers reflecting on having Third Culture Kids in

their class, and administrators reflecting on Third Culture Kids in their schools). There is, therefore, a relative gap in the current literature, that of the perspective and voice of the Third Culture Kids themselves [12].

There has been some research on traditional transition programs (between schools or school levels within countries) [13] [14] [15] [16] [17], however there has been no specific research regarding transition programs designed to support English speaking Third Culture Kids as they move in, through and out of an international school where although the language of instruction is English, the dominant language spoken outside of the classroom is that of the local culture.

Many international schools have identified they should have a better understanding of transition programs [11]. Transition programs are run by international schools and designed to support new students joining the school. Existing research demonstrates administrators need to recognize what is needed in a transition program to specifically support Third Culture Kids and subsequently, English speaking Third Culture Kids, to help them settle into the new and diverse environment of their new school [2] [11] [17]. As a result, improved transition programs that consider the needs of the student (and their family) as well as the operational needs of the school, should increase the chance of both a successful transition for the student and the school.

As previously mentioned, this study has evolved as a result of my professional experiences in international schools in the United Arab Emirates, Thailand, China, and South Korea. I have seen English speaking Third Culture Kids transition through the school and as such I have observed, as well as been part of, the transition program delivery experienced by English speaking Third Culture Kids. Where possible I have acknowledged my biases and drawn on them as an educator and researcher with informed opinions regarding the nature of transition programs, the impact on inadequate transition programs and how they could be improved. I have also seen myself as an advocate for Third Culture Kids whilst working in international schools as I myself, as an expatriate teacher, have also had to experience new cultures and workplace environments in my professional roles (I, too, have stood in the school cafeteria and not recognized anything on the lunch menu). I recognize the importance of hearing the previously silenced voice of the Third Culture Kid and listening to what they need to make the transition experience positive for them.

As a researcher I put aside my personal opinions and allowed the data to speak for the participants. It is critical that my analysis of this research project be grounded in the data and not based on any

preconceived ideas that I may already hold regarding the issue of transition programs for English speaking Third Culture Kids at international schools. My undertaking is to promote the value of listening to English speaking Third Culture Kids and applying the learning towards giving these students a better chance at a positive transition experience.

Subsequently, as a result of my professional experience as a school leader and educator, as well as an expatriate worker at international schools, the limited professional literature on this topic and the increase in domestic students attending English medium international schools impacting on the dominant instilled culture of the school, I determined that further research on transition programs for English-speaking Third Culture Kids was worth pursuing.

3. Methodology

The phenomenological research for this project was based on wanting to understand the degree to which international schools have supported English speaking Third Culture Kids through their established transition program by asking the following central research question:

How do English speaking, Third Culture Kids perceive and describe their experience of transition programs at English medium international schools?

Due to the nature of the study the qualitative research strategy, interpretative phenomenological research, was determined to be the most appropriate. This research strategy will allow the Third Culture Kids an opportunity to share their experiences in the context of their transition from one school to another as interpretative phenomenological research (IPA) focuses on how individuals make sense of a major life experience. IPA requires a thorough qualitative analysis of comprehensive personal accounts obtained from participants [18].

The key research tool was semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, the participants' responses were analyzed with the intent of determining a narrative interpretation of the participants' lived experiences.

For this research, the sample was drawn from the group of students who meet the criteria for this study: (a) they are a Third Culture Kid currently attending or have recently attended an international school; (b) their home country is considered western; and (c) they speak English as a native language. Whilst future and additional research may be done focusing on different aspects of transition programs to provide a wider picture of

how transition programs support Third Culture Kids, this research reports in detail about this targeted group of students.

Participants were interviewed twice and asked to reflect on an extract of a short story written by a Third Culture Kid.

To provide the data needed to identify best practices for English medium international schools to include in their transition programs for English speaking Third Culture Kids, the recorded interviews were transcribed, and the data formally organized prior to being broken down for analysis. A narrative account of the researcher's analytic interpretation was determined and verbatim extracts from the participants attached to support the analysis [18]. Cohen et. al., suggest using a narrative style to convey the research findings as it brings the information to life which is important when sharing the lived experiences of the participants [19]. The participants in this research were sharing their story with the researcher so the stories deserve to be told to the wider audience in narrative form rather than reducing their lived experiences to a collection of themes and data for analysis.

This paper discusses the perspective of one student participant from the larger study. This student attended an international school in China and was one of only four English-speaking students at the school. The school was an English medium school; however, Chinese legislation required the school to also teach the Chinese curriculum alongside the British curriculum. As previously discussed, local parents, especially those in China and other nearby Asian countries, recognized the global relevance of learning English and their desire for their children to speak both English and their mother tongue. This led to the increase of hybrid schools in China particularly when the Chinese government did not allow Chinese nationals to attend traditional international schools established to cater for the expatriate demand. Therefore, whilst the school attended by the participant was labelled an international school, it was more accurately a hybrid, designed to meet the growing need of the local community in addition to catering for international students.

Subsequently, the student attended lessons in both English and Chinese. The four English-speaking students attending the school were also boarders at the school from Monday morning to Friday afternoon and all four students shared a room with a Chinese student. These students had been attending the school for six months prior to my arrival at the school and three of them had attended a traditional (expatriate focused) international school in China before attending this school.

Reflecting on the transition experience for this student and their siblings and recognizing the

shortfalls of the school and the leadership team in managing their transition into the school was the catalyst for this doctoral research project.

4. From the Perspective of the Third Culture Kid

To better understand the degree to which international schools supported English speaking Third Culture Kids, the difficulties faced by English speaking Third Culture Kids attending international schools where the dominant language and culture at the school was not English were examined from the perspective of this English-speaking student. The student participated in a series of interviews where they shared their experiences as well as reflected on a short story about someone who had gone through a transition into an international school and commented upon the differences and similarities of the story compared to their experience.

The student at the time of the transition was a teenager attending high school level classes in China. The student had experienced moves and changes in where they lived and where they attended school in the past as a result of their parents' employment. Initially, the idea of an international move held no fear, only excitement because:

"We had already moved within America so I thought it would be like that."

However, the reality of this particular relocation would have nothing in common with the previous local moves. In the lead up to the move whilst the student had feelings of excitement and anticipation, they observed their parents trying to hide feelings of stress and worry. In any relocation, even when parents take into consideration their children's needs, they still have fears or guilt surrounding the their decision to relocate and any potential emotional harm the relocation could have on their children [2]. These feelings were observed by the student and put a damper on the initial positive emotions experienced before the move. The parents did not share their worries with their child instead tried to shield them from any negative thoughts, but the student (and their siblings) picked up on the stress and worry their parents were experiencing.

On arrival in the new country, the student was shocked to realize their big bedroom in their large house with a backyard was now just a memory as their family was now faced with a small two-bedroom apartment. Instead of a bedroom each, the student now shared a room with one sibling and the other sibling made do with a converted office space. The student reflected on the lack of space and loss of privacy:

"I remember I didn't like that very much, because I like having a space I could go to."

The first day at the new school saw the student feeling very anxious, not knowing what to expect. Prior to the first day, the family had been shown around the school, but the guide never spoke with the children, only to the adults, so the questions in the mind of the student were left unanswered. Their first encounter at the school was a whole school assembly. It wasn't unfriendly but it wasn't exactly welcoming either. Being the only students in the school who were not local the siblings encountered blank stares and there were no familiar faces for comfort.

Once in the classroom there were no introductions, just the expectation to 'get on with it'. Their classmates would only speak English in the presence of teachers, so the student felt increasingly isolated. At lunchtime in the school cafeteria, the student only ate rice because they were unfamiliar with the food, and no one would tell them in English what they were eating. Announcements in the classroom were also in the local language. The announcement of a planned fire drill was missed, leading the student to be caught unaware in the shower and getting in trouble for causing the drill to be slow. The student explained:

"Important information, I just kind of had to figure things out which was a bit difficult at times."

Overall, the student described that the experience was "sink or swim" but also "being thrown in the deep end" at the same time. It was hard to make friends because of the language barrier and this meant the student couldn't have a break from home life as the only person they could socialize with was their sibling. Whilst being a twin meant they were quite close to one of their siblings, the student expressed their dismay at only having family to associate with all day at school, at home and even on weekends.

"I had no friends, so I had to hang around my sibling."

As the year went by and the student learned to speak some of the language things began to improve but not enough for the student to honestly believe theirs was not a unique situation. They did not think there was anyone who could understand how they felt. They had never heard of the term Third Culture Kids although they looked for any kind of support group for students like them. The student felt alone and isolated. They summed up their experience in one word.

"Terrifying."

5. Discussion

The following is a discussion of the themes that were derived from the analysis of the student's narrative interpretation of their lived experiences as an English speaking Third Culture Kid at an English medium international school where the dominant language and culture at the school was different to their own. It is proposed that international schools consider these discussion points when planning transition programs for new students from destinations beyond their borders to ensure their transition experience is one that is positive.

The overarching theme of managing expectations has several angles. The school needs to manage the expectations of the parents and students; the student needs to manage their expectations of attending an international school and the parents need to manage their expectations regarding the education an international school can provide and how their child is prepared for the move. The following section considers each of the above angles of expectations.

5.1. Managing Student and Parent Expectations by the School

When a new student enrolls at an English medium international school the school should recognize the limitations of the student in regard to the existing culture at the school. Appropriate support for Third Culture Kids as they transition through schools could reduce the adverse impact of multiple relocations [11]. The school should consider where the student has transitioned from and their history as a Third Culture Kid. Additional support the school can provide will be discussed further in a later section: Suggestions for School Improvement.

The prevailing idea why international schools appear to limit the support provided to English speaking Third Culture Kids stems from the fact because they are an English medium school, and the student is an English speaker, there should be no problems with language. As the core lessons (in most cases) are delivered in English, by English speaking teachers (usually expatriates themselves) the concept of having English speaking students in the class would seem to be a perfect situation); however, as the research has shown this is not always the case. Whilst having a 'rule' that English should be spoken the whole time is great in principle, in reality, as soon as a teacher is absent, the students revert to their local language to the detriment of students who solely speak English. Unfortunately for the English-speaking student, the school cannot impart any consequences for students

who choose not to follow this 'rule' other than a reminder to speak English. Students will always revert to the language they feel most comfortable with and in these situations, it is usually their native language. In a reversal from the 1990's current international school populations can be up to 80% of local children [20] (or in some instances from personal experience closer to 98%). This means, the student habit of reverting to their local language is not going to be something that the school will be able to change in the short term, and this should be recognized and shared with families when new students are transitioning into the school, so they are aware of the possibility of potential issues once the student starts at the school.

5.2. Managing Expectations of the Parents

As previously mentioned, Hayden, et. al. [11] stated parents expect an international school to provide an education that is comparable to one available in their passport/home country. This is not an unreasonable expectation as international schools were originally founded for this purpose [11]. However, expatriate families who have moved to a new country as a result of education, employment or military deployment should recognize that the current globalized market has meant the role of international schooling is continually changing, and what was delivered in the past will not always match what can be delivered now or in the future [6]. International schools now cater for both local and foreign-born students. This may mean a large percentage of the school population may be local. Subsequently, the lunch menu may be predominantly local dishes and holidays and festivals may be based on local religions as well as those expected in a western school. Parents sending their children to international schools in today's globalized society need to understand and recognize that although the school may still provide the academic expectations of a school from their home or passport country, the community of the school may be a blend of western and local cultures and the social atmosphere experienced by their child may not be what they were expecting from an English medium international school.

5.3. Managing Expectations of the Students

There are many variables that a school needs to consider when considering how to manage the experience of the transition of a Third Culture Kid. What is the age of the student? Has the student lived in this country before, or another country other than their passport country? If so, was the dominant language of that country English or another? How involved was the student in selecting the school

they attended? What process was adopted in selecting the school such as research, interviews etc.? What were the emotions of the student relating to the move or transition to a new school? Bates commented how Third Culture Kids had to manage the loss of home, friends, and relationships, as well as their sense of place with each move undertaken [11]. It often falls to the teachers and counsellors at the school to support the Third Culture Kid's emotional wellbeing as they come to terms with the losses they faced during their relocation and transition to the new international school. It is at this time when an effective transition program demonstrates its value to both the school and the English speaking Third Culture Kid. An effective transition program will ensure the student is supported through their transition and any issues relating to them settling in and becoming a valuable member of the school community are addressed before they become a major problem.

As there has been very little documented research from the voice of the student in regard to their transitions to international schools it has been difficult to assess how successful schools have been in managing this expectation from the perspective of the Third Culture Kid. In many situations, it might be assumed, based on the limited research available, that parents have taken the bulk of the responsibility for managing how their student has dealt with their transition. In the analysis of the data from the Third Culture Kid this paper is presenting, their parents managed their expectations for the transition rather than the school.

5.4. Suggestions for School Improvement

There are a number of suggestions that were recommended by the interviewed student as to how an international school with a dominant non-English culture could improve the transition for English-speaking Third Culture Kids. Generally, schools can contribute to assisting families of all Third Culture Kids by providing links to the local expatriate community [2] and school leaders can highlight the diversity of the student body by ensuring the talents and everything the Third Culture Kids have to offer within the community and classroom are recognized, creating an inclusive school culture [11]. More specifically, when we consider transitions for English-speaking Third Culture Kids, the suggestions for improvement can be grouped into two categories, before arrival and after arrival at the international school (before departure from the international school could also be considered, but it is not discussed as part of this paper). Any recommendations for parents in regard to managing their child's expectations are also not included in the scope of this paper.

5.4.1. Before Arrival. Before arrival refers to the time when the parents decide to relocate to a new country as an expatriate up until the day before the student starts at the new international school.

Before a student starts at a new school there is significant paperwork that is required, and consequently numerous emails or letters are sent between the parents and the school. To improve the transition experience, it is recommended that the school also sends at least one email or sends a welcome pack to the student so that the relationship can start before the student even leaves their home or previous country. Even the single piece of correspondence sent directly to the student as opposed to everything being sent to the parents would be well received by the students.

“Also, if I had gotten like a welcome pack or welcome letter or something being, like, this is about the school, this is what it is like socially, this is what it is like academically, this is the food, this is the boarding school... I think that would have helped a lot.”

As well as the welcome letter, the school could send school branded or marketing materials to help welcome the students and make them feel special. A boarding school in South Korea sends reusable luggage tags to boarders, the luggage tags are printed in the same tartan design as the school uniform, giving incoming boarders something special to attach to their luggage and when they arrive at the airport at the other end, having something in common with existing students also arriving for boarding gives a welcoming and inclusive impression. The receipt of this small gift also allows the student receiving it the opportunity to feel recognized as an individual, not an extension of their parent's cheque book. Other suggestions are pens, pencils, water bottles, keyrings, or even small plush animals wearing the school logo.

Students should also be directed to peer created school information such as student made videos and online tours. These types of resources could be made by school councils or student leadership groups and show incoming students what being a student at this international school looks like, from the perspective of another student. Similarly, the incoming student could be paired with an existing student (like the traditional buddy system) but started before the student arrives, providing an opportunity for the incoming student to ask questions or just speak with someone already there. Ideally, the buddy should be another English-speaking student, so the students potentially have things in common to discuss. International schools provide this service to incoming new expatriate teachers with great success so the structure behind such a strategy would not need much tweaking to

make it suitable for students. Often, incoming teachers are invited to join local community or expatriate teacher Facebook sites specific to the area. Students at the school could set up whatever social media sites that are popular with the teenage population and send invites for the incoming students to join offering the opportunity to create some social relationships before arrival in the new country or at the school.

Once the family has relocated (or during an orientation visit to the country) the family (parents and students) should take a tour of the school and meet some of the staff who work there. During the tour the person leading the tour should involve the student in the discussion about the school site rather than direct all information to the parents. This would allow the student to feel as if questions could be asked about the site or attending the school.

“If he would have been like – ‘this is what you can expect’ or ‘this is how the day would go’ or anything like that, information given directly to me, and then letting me ask stupid questions like the food or something like that, I think that could have helped me.”

All questions are valid and students asking should not be given the impression that asking about food at the cafeteria or where to go to find the basketball courts are any less important than the questions their parents are asking about fees and academic transcripts.

5.4.2 After Arrival. After arrival refers to the day the student commences at the school until the day the student leaves the school, either as a graduate or transitioning to another school. Once the student has arrived at the international school there are a number of recommendations the school could consider making so the experience is positive.

On the first day, the student should be introduced to their new classmates and an attempt made at some ice-breaker activities. This will give the new student some points of reference for later conversations.

“I really hate ice-breakers, but like something that would have introduced us, giving us things to talk about, or like, yeah, this person isn’t scary.”

If announcements have to be made in the dominant or native language, there should be translations provided or the message repeated in English, especially announcements that relate to safety or student well-being.

The student should be assigned a buddy and the homeroom or main teacher should follow up with the student and buddy at regular intervals over the first few weeks, not too many times to seem

overbearing, but enough times that the student feels that there is someone available to talk to if things aren’t going too well or if they just have questions that they aren’t able to ask their buddy. This also allows for the teacher to check on the relationship with the buddy. Is this person being supportive or unhelpful and leaving the new student to fend for themselves or making them feel welcome? Even once the student has appeared to have settled in, a teacher or counsellor should make regular check-ins to make sure things are actually alright and it isn’t a façade hiding unresolved issues. Once the student is at school and attending classes, the success of the transition program depends on relationships between students, between student and teacher, and between home and school. If all of the relationships are working and each party has an open communication channel to the other, it is unlikely that the student will have a less than positive transition experience. Open communication will also allow any issues experienced by the student or the parents to raise them without fear.

6. Conclusion

From the data collected from the interviews with the student it was apparent that they had encountered a less than positive transition experience. However, they were able to provide a number of suggestions that international schools could consider implementing in an attempt to improve the existing transition program. It is recognized that some of these recommendations may not be feasible because of budget or other restraints but as a minimum, correspondence with the student before arrival should be made at least once by email or letter. Creation of social media groups for the students to meet online before arrival are also cost free but would have lasting value when relationships forged online assist in making the transition experience less harrowing. There can be no reason why the school cannot make an effort to make the transition a more positive experience.

Overall, there needs to be more awareness of the needs of Third Culture Kids and in particular, English-speaking ones attending international schools where the dominant language and culture is not English. International schools should know who they are, what they need to make their transition a positive one, and how the school can make this happen. Third Culture Kids need to realize they are not alone, and they are not the first person this has happened to. Their transition experience at an international school should not be ‘terrifying’.

7. References

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