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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Growing up Globally: Third Culture Kids' Experience with Transition, Identity, and Well-Being

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Abstract

As globalization increases, there has been a rise in expatriate families and, consequently, students enrolled in international schools. These children, known as *third culture kids* (TCKs), face difficult transitions, identity development challenges, and adverse social-emotional effects. Transition programs have been developed and implemented by some international schools to assist students living in a third culture; however, extended support and specialized TCKs' programs that address transition, identity, and emotional issues continues to be largely unavailable. To better serve this ever-increasing population, the current literature is examined, and, arising from this, implications and future directions for helping professionals in international schools are presented.

Keywords Third culture kids · Identity · Transition · Well-being

Introduction

The International Schools Consultancy (ISC; 2020) identified 11,659 international schools across the globe, serving 5.98 million students. Approximately 20% of these students are children of expatriates (ISC, 2018), or those who are living outside their country of residency. These students are typically referred to as *third culture kids* (TCKs). TCKs have received relatively little attention in academic educational research (Bates 2013; Dolby and Rahman 2008; Limberg and Lambie 2011; Risch 2008). Initial research was largely conducted by Useem and Downie (1976), both American sociologists who were exposed to students living in a culture that was considered different from their own. Through their work, they were able to develop a framework for defining TCKs. However, subsequent researchers, Pollock and Van Reken 2001, (p. 19), have narrowed the definition of a TCK to:

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> A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) also developed the "Third Culture Model" (see Fig. 1). This model illustrates what cultures people with international lifestyles will encounter. The first two cultures are shown as one's home culture (e.g., the United States) and the culture of the host country (e.g., Germany). The third culture is made up of individuals who have shared experiences of international mobility (e.g., children of military personnel living on a base and attending a Department of Defense Education Activity school).

TCKs are a diverse group and can be further understood to include expatriate children from countries around the world, missionary children, military children, refugees, and other children living in a third culture (Cole 2018; Davis et al. 2010; Limberg and Lambie 2011). Further, TCKs have unique experiences in regard to their educational, identity, and cultural development (Hayden and Thompson 2004; Limberg and Lambie 2011). These children often demonstrate the ability to be adaptable, as well as flexible in their environment, but can also struggle to develop a strong sense of identity (Cockburn 2002; Davis et al. 2010; Limberg and Lambie 2011). TCKs' development is directly impacted by living in the third culture where they are exposed to diverse people, cultures, and ideas (McGregor et al. 2013).

TCKs have been found to demonstrate an ability to connect with all cultures they reside in, but have trouble identifying with or feeling like they belong to any specific culture or place (Limberg and Lambie 2011; McGregor et al. 2013). Pollock and Van Reken (2001, p. 100) referred to TCKs as "cultural chameleons." This nomenclature eludes that TCKs feel comfortable with new locations, cultures, and people and are adept at navigating these new situations; however, they fail to create meaningful or deep relationships (Fail et al. 2004; Limberg and Lambie 2011; Pollock and Van Reken 2001). Furthermore, TCKs typically have a global mentality, second language competence, cognitive flexibility, open-mindedness (Hayden et al. 2000), higher levels of resilience, and leadership qualities (Abe 2018), but when compared to non-TCKs, they are often less emotionally stable (Limberg and Lambie 2011). Therefore, TCKs' well-being and identity development are the primary concerns among advocates and researchers.

The purpose of this literature review is to summarize the research on: (a) TCKs' identity development; (b) social and psychological effects experienced by TCKs; (c) the impact of

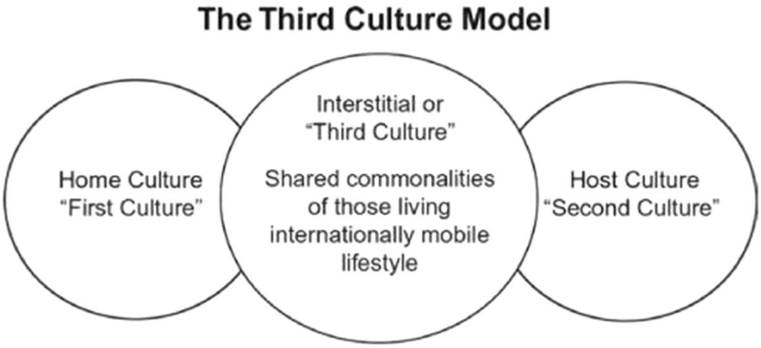

Fig. 1 The Third Culture model. Reprinted with permission from Ruth Van Reken (Pollock and Van Reken 2001)

international transition; and (d) transition programs that are currently available for students and their families in international schools to mitigate harmful effects, while promoting positive outcomes during the transition process. Finally, based on the current literature examined, we offer implications and future directions for international schools and professional school counselors.

Identity Development

A key psychological task within adolescence is identity development (Erikson 1950, 1968). Erikson's psychosocial development stage model suggests that adolescence is a turbulent time when children face the task of identity versus role confusion and attempt to discover their adult selves. During this stage, teenagers attempt to find themselves through various personal ventures and exploring different roles. When an adolescent successfully completes this stage, they, in theory, have a strong sense of self and are able to remain authentic in their beliefs and values. Those that are successful are much closer to having a healthy personality, which theoretically can resolve potential crises that emerge. However, if an adolescent fails to complete the stage successfully, they could potentially develop a weak sense of self and experience role confusion. Such individuals could be insecure, unsure, and confused about the future, and will likely struggle without an individualized identity as an adult. Erikson (1950) also suggested that the virtue of fidelity is developed during this stage when an individual successfully secures their identity. Fidelity leads to the capability to be accepting of others, even when there are core differences between them (Erikson 1968).

In the case of TCKs, they often struggle to feel as if they are representing only themselves or something much larger, such as their parents and/or the organization that brought their family to a foreign country (Meier 2015). Erikson (1988) discussed how in this stage, adolescents often experience a sense of role confusion that can lead to a lack of fidelity towards others, making it difficult to build long-term connections and relationships. The absence of fidelity can be applied to TCKs, as they are often lacking close friendships, extended family connections, or community support, due to their transitional lifestyles (Cockburn 2002). It has been noted that often a TCK's greatest weakness is in trusting others (Bell 1997) and identity issues among TCKs can stem from constantly relocating, making it burdensome when trying to create lasting relationships (Sears 2011).

Furthermore, in their response to role confusion or identity crisis, an adolescent may experiment with different lifestyles and change their identity (Erikson 1968). TCKs may adjust their identity to mold to the various school climates they attend and/or the country they reside in; thus, never forming a complete personal identity (Pollock and Van Reken 2001). Broderick and Blewitt (2014) asserted that individuals who experience an identity crisis for a significant period of time may enter a phase in which they withdraw from responsibilities and encounter symptoms of depression. For TCKs, an extended moratorium of uncertainty of one's identity is possibly due to an inability to connect to a peer group, social cause, or cultural anchor (Gilbert 2008).

Identity challenges among TCKs often can be represented in the form of the question: "Where am I from?" This can be a difficult question for young people to grapple with who are unsure of who they are and where they belong. Answers might reflect the country or place where the person has lived the longest, but will also vary based on the individual. For example, in a study conducted by Sears (2011), a set of adolescent twins, both identifying as TCKs, were asked to respond to this exact question, "Where am I from?" The twins cited two different countries; one expressed a connection to Egypt, while the other felt more connected to Qatar. According to Cockburn (2002), for TCKs there is a strong and significant correlation between identity development struggles and (a) how long a TCK has spent outside of their home country; and (b) the developmental stage the child moved abroad. While it is understandably difficult for any child to go through major life transitions, Cockburn believes that TCKs under the age of five and those in their adolescent years are at the greatest risk for identity complications. Constant transition is a threat to one's identity, because of the inherent disconnection that can come with moving into the unfamiliar and unknown (Hayden and Thompson 2004).

Understanding that transition, which is an essential part of a TCK's lifestyle, may in itself be detrimental to TCKs' identity development, Toder and Marcia (1973) identified that individuals who fail to develop a conscious sense of self, are typically more conforming to their peers. For TCKs, this may mean developing into becoming the aforementioned "cultural chameleons" (Pollock and Van Reken 2001, p.100). Adams et al. (1985) also indicated how these individuals are susceptible to peer pressure, which can lead to maladaptive behaviors and feelings. For example, anxiety, depression, isolation, and poor self-image, are common among TCKs (Rameker 2006). Unfortunately, Sears (2011), when studying present and former TCKs, found that indeed, participants' identity development was commonly abnormal and challenging for them, compared to non-TCKs, who had a more traditional process of identity development.

A recurrent struggle among TCKs is juggling the layers of one's identity. In many cases, TCKs feel their identity is the representation of their parents' agency, company, or country and role in the community (Meier 2015). Furthermore, Meier (2015) mentioned that embracing these various characterizations can lead to an identity where interpersonal interactions are not consistent throughout facets of a person's life. Because of persistent mobility, TCKs often struggle with interpersonal communication and relationships, as well as personal wellness, which stems from the lack of identity (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk 2014). Without the opportunity to build trust in others and form meaningful relationships, TCKs are apt to experience loneliness, depression, and other mental health complications at an early age (Meier 2015).

Identity development is directly connected with psychosocial well-being (Marcia 1980). Berzonsky (2003) found that individuals with a weak sense of identity had lower levels of resilience and higher levels of depression. Furthermore, individuals lacking a strong sense of self tend to experience the world as chaotic or unmanageable (Berzonsky 2003). Berzonsky (2003) cited multiple research studies that found adolescents who lacked a concrete identity to be more susceptible to feeding and eating disorders, academic and school related problems, neuroticism, and early drug and alcohol use. Conversely, individuals with a strong sense of self found themselves more adaptable and capable of self-regulation (Berzonsky 2003). Marcia (1980) also found adolescents who achieved a sophisticated and mature sense of self were able to attain higher levels of self-esteem, autonomy, moral reasoning, and cultural sophistication.

A study by Abe (2018) identified that later in life, TCKs often show normal changes in personality, higher multicultural engagement, and overall greater well-being than within their adolescent years, compared to non-TCKs. While these are positive outcomes for TCKs, they often do not occur until well into adulthood and usually do not match the typical identity development phase of life (Rameker 2006). This illustrates one concern with TCKs' identity development: While TCKs can eventually develop a healthy identity, research shows that young adults who suspend adolescent development may repeat social and emotional difficulties into young adulthood (Broderick and Blewitt 2014).

Ideally, teenagers develop a high degree of identity exploration during their adolescent years, followed by commitment to one's sense of self, which is linked to agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and social responsibility (Karaś et al. 2014). In the case of TCKs, while they have the potential to thrive after their transition into or out of international schools, they are also subject to possible long-term challenges regarding self-image, personal well-being, and developing meaningful relationships with peers (Fail et al. 2004; Limberg and Lambie 2011),

Transitions and Psychosocial Well-Being

TCKs by definition face some kind of transition into a new culture, location, and school (Pollock and Van Reken 2001). A TCK's transition is a crucial element of their experience and significantly impacts their psychosocial well-being (Kotensky 2008; Limberg and Lambie 2011; Pollock and Van Reken 2001; Risch 2008; Sears 2011). Unfortunately, the adverse effects of transitioning as a TCK most often include grief, feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kotensky 2008). This is also true for TCKs transitioning back to their home country. In a study conducted on missionary children returning home, Davis et al. (2010) found "43% of the students [had] elevated levels of anxiety and depression, 66% reported elevated levels of stress, and 43% reported lower levels of psychological well-being" (p. 191).

While it is clear that transitioning to a new culture is a difficult process; repatriation is just as challenging for TCKs. Purnell and Hoban (2014) identified four stages of transition for TCKs re-entering their home country: (i) preparation for transition, (ii) initial transition, (iii) adaptation, and (iv) stabilization. Similarly, Pollock and Van Reken (2001) developed a transition model for TCKs entering a host country that shares many of the same characteristics. Their model consists of five stages (i) involvement, (ii) leaving, (iii) transition, (iv) entering, and (v) re-involvement. This model can be illustrated with the example of a student attending a high school in their home country feeling connected and comfortable (involvement). The student then leaves this school and moves to a new country (leaving). During this time, they experience a transition to both the new country and a new school (transition). The student will then begin at the new school (entering) and, hopefully, will reach the point where they feel connected and comfortable once again (re-involvement). Both models emphasize the importance of adaptation or entering, further validating the likely value of a transition program. Schools typically do emphasize the initial transition into the school environment, but mid- to long-term transition support for students seems somewhat nonexistent (Bates 2013; Risch 2008).

Transition Programs

Comprehensive transition programs can be a catalyst to improve TCKs' identity development within the third culture (Bates 2013). School programs in the United States have been developed to assist students in general who are transitioning from elementary to middle school or middle to high school (e.g., Link Crew; Where Everybody Belongs). Research has found that such programs typically reduce the number of disciplinary referrals, suspensions, absences, tardiness, and students failing classes (Applied Survey Research 2011). Likewise, international schools have begun to recognize and design programs that alleviate to some degree the adverse effects of the difficult transition into a new culture and school (Bates 2013; Morales 2015; Risch 2008).

However, Risch (2008) surveyed 58 international schools and found that only ten had a formal transition program in place, while 36 reported they had an informal program, and the remaining 12 schools had no transition program available. Further, only 54% of the international schools offered any formal event, program, or activity to address the cultural diversity of the school (Risch 2008). Although such provisions did not all have the same level of intensity, Risch found 31% offered specific courses or units that were directly related to cultural diversity and learning, while 37% planned single-day or week-long cultural events. The remaining 31% provided some informal program or activities (Risch 2008).

In another study conducted by Bates (2013), she found that of the respondent schools, only 36% indicated that they utilized some form of a transition team, but 80% indicated that their school did have an orientation program, typically including a buddy system. Buddy programs can generally be defined as pairing a new student with an existing student (i.e., a “buddy”) who has been selected by the school to help with orientation during the initial transition (Limberg and Lambie 2011). Overall, Bates’ (2013) findings indicate a lack of transitional support for students in international schools, with only two schools offering what would be considered a comprehensive model. Bates indicated that many international schools are unaware of the issues experienced by TCKs and/or the need for transition programs.

Scholars have attempted to define important elements of a comprehensive transition program for TCKs (Davis et al. 2010; Morales 2015; Risch 2008). However, Risch (2008, p. 52) offers a comprehensive definition of a formal transition program for TCKs as involving, “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.” As far as transition education was concerned, between 36% and 57% of international schools said that they incorporated some form of TCK-related education into their transition curriculum (Risch 2008).

Programs that help TCKs with their identity development, psychosocial well-being and transition into an international school seem, on the whole, to be lacking. There is clearly a divide between what students need and what is actually being provided by schools (Bates 2013; Morales 2015). TCKs require a safe and supportive educational environment to mitigate the ambiguity of the change they are experiencing during their periods of transition (Limberg and Lambie 2011). Despite the issues associated with identity development among TCKs and their psychosocial well-being, minimal support seems to be provided that tailors to their unique needs.

Implications and Future Directions

We believe it is the role of school counselors, in conjunction with administrators and teachers, to spearhead a comprehensive transition program that targets the specific needs of TCKs. School counselors in international schools seem to be a natural fit to lead transition programs, as current and likely transition programs are primarily focused on improving the school connectedness of TCKs. One of the central responsibilities of school counselors is to support students' social/emotional needs (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2019). The authors of this article strongly advocate for international school counselors to take the lead in developing or improving TCKs' transition programs. Presently, it is unclear as to who actually holds the responsibility for TCKs' transition experiences. We believe that it is crucial to have a professionally trained individual who is knowledgeable and skilled in the field of counseling to play a major role in supporting TCKs' transition. Likewise, counseling strategies, techniques, and theories need to be integrated into transition programs in order to address the characteristic psychosocial needs of TCKs. We also believe such an individual should foster a systemic approach; a paradigm focusing on the whole context, as well as displaying solid leadership and advocacy skills (ASCA, 2019) to successfully implement a transition program in an international school.

Based on the literature review, there are limited resources such as comprehensive transition programs made available to TCKs. Erikson's (1950, 1968) established stages of psychosocial development highlight the importance of identity development over role confusion during adolecence. Failure to achieve a sense of self has been shown to stunt development and can cause depression, anxiety, loneliness, and an overall lack of emotional connection (Rameker 2006). We believe that more can be done to assist TCKs in their transition, identity development, personal well-being, and management of possible adverse social-emotional effects.

In existing transition programs, school connectedness seems to be the primary focus, with identity development and well-being receiving less focused attention (Limberg and Lambie 2011; Risch 2008). As previously illustrated, it appears that identity development in adolescence is tied to overall well-being, and can be influenced by school connectedness. For that reason, our belief is that international school counselors need to work with administrators, teachers, parents, and students to ensure that the domains of identity development, well-being, and school connectedness are being adequately met by international schools' transition programs.

Not only is it important for programs to include psychosocial well-being and school connectedness, it is also crucial to have programs that address the strengths and challenges of TCKs during their developmental phases. Morales (2015) offered an example of a working model of such a program, although he acknowledged that it is not fully comprehensive. This transition model includes an Ambassador Group, which consists of existing students and the school counselor, who plan and organize activities to help new and leaving students. The Ambassador Group also assists with a two-day 'new family' orientation, an assigned student "Welcomer" paired with each new student, ongoing support for parents provided by the counselor, and direct aid for students and parents who are transitioning out of the school (Morales 2015).

Programs that currently exist to address these transitional challenges and the risk of identity confusion seem inconsistent and do not necessarily meet the specific needs of TCKs. At this point in time, most transition programs vary considerably by individual school or organization, and the provided activities may not be comprehensive. Furthermore, the programs that do exist appear to focus on a buddy system or an orientation style of transition assistance (Limberg and Lambie 2011; Risch 2008). Such programs do not seem consistent with the recognised actual transition and growth needs of TCKs. As a result, we argue that TCKs need additional support in the form of a comprehensive transition curriculum that consists of lessons designed to address the specialized challenges of transition and to encourage positive identity development.

A comprehensive transition program would be one that attends to the following elements: pre-arrival, orientation, student records, welcoming rituals, peer support, parent/family support, counseling/stress management, personal and cultural identity attention, transition education, leave-taking, and re-entry (Risch 2008). For pre-arrival, Risch (2008) recommends connecting with parents via email prior to school starting, where the school counselor offers information about the school, the community, and the cultural values and norms in the locale of the school. Orientation should cover a half- or full-day, and include (a) a tour of the facilities; (b) information about the school; (c) an opportunity to meet teachers; and (d) a presentation on the distinctive cultural norms and values of the host country (Risch 2008). Parent and family support should be an integral part of the comprehensive program, and to be successful, it should include a welcoming social event, inclusion of the parents in the student orientation, community orientation, information on culture shock and adjustment, and education on the characteristics of TCKs (Risch 2008). It is also recommended that parents be prepared to provide student academic records (i.e., report cards, test scores, and a teacher recommendation, transcripts, health records), and school personnel should consider interviewing students to determine English language proficiency to ease transition (Risch 2008).

Upon arrival on the first day, Risch (2008) suggested welcome activities (e.g., an assembly; a welcoming announcement in the bulletin) that also include a peer support component, just like the Ambassador Group (Morales 2015), where peer mentors have already been trained. Further, transition programs should always offer general education on transition, including information about culture shock, characteristics of TCKs, stress management, strategies to prepare for leaving, conflict resolution, grief and loss management, and an exploration of personal and cultural identity (Risch 2008). A component that is often left out of transition programs is leav- taking, which Risch (2008) suggests should involve farewell parties with their class, announcements in an assembly for the departing students, and potentially a farewell gift. Another component that is typically neglected is education on re-entry to one's home setting and the common experience of reverse culture shock (Risch 2008).

Although it has been established that initial transition assistance is needed and sometimes provided, additional components should be added to current transition programs. Two programs established in the United States seem promisin. One of these - 'Where Everybody Belongs' (2018) - emphasizes the social component of transition assistance to reduce bullying and promote connectedness to the school and community through social follow-ups with mentors. Similarly, the 'Link Program' (2018) requires mentors to meet with mentees each month to assist with social and academic issues. International transition programs can increase their positive outcomes by utilizing programs with a focus on long-term social, academic, and developmental objectives.

We also believe that resource models outside primary and secondary education should be considered.Conducting first-year seminars is a hallmark initiative utilized at many universities across the United States and offers several components that may be valuable in the international school setting. These seminars typically provide new students with immediate connections with fellow students, direct transition education, and proactive social and emotional support (University 101, 2019). We believe that TCKs could benefit significantly by having such elements introduced into transition programs.

It is not clear how many international transition programs focus on specific TCKs' concerns related to identity development and social-emotional well-being. Despite Risch's (2008) investigation on how schools incorporate TCKs' education into their curriculum, there seems to remain a lack of standardization among schools that are specific to TCKs' unique needs regarding transition, identity, and psychosocial well-being. Future research could attempt to define more clearly what specifically is being taught in transition programs to address identity development and psychosocial concerns. Notwithstanding several research studies on what transition programs involve, and the frequency with which schools provide such a curriculum, there is an absence of research on the effectiveness of such programs across all levels of comprehensiveness. We also suggest researchers investigate how effectively these programs address the issues they are theoretically designed to address. This would include discovering how such programs affect students' social-emotional well-being, how connected the students feel to the their home country (first culture), local culture (second culture), and school (third culture) after going through a transition program, and if the TCKs involved successfully progress through psychosocial stages in adolescence. Ultimately, we believe programs should grow and evolve with the ever-changing needs of *all* students. TCKs are no different—we can do better to serve them and address their unique needs to ensure that they feel connected, develop a strong sense of self, and maintain their overall well-being. Comprehensive transition programs led by the school counselor can be a wortwhile answer to addressing the seeming current gap in practice.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

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