Third Culture Kids, their identities, and supports at International Schools
Kanako Suwa  12/15/16
This article examines the multilayered identities of Third Culture Kids at international schools and explores the possible supports and guidance schools can provide for their TCK students.
INTRODUCTION

“Being half Japanese and half Swiss is hard because I feel like I don’t belong in either places... but I’ve accepted that fact now” – Michelle

“Living abroad, there are different ways that your social and cultural norms are affected... Your own customs change, and your view of the world changes, because you have more interaction with the world... You adopt norms from different cultures.” – Lindsey

As is the case with Michelle and Lindsey, two girls with experiences of living outside their passport country, the process of finding a place to belong and negotiating self-identity lies at the core of many Third Culture Kids around the world. This study explores the numerous complicated aspects of being a Third Culture Kid in this highly globalized world and how international schools can support their students in discovering themselves and adapting to the world around them.

Who Are Third Culture Kids?
The term “Third Culture Kids (TCKs)” was first coined by John and Ruth Useem, American sociologists who spent some time in India with their children in the early 1950s, referring to children who accompany their family to a new country and began to create a “third culture” within them. The “third culture” refers to the mix of cultures and values that children began to adopt, a mix between their passport country (the first culture) and the new country (the second culture). In 1989, David Pollock, an American sociologist, developed this definition for Third Culture Kids:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds
relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any.

Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p.13).

Although this is a very broad definition for a label for a group of individuals, it also encompasses a wide array of individuals and gives them all the chance to identify as a Third Culture Kid. The TCK umbrella is a self-identifying umbrella, not an automatic identifier like your race, ethnicity, or religion. Anyone who has lived “abroad” as a child in the sense that they were living outside of their passport country can choose to identify as a TCK, like myself, and even the United States President, Barack Obama.

Many TCKs are the children of expatriates, or families that live outside of their own countries. These expats are often government officials, missionaries, visiting professors, international company workers, and military personnel (Useem & Downie, 2011). Prior to the coinage of the term TCK, this population was also referred to as “military brats”, “missionary kids”, “foreign service kids”, and “corporate brats”. Other labels such as “global nomads”, “global citizens”, “cross-cultural kid”, and “international school students” also refer to more or less the same population of kids. The label TCK brings all of those kids together under the Third Culture Kid umbrella.

**International Schools**

According to the International School Consultancy as of 2014, there are 7,017 international schools around the world, “meeting the needs of 3.5 million students, all using English as the language for learning” (ICEF Monitor, 2014). There are two schools established in 1924 that are considered to be the ‘oldest’ international school: the International School of
Geneva, and the Yokohama International School (Hayden, 2006). International schools then went through a rapid developmental period in the post-war era of the 1950s and the 1960s following the onset of expat lifestyle. Such development was heeded by parents who realised their children were not getting the quality of education they would if they had not moved out of their passport country; this realization led to the solidifying of the purpose of international schools. From there, the history of international schools has been well documented. In 1964, the United States State Department agreed to fund American schools overseas, and the first council of international schools called the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) was established in March of 1965 (Jonitez & Harris, 1991).

There are countless different types of international schools: as long as the school offers a curriculum that is different from the national curriculum of the country, the school can be considered to an international school. Typically, an international school is a private institution that uses English as the main language of instruction. According to Keson (1991), an international school now have students coming from anywhere between seven to seventy countries and offers two or three curricula for its students. Although there is a variety in curriculums, size, student demographics, and of course, location, Blaney (1991) argues that international schools around the world do in fact share common elements such as philosophy, mission, and curriculum. He also points us to UNESCO for a well-formulated philosophy of international schools (p.201) including but not limited to:

- Recognition and respect for the worth of different cultures and nations
- Awareness of the interdependence of all living things, peoples, and nations
- Respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms
Peaceful, cooperative uses of science and technology towards the betterment of global society

The missions of international schools are then established with these fundamental beliefs and values at its core. Taking all of this in, Gerard Renaud (1991) proposes that the “mission of [international] schools is to prepare young people – the decision makers of tomorrow – to live in a complex multicultural society” (p.8).

It is also important to note that in recent years, local children are also accepted into international schools. Murphy (1991) offers the following definition for current international schools:

“International schools serve children of those international organizations and multinational companies…and offer educational opportunities to children of host country nationals who want their children to learn English or who prefer the greater flexibility which an international school offers over the national system” (Hayden, 2006, p.11).

The International School Consultancy also recognizes and supports the change in the student demographics at international schools by stating that 80% of the current international school population comes from local wealthy families wanting quality education for their children, as opposed to 20 years ago when the majority of students at an international school were children of expats (ICEF Monitor, 2014).

**TCKs at International Schools**

TCKs often find themselves students at international schools, and for many, schools tend to serve as a ‘safe space’ that is embedded in a foreign country. Brian Hill (1986), a professor of education in Australia, posits that international school experiences should assist TCKs in
maintaining a positive sense of self while navigating their way through a new environment and
developing critical thinking and communication skills necessary to live in a global environment.
Therefore, it is important for international schools to remain a safe place where TCKs feel like
they belong by providing appropriate support and opportunities for them to explore and develop
their identities in a multicultural context. Grimshaw & Sears (2008) argues that international
schools are able to provide such support because their staff and students are “de-territorialized in
the sense that they [all] operate between cultural boundaries” (p.263). It is common for faculty
members at international schools to be from an outside country, thus creating an environment in
which the school is a “site where adjustment is a constant experience for all sections of the
community” (Sears, 2011, p.77).

There are multiple terms that refer to the same group of people. As mentioned above, the
label “Third Culture Kids” is a self-identifying label, and requires an individual to consciously
identify as a TCK, before others can begin to call them a TCK. Living outside of one’s own
country does not automatically give you the label of TCK. To me, this does not feel as inclusive
of a term as “international school students”, which is a label that applies to anyone that is a
student at an international school. The purpose of this paper is to identify the areas of difficulties
for students going through transnational transitions and to suggest support systems for
international schools for their students. Because previous research uses phrases such as TCKs
and global nomads, I will use the term “international school students” and “TCKs”
interchangeably throughout the paper to refer to any and all students that are at an international
school outside of their passport countries, including students that identify as a Third Culture Kid,
global nomad, and any other similar terms.
LITERATURE REVIEW

TCKs, Identity, and Culture Shock

What makes TCKs distinct from their parents and other adults that experience living in different countries is the age at which they spend outside of their passport countries? As previously mentioned, the definition of TCK proposed by David Pollock in 1989 includes a phrase “significant part of his or her developmental years” in it. This is referring to the years from birth to around 18 years of age, during which an individual’s identity is formed. According to Adler (2012), “psychosocial needs are most profound in adolescence and young adulthood when the people engage in establishing themselves,” (p.317) and multicultural experiences will have a significant effect on forming unique identities for children and young adults.

Another crucial aspect of identity formation that is specific for TCKs is the process of adjusting to the context they are placed in. Many students at international schools are often “trying to develop a sense of personal and cultural identity” (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999, p.59) along with their peers in an unfamiliar context. Fail & Walker (2004) claimed that TCK’s identities are constantly challenged as they move and enter a “different culture where learned behavior may no longer be appropriate or acceptable” (p.323). It is at this point that TCKs readjust their cultural perception and behaviour to be appropriate for the new culture, while keeping their previously learnt behavior in the back of their minds. TCKs therefore are constantly negotiating their self-identity as they move through “one experience of self to another, incorporating here, discarding there, responding dynamically and situationally” (Adler, 2012, p.317) in different cultural contexts, thus creating what John and Ruth Useem called the third culture. It is important to note that this third culture is different for each TCK and continues to develop as they move through different stages of life.
Along with adapting a *third culture* comes the stress of having to adjust and readjust themselves to fit in the new circumstances they are thrown into. This stress is often referred to as *culture shock*, and is commonly experienced at the start of a life in a new place. Weaver (2000) offers three causal explanations: culture shock occurs as a result of “the loss of familiar cues, the breakdown of interpersonal communication, or an identity crisis”.

Pollock and Van Reken (1999) use the term *cultural balance* to refer to the point where we start to internalize the practices, principles, cues, and behaviors we have come to learn and interact with (p.88). We rely on social cues to guide us in interpersonal relations. These social cues differ in culture and situation, so the cues that TCKs used to navigate through life in one country suddenly disappear or change when they move to another location. The cultural balance tips and is no longer in balance. This results in not having the appropriate schema to interact with people in a new place, which then causes interpersonal communication breakdown. Communication breakdown “causes frustration and anxiety” and could be a “source of alienation from others” (Dongfeng, 2012, p.71). This could be a reason for further avoidance of interaction with others, causing delay in smooth transitions. Adler (1991, 1975) believes culture shock to be a normal process in intercultural learning, and TCKs eventually come to incorporate the new norms and behaviours into their already existing cultural knowledge. This integration of cultural and social cues leads back to the idea of *third culture*, one of the few defining characteristic of Third Culture Kids.

The identities of TCKs are complex, diverse, and multi-layered. This constant negotiation of self-identity leads to cases in which what we see doesn’t necessarily tell us who these individuals are. The international school demographic is said to be diverse in race, ethnicity, religion, and other identifying qualities. Bethel & Van Reken (2003) takes this diversity a step
further, using the term *hidden diversity* to describe the “diversity of experience that shapes a person’s life and worldview but is not readily apparent on the outside”.

Eventually, TCKs often reach a final step in their identity development, where they feel confident in the self-identity and the mixture of values, behaviours, customs, and traditions they have adapted from their experiences. Their *cultural balance* is restored. Schaetti (n.d.) talks about the idea of “personal truths” in terms of identity where one establishes their beliefs and values independent of circumstances; yes, they may adapt their behaviour to their changing environment, but their core beliefs remain constant.

**Transitions and Common Challenges**

Just as anything in life comes with advantages and disadvantages, Third Culture Kids have their fair share of benefits and challenges. These challenges arise throughout TCKs’ lives, especially when transitioning is involved. Transitions refer to any time TCKs are put in a different environment from what they are accustomed to. This includes moving away from their passport country for the first time, also known as “first transition”. Transition also refers to when TCKs move from one place to another, or when they move back to their passport country which is also known as “re-entry” (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

It is important to note that, for many TCKs, factors and issues that are commonly considered to be “challenges” are also something that helps them grow as multicultural individuals. For TCKs, a *challenge* is not always a *liability*, or something that brings them down. It is a growth process that creates this distinct group of flexible, resilient, and culturally competent individuals (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). That being said, it is still imperative that educators of TCKs are aware of some of the possible challenges that they face in order to better assist them.


**Sense of “Home”**

One of the most prominent aspects of a lifestyle full of transitions is the concept of “home” for TCKs. This, along with negotiation of self-identity poses as a challenge to many TCKs. A factor that distinguishes TCKs from other high mobility groups of people like immigrants is the idea that after spending a certain amount of time outside of their passport countries, TCKs are usually expected to eventually return there. This sometimes causes identity conflict for TCKs in terms of where they identify as “home”.

In a self-reflection essay of her TCK life titled “Returning to My Parents’ Foreign Home”, Hervey (2011) recalls feeling “like an alien in [her] parents’ home town” (p.165) in the United States, after having lived in Kazakhstan and Chile. Likewise, Russell (2011) states that “moving back to the United States for college proved to be one of the more difficult transitions for” her and that “moving back to [her] country of citizenship proved extremely off-putting” (p.32) in her self exploration paper. Leonora, a 15 year old girl from Brazil, interviewed by Sears (2011) said that “home was ‘where I Live, or, I don’t know --- it’s where I feel comfortable’” (p.80), rather than a specific location. As we can see from these testaments, it is evident that these individuals who identify as TCKs have conflicting feelings of “home”.

Being unsure of “home” is a shared trait among many TCKs. There is a high likelihood the answer to the question “where is your home?” or “where are you from?” will be preceded by an exasperated groan or a sigh when speaking to a TCK. This loss of “home” could be from a number of different reasons; not living in your passport country for a significant amount of time or having any ties to it can remove the patriotic attachment. Experiences in other countries have
surpassed that of the passport country, essentially transferring the feeling of “home” to the outside country.

According to Fail et al (2004), TCKs often identify as coming from their passport country when they are in a foreign country, and identify as coming from overseas when they are in the passport country (p.325). This stems from the worry that because of their experiences abroad, they feel as though they don’t fit into the dominant culture of the passport country anymore. In return, they also do not identify with the dominant culture of their foreign country. This suggests that TCK’s sense of home may have more to do with their relationships and experiences, rather than their geographical locations. They are able to belong in different countries, communities, and places, and have the ability to adjust, integrate, and enjoy being “a part and yet apart” (Downie, 1976) of and from a place (Fail et al, 2004).

**Belonging and Feeling Alone**

It is crucial to keep in mind that although many international school students fall under the umbrella of Third Culture Kids and identify as such, there is a high chance that no two TCKs have had the exact same third culture experiences. That is the beauty of the TCK umbrella; the specifics of their experiences are individually distinctive, and yet this cultural umbrella allows them to find others with the shared experience of living outside of their passport countries.

Yet, TCKs often express the feeling of not *belonging* with others at first. This is reasonable, considering it is difficult to believe that someone who has not experienced the same transitions you have can relate to you. However, Cottrell (2011) found that many international school students aren’t always aware of the existence of the TCK umbrella. Throughout their international school experiences, students find out that although they are not from the same
passport country or have moved around to the same countries as a TCK, they are able to “share, because of the similar life style” (p.66).

Likewise, Van Reken (2011), after receiving letters from fellow TCKs following the publishing of her journal documenting her TCK life, concluded that although the “details in the letters might be different,” the basic story is the same (p.27). While working with David Pollock, a leading researcher in the field of Third Culture Kids, she discovered that a group of TCKs “knew exactly what each other was talking about even though the details were different depending on where [they] were from or had grown up,”(p.29) further proving that the specific circumstances might be different but there are commonalities across the world of TCKs that they share.

Cottrell (2011) also writes that learning about the concept of being a TCK “brings great comfort and self-understanding as it normalizes this identity”, the experiences, and the challenges (p.67). Just like every other adolescent, international school students seek validation for their identity especially given the amount of adjusting and readjusting they had to do in order to establish a sense of self-identity that encompasses the dynamic of their transnational experiences. Pollock’s definition and description of TCKs offered such individuals a place of belonging. They are now able to belong in a group that is not defined by the traditional way of mass identities such as race, ethnicity, or religion, but instead is defined by their unique and yet common lifestyle.

**Losses and Unresolved Grief**

In 2011, Kathleen and Rebecca Gilbert found that much of the TCK research focuses on the positive aspects of being globally mobile individuals, and that an integral part of the TCK experience was lacking attention: the losses TCKs endure in their lives and the unresolved grief.
These losses typically occur when TCKs experience losses during their transitions to their passport country: loss of places, possessions, pets, people, the loss of safety and familiarity. These losses may continue to present TCKs with difficulties in transitions, one of them being the notion of *unresolved grief*.

Grief in this particular context refers to the “internal process of redefining what “normal” means after one has experienced a loss” (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2011, p.27). Unresolved grief typically derives from not having enough time, space, support, and acknowledgement to process and cope with such losses. The lack of acknowledgement and understanding of their losses and grief from those around them is a prominent factor in experiencing unresolved grief. Often times, when returning to their passport countries, family and friends around the TCKs tend to welcome them *home*. Hervey (2011) recalls her experience of moving back to the US; neighbors and friends welcomed her and her family “home”, although she did not consider the US to be her home. Being placed in a situation where she was still processing the loss of familiarity of the place she lived prior to moving back to the US, while those around them assumed she was happy to be “home” gave her the feeling she had to adjust to the new environment fairly quickly. There was no time to grieve for her loss, to get closure for her old life, her loss was invalidated, and she felt that it was time to “move on”.

Just like other challenges, many TCKs eventually come to term with their losses and grief; they realise that the grief they experience during transitions is, in fact, an affirmation of their past. The grief itself is a testament to where they have been, because “we do not grieve for things or people we don’t love” (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p.74). Grief for losses is a natural process of transition; it doesn’t mean we are not flexible by not transitioning smoothly. It merely means that leaving what we love behind is difficult.
RESEARCH

Much of previous research on Third Culture Kids have focused on introducing Third Culture Kids, their identities, and the challenges they face during their transitions. There is little focus on the role of schools for TCKs and how international schools can assist their students during their transitions. Hill (1986) wrote that school serves as a safe place for TCKs and that schools are responsible for guiding their students in navigating their way in a new country. My research will use what we know about TCKs and their life, and focus on the different types of support international schools can provide for their students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

a. How do international school students describe their transnational experiences?

b. What are the advantages and challenges international school students face throughout their TCK experiences?

c. How can international schools offer support to their students?

METHOD

To gain first-hand accounts from TCKs, I conducted an interview with four individuals who identify as a Third Culture Kid. Of the 10 volunteers, male and female, ranging in age from 18-25, I picked four participants that have lived in multiple parts of the world and have attended more one or more international schools. The four participants subjects ranged in age from 18 to 24, in the hope that having a current international school student and graduates of international schools will provide more comprehensible insight into their lives as TCKs. Two of the four interviews were conducted via Skype, and two were conducted in person. I asked the participants six questions that I had sent to them prior to the interview, and each interview lasted about an hour.
Participants

Katie is a 22-year-old female, who is an American citizen. She was born in upstate New York, then moved to the Czech Republic when she was 11 years old. She came back to the United States for a year, and then moved to China for 3 years. She attended an international school in Prague, and graduated from one in Shenyang. She studied at Boston University for 4 years after that, and is now working in Boston.

Nino is a 24-year-old female, who holds American and Japanese dual citizenship. She was born in Arizona and lived there until she was 5 years old. She then moved to Japan for a year, and then moved to Texas for 2nd through 7th grade. She spent 7th – 9th grade back in Arizona, and then moved to Taiwan after 9th grade where she was enrolled in an online school for a year. She attended an American school in Taipei for 11th grade, and then in 2009 for her senior year, moved back to Arizona. She again went back to Taiwan in 2012 for two years, and has been living in Arizona since 2014.

Lindsey is a 20-year-old female who is an American citizen. She was born in the United States but moved to Shanghai, China when she was 1 month old. She lived there until she was 5, and then moved to New Hampshire for 1 year, and Maryland for 4 years. When she was 10, she and her family moved back to Shanghai, where she was homeschooled until junior year. She then attended an international school in Shanghai for two years, prior to beginning her college career at Boston University.

Michelle is a 118-year-old female with a dual citizenship of Japan and Switzerland. She has lived in Sydney and Beijing as a toddler, and lived in Shanghai for a year when she was 4. She then moved to Taiwan, then back to Beijing, to Jakarta, and now lives in Kobe, Japan. She attended an American school in Taipei for 1st-3rd grade, International School of Beijing for 4th-
6th grade, Jakarta International School for 6th-9th grade, and is now studying at the Canadian Academy in Kobe. She and her family split their summer and winter holidays between Switzerland and Japan.

**Interview Questions**

1. Where is “home” for you, or how would you define the term “home”?
2. What are some memorable things you experienced during your transitions to other countries?
3. Did any cultural similarities and differences make your transitions particularly easier or more difficult?
4. How did your school address common TCK challenges and offer support for students, if any?
5. What supports would you have liked to see from your school and the community?
6. In what ways do you think your life and experiences as an international school student shaped who you are right now?

**FINDINGS**

**Identity**

All four participants identify as Third Culture Kids and have spent some time outside of their passport country, if not for the majority of their lives and are aware of their unique lifestyle and the effects it had on their identity. Lindsey recalled one particular instance in which she and her sister, both of whom grew up in China, had a different approach to a problem than their parents, who grew up in the United States, did.

I remember my older sister and I were having an argument and we were trying to resolve it and we realised there was a miscommunication. My parents were
confused by the way we approached it, because basically my sister and I had a more Chinese approach, whereas my parents would go about the American way… This is an example of how TCKs learn to adopt norms from the culture they live in. She also shared a story of her experience back in the United States after living in China for a total of 13 years and how she had to adjust her cultural and social norms. In China, she remembers, it is considered impolite to accept something that is offered to you the first time, even if you want what is being offered to you. So first, you decline. And because this is the cultural norm in China, says Lindsey, the interlocutor will offer the same thing to you again, at which point you are allowed to accept the offer. However in the United States, the second offer does not happen; Lindsey declined to have a bite of her friends’ food the first time he offered even though she really wanted to try it out, to be polite. She expected him to offer again, and was surprised and disappointed when he did not. Through this experience, Lindsey said, she learned to adjust her cultural and social perception back to what is accepted in the United States.

On a broader scale, Michelle summed up her self-identity and the process of developing it in a simple sentence: “My values right now come from all of the places I’ve lived, from listening to other people’s stories and respecting other cultures”. She is positive that she was able to incorporate bits and pieces of her past and the experiences of living in different countries, and the exposure to numerous cultures and societies has allowed her to be accepting of differences. Although she has only lived in Japan, one of her passport countries, for 3 years out of her 18-year-old life, Michelle says she identifies as Japanese. She believes that the core values and customs she holds at the base of her identity are closely related to that of the Japanese public.

Katie also shared her insight into her own identity development. After living in the Czech Republic for two years, she said that when she came back to the United States, she was afraid to
be different from others and wanted to conform to the typical American high school life. However, after coming back from living in China, she noticed herself being more comfortable taking parts from the cultures she lived with and making them her own. She was able to use the ways in which she was “different” to her advantage, from her social and linguistic skills she acquired while living abroad and was able to recognize her assets. Katie also said that she incorporates and adapts parts of different cultures she is familiar with, to create her own culture. For example, she makes “Chinese” food at home, but she admits that the food she makes is not authentically Chinese. She takes parts of Chinese cuisine, adapts it to the ingredients she can find in the United States, and makes a Katie dish that is a mixture of Chinese and American cuisine. She admits to doing the same with cultural and societal values, customs, and beliefs.

**Culture Shock**

When asked about culture shock, Michelle quickly recalled waking up at 5am to chanting noises outside when she first moved to Indonesia, which she soon discovered was the sound of early morning prayers. Like Michelle, Katie, Lindsey, and Nino agreed that religious, cultural and societal differences were difficult to adjust to. All of them moved to a country where the main language was not English, the food was different from what they were used to eating, and their daily life routine shifted. Some countries had stricter dress codes than others due to religious reasons, like Indonesia, and Michelle admitted it took some time to learn the cultural norms of the new country. What was accepted from them in the old country was not accepted in the new country. People acted differently in situations, but as Katie and Lindsey recall, the social cues they had gotten used to were not apt to provide them with what to do in the new country. All participants were also in agreement that they had to learn these new customs and values as they went along and did not have any frame reference at first.
Sense of “Home”

The first question of the interviews was this: “where is your home, and what does home mean to you?” As anticipated, all four participants voiced that they were not particularly fond of this question, and they were all in agreement that it is a difficult question to answer. Katie explained the difference in what this question means to non-TCKs and what it means for her.

When you ask this question to a person who has only lived in one place, when they think of home, their idea of home is the place they grew up in. And when I think of home, I don't really have that "home"... Yes, I grew up in my "hometown" but then I moved. I moved away for longer than I've lived in my "hometown" at this point… And I haven't really been back so I don't consider that place, my "hometown", my "home"… So when I define home, it's more of where I go to regroup, the place I miss when I'm at work or at school.

To Katie, the town she spent the first 11 years of her life, is not her home. Although her family still lives in the town, they don’t live in the same house she grew up in. She has not been back to the town since the summer after sophomore year of college, and her family is moving back to China this summer. She doesn’t feel connected to her “hometown” anymore.

Likewise, Nino also doesn’t identify her birth town as her “home”. Although she has only lived in Taiwan for a total of 4 years, the relationship she built and the experiences she had in Taiwan was significant to her identity. “All of my close friends I have right now are the friends I made when I was in Taiwan,” says Nino, and concludes that her definition of home is where her heart lives, and right now, that place is Taiwan.

Lindsey, like Katie and Nino, agrees that her passport country doesn’t automatically define “home” for her.
If I had to say "home country", I would probably say America because that's where all my family is from, my passport, I've lived here a few years and I go to college here... however, if I were to say "hometown", I feel like I'd say Shanghai because I've lived there for 13 years out of 19 years of my life. It is really, in so many senses of the word, where I consider "home" and getting to feel like, yes, I know this place, this is where I know how to get around, where I grew up and had so much impact on my life... It's where I've lived and become who I am. To her, sense of familiarity and the influence it had on her life is an important factor in defining where her “home” is.

Like the other three participants, Michelle’s idea of home is also multifaceted. Although she is Swiss and Japanese, she has never lived in Switzerland apart from the summers she spends there, and this is her first time living in Japan, so she doesn’t consider either of those places to be her hometown. Having lived in 6 different cities throughout her life, her definition of “home” is actually pretty simple: “my home is wherever my house is at the time, where my family is,” said Michelle. So currently, her home is Kobe, Japan. Four years ago, her home was Jakarta. During the summers that she spends with her grandparents in Switzerland, that is where her home is.

**Feeling “Alone”**

Katie shared her experience of when she stopped feeling “alone” and “different” from others. She was 18 years old and living in China, when she participated in an exit program for international school students that were going back to their countries after graduation. This program was led by David Pollock’s son, and addressed different factors the students might face when they go back to their passport country. To Katie, this was when she finally found a place where she definitely belonged: the Third Culture Kids umbrella. During the 3 day programme,
Katie said she and many other graduating students from international schools in China gathered and played ice breakers, personality quizzes, and attended seminars on topics that were relevant in preparing for their life beyond high school. Flowcharts of things and ways of thinking that were unique to people that go to international schools and lived in different countries were presented, and personality quizzes was accompanied by an explanation of why people who live abroad have tend to have certain personality traits and gave reasons as to why they felt the way they did.

It confirmed all these feelings that I’d been feeling [about living outside of the US, about preparing to go back], and brought together everything I’d felt in my transitional years where I lived in 3 different countries within the span of 6 years… It gave me a sense of belonging to the TCK culture, it’s not one culture, it’s an umbrella of cultures. And it was nice to be underneath an umbrella for once.

Katie admits that although she knew of the term TCK before this exit training, it wasn’t until she attended seminars and learnt more about being a TCK that she felt like she belonged somewhere.

In addition, Lindsey admits that a lot of her friends right now in college are either international students or American students that grew up internationally, because they “just have that thing [they] can click over.” The experience of living abroad is so unique that it’s difficult for someone who has never had that experience to relate to the ones who did. Katie voiced the same sentiment, recalling the time she moved back to the United States; “people who have only lived in one place had a hard time relating to my experience of living someplace else”.

**Losses and Unresolved Grief**
I remember when we were taking off, I remember thinking when will I ever be able to come back to what's become my home... my parents told some of our family to not say welcome home, or how does it feel to be back home because it didn't feel like my home... My parents, they grew up in America, so it was home to them but it wasn't for me... It was hard. I didn't want to consider it home.

Lindsey shared her thoughts about leaving Shanghai at the age of 18. It especially didn’t help that her parents were also moving back to the US, and to Massachusetts where they have never lived before. Even though they were coming “back” to their passport country, to Lindsey, it was more a loss of familiarity of Shanghai, than going back “home”. Luckily for her, she communicated well with her parents and they were able to ask their family and friends in the US to be considerate of Lindsey’s situation.

Other participants voiced that when they move to a different place, they were not given the time to grieve of their loss, because they had to begin their new life in a new location. All the time and energy was spent on figuring out how to go about their new life, that they didn’t have the chance to cope with their loss that originated from leaving a familiar place.

**School Experience**

All four participants attended an international school during their time abroad. Michelle, who has attended 5 international schools so far, summarized her experience; “international schools are all similar in their curriculum, what they expect from you, and how they bring you into the school. Being a part of the international school community wasn’t that difficult, but the outside life was”. She also stated that no matter which country she was in, the atmosphere of the international school was similar. Katie, having been a student at two international schools, also agrees. At an international school, Michelle hypothesized, everyone has had the experience of
being a “foreigner”, an “outsider”, and that they know how to welcome you and ease you into the new environment because they’ve all gone through it.

Katie and Nino both agree that the school acted as an “escape” from the foreign world outside. School was where students and families shared their resources on where to buy food and goods that reminded them of their passport countries and celebrated holidays and traditions. Nino shared that being at an international school where the main language was English was a blessing while she lived in Taiwan, because she was able to communicate with others at school using her native language.

In terms of support provided by the school for their students, Nino was positive her school didn’t offer much, other than an introduction to what the school is like. Lindsey, likewise, admitted her school had a small orientation session for incoming students but it was an orientation that was focused on their new school life.

Katie shared that although her school did not offer any support for incoming students, they did participate in the exit programme that was previously mentioned. This programme, she believes, is something all international schools should offer for not only graduating students but to anyone who is leaving one country to go to another.

Michelle, as a current senior in high school, told me of the buddy system that the schools she has been at have used. This is a system in which incoming students are paired up or assigned a buddy who shows them around the school. Although it sounds like an efficient way to ease incoming students into the school, Michelle also said, “this system doesn’t work unless the buddy wants to be your friend. Usually, by the second day, you’re not really talking to them”. Looking back on her experience, Michelle also shared that she thinks schools are good at
preparing students for starting at the new school, but once school starts, students are left to their own devices.

**Other Findings**

In addition to her own school experiences, Michelle shared that her mother always being worried about her starting at a new school. She claimed that her mother’s worrying made her more anxious about starting school. She said that the reason her mother was worried was because parents were usually not given much information about the school. Michelle also recalled her and her friends sharing their experiences of parents being over-worried because they were not really getting ample information from the school.

**DISCUSSION**

The result of the interviews aligned with what we already knew about TCKs and their experiences and their responses were mostly what I expected to hear when I planned my interview questions. In addition, despite range in age and the different experiences my interview participants had, the way they felt about their experiences abroad were similar. All four participants agree and provided anecdotes to support previous research that stated TCKs often engage in negotiation of identity to accommodate their surroundings. They all said that who they are right now has been largely influenced by their TCK experiences, which I, as a fellow TCK, also agreed with.

They were also in agreement that their sense of home and belonging is not constant, which is understandable given how often they transition from one place to another. I was also not surprised to find that they experience loss and grief from their transitions, but was interested to hear that their loss and grief doesn’t come only from the transition themselves. Like Lindsey shared, their loss and grief are magnified because of the way the people around them treat them
after they move back to their passport country. I didn’t consider how people would act towards them when they moved back as a factor in their transition, so I was surprised to hear that. Relatedly, it did not occur to me to take parents’ reaction to starting a new school into account when thinking about the factors that affect TCK’s transitions. I am glad Michelle mentioned her mum so that I could think of how schools can support the parents too, which could contribute to decreasing the stress factor for TCKs.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS**

The interviews also revealed that international schools could, in fact, act as a “safe” space for TCKs. Now the question is, what are some specific ways in which international schools can actively address incoming TCKs and support those who are preparing for another transnational move?

The most important support schools can provide for their students is the chance to familiarize them with the new culture they are entering into. An orientation session that not only talks about their new school life, but also gives them an introduction into the culture and the society of the world outside of the school. Although majority of a students’ daily life is spent in school, they are still exposed to the local life, which typically involves interacting with the locals in the area. Providing students with some background on what is expected of them in that new culture will decrease the chance of students experiencing culture shock.

In addition to an orientation for students, an orientation for parents would also be beneficial in supporting families at international schools. A clear explanation of the school and their expectations, the options their students have for classes and participating in extracurricular activities, contact information and the logistics of registering for everything that the students need would allow parents to be familiar with the school environment and the staff. This will take
some of the weight off the students’ shoulders because they won’t have to worry about their parents and the questions they have about school.

Providing students and families with contact information of community members is another way in which schools can assist them. Someone from the same passport country as the incoming students, someone around the same age, with similar experiences, shared religion, ethnicity, hobbies… From my experience, it is likely that members of the international school community break off into smaller communities by mutual experiences, interests, and benefits. Having an entry point into such communities as an incoming student and family will prevent them from isolating themselves. Members of such communities can help the incoming individuals ease into the new environment smoother too.

Another crucial support international schools can offer for their students is to prepare them for going back to their passport country, which many TCKs do. This exit programme will give students a sense of what to expect when they return to their passport countries in general, how their identity as TCKs might make them “different” from the more or less culturally homogenous population of their passport country and city, and encourage them to consciously start preparing for their move. To minimize the sense of loss and unresolved grief after the transition, this programme should also stress the importance of saying good-bye to their friends and surroundings and getting a closure.

LIMITATION

There are several limits to my research, biggest one being the convenience sampling of my interview subjects. They were chosen based on their accessibility, and three out of four subjects are my close friends. It is possible that this relationship and the preexisting knowledge
and bias I had about my interview participants affected the questions I asked as follow-up during our interview and the willingness of my participants to share their stories with me.

In addition, my sample size for the research was very small; one student each from four schools out of 7000+ international schools is not a big enough of a sample to get comprehensive insight into international school experiences. Although different in age and countries, interviewing four TCKs is also not enough to provide an accurate representation of the TCK life.

Based on these limitations and taking in account of the time necessary to complete a sit-down interview, future research on this topic should include a short survey with more participants so that we can acquire a larger amount of information on the life of Third Culture Kids.

CONCLUSION

Although each student has their distinct experiences, what lays at the foundation of their identity as Third Culture Kids are similar. Regardless of where students are coming from and where they are going, throughout their high-mobility lives, TCKs engage in an endless negotiation of identities, experience conflicting sense of home and belonging as well as loss and grief during and after transitions. TCKs are a unique group of students with multitude of experiences amongst them; their exposure to different cultural, social, and linguistic knowledge from their multicultural lives is precious. And for these students, one of the places they feel safe and feel like they belong somewhere is when they are at school. Therefore, it is the responsibility of schools and educators to provide not only academic but also cultural and social support for their students, and this is extra crucial at international schools where students might identify as TCKs.
Reference


