

So what will they do when they grow up?

Surely every international school teacher has had to fight a lump in the throat at graduation, and wonder what will happen to this amazingly talented and special group of students which will never ever again be gathered in the same place at the same time. It is always hard after developing such close relationships with engaging, mature, interesting and multilingual young people, to see them disappear. Yes, we may receive the occasional e mail and they may come back to visit in the early years, but what on earth happens to them in the long term?

What happens next?

I have always been fascinated by the question of what happens to international school students. What do they do, where do they settle, whom do they marry? I can trace my interest back to a particular family. The parents were both African but from two different countries and religions. The children were raised in the Middle East and have all gone to the States for University. I have always wondered where they would end up as they have no sense of belonging in their two African countries and little affinity with the country in the Middle East. The school represented the international community in which they were probably most comfortable and felt most at home. Although it is still too early with this particular family to assess the out comes, I am (hopefully) drawing to the end of further re search which has explored the long term effects of an international education.

Facts and figures...

It is tempting to quote the facts and figures; 92% were multilingual as children, and 25 to 45 years down the line, 72% are using multiple languages on a regular basis. Of those with a partner (to be politically correct!) 74% are with someone either from another nationality or who had an international background. Only 27% are currently resident in the same country as their parents and siblings and 53% are living in a country different from their parents' passport country. 63% had been in another country within three months of responding to the questionnaire so they are still helping to keep the airlines in business. These figures all support Gerner's prediction based on his research in 1991 that international school students rated themselves as more interested in languages, travel and a future international lifestyle than their monocultural counterparts.

Interview responses

However, the most interesting facts have emerged from interviews rather than questionnaire responses. Ask them where they feel most at home or where they have the greatest sense of belonging and there are some interesting responses. These ranged from "a migrating bird" to feeling like a "100% imported product". Most had a sense of belonging in more than one country. Most of them seem to be addicted to variety, travel and change. The biggest surprise for me was the long-term commitment to relationships. I expected that like Kelloggs Variety Packs they would change partners as frequently as they changed countries but not at all. They value relationships and yet all re-

vealed a tremendous amount of resiliency and ability to cope with death, divorce and trauma. They were an exceptionally self sufficient and successful group of people with a high regard for the education and exposure it gave them as young people. "I gained a wider angle, I didn't have another film, I didn't have another camera, I had another lens...I could see wider, deeper, more contrast, the school gave me this necessary variety of looking at things differently."

Some of them have been trapped in marriages or jobs which have prevented them from expressing their international identities but most of them, rather like emerging butterflies, have demonstrated that it is possible to have roots and wings. Many of them are based in one place and have "settled down" but travel frequently and build variety into their lives in different ways. A number are raising their own TCKs and thus passing on their heritage to the next generation. The majority do stay in touch, even now, with their former school friends, soul mates who understand what it is like to be raised in an international culture. E mail has certainly facilitated cheap and easy long distance communication. Graduation may mark the end of a shared community but the shared experience and mutual understanding have built bonds that time does not destroy.

Gerner et al 1992 'Characteristics of Internationally Mobile Adolescents.'
Journal of School Psychology. 30:197-214

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