

# Whatever becomes of international school students?

There has been an increased interest and focus on the nature and qualities of the international school student. The term "Third Culture Kid" or "TCK" first coined by Ruth Hill Useem in 1962, in relation to her studies of expatriate families in India, was copyrighted by Dave Pollock of Interaction in 1988, to describe

*"an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents' culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience."*

Surely this description applies to the international school student and the profile of this TCK or global nomad as he or she is often called is of growing interest to the international school educator.

## **T.C.K Profile**

The "profile" of the TCK or global nomad explores the benefits and challenges of the impact of mobility, leave-taking, numerous temporary relationships, culture, and languages on the child. It has largely been put together by researchers in the field such as the Useems at Michigan State University, and practitioners such as Dave Pollock of Interaction and Norma McCaig of Global Nomads International. What research has been done to verify the theories of the profile? According to Gerner et al. (1992) their research, which sought to test the characteristics of internationally mobile adolescents on two continents with peers who maintained residence in only one country, is the largest known analysis on the subject. Although their research had an American bias in that the control group was American, and 34% of the "international students" in the two American international schools were American, the findings seemed to bear out the theory that

*"US adolescents who live overseas rate themselves more culturally accepting, more interested in travel, more interested in learning other languages, and more interested in following an international lifestyle in the future than do US adolescents who have only lived in the United States" (Gerner et al. 1992:207)*

## **Research**

What other research has been carried out? It would appear that there are pockets of interest in particular internationally mobile sub-groups such as Military children (Wertsch 1991), Missionaries' children (Echerd and Arathoon 1989), Japanese children (Goodman 1990), Diplomatic Corps (McCluskey 1994) and articles have been written and research has been carried out by some of these groups to explore the impact of international mobility on the child.

Evidently this is a subject area which invites further research in order to test the theories of the profile, since the population of TCKs is continually growing. It also gives rise to another, equally interesting question. What are the long-term effects of

such a childhood? What will happen to these children in the future? Where will they live, what will they do, whom will they marry? What research has investigated the answers to these questions?

The Useems, along with A.B. Cottrell and Finn Jordan, have undertaken a large piece of research into this area, the results of which have been published in *Newslinks* (1993 and 1994, xii and xiii). Although the sample is large (680 respondents), it is exclusively American. David Willis published in the *ISJ* (1994 xiv:1) an article relating to a piece of research amongst the alumni of an international school in Kobe, Japan. The author's own research, entitled, "Some of the Outcomes of International Schooling" sought to answer some of the above questions and find out, by tracking international school students 20 years down the line, what has happened to them. This exploratory research, which attempted to be more international in design, was limited by time and the cooperation of the schools in the sample.

Of the 366 membership schools in ECIS contacted in November 1994, 161 responded to a questionnaire about Alumni Associations. Out of this number, 6 were selected in 6 different countries according to the following criteria. They had to have an IB curriculum, have students from at least 30 different nationalities in their school and have an Alumni Association at least 20 years old. These schools were invited to distribute a questionnaire to as large a range of nationalities as possible who had graduated 20 years previously.

Although the final sample was small (38 respondents), it established some interesting findings. The respondents were from 20 different nationalities, 26% were of dual nationality and 42% had parents who had a cross-cultural marriage. Currently 42% are residing in a country different from their nationality. (Werkman, 1986, in his research on TCKs claimed two thirds of his sample hoped to return overseas.)

### **Legacies of living overseas**

Certain issues were examined in the light of the theories which seek to define the children. Regarding mobility, the average number of moves up to the age of 18 was 4.3 compared with an average of 6.1 in the subsequent 20 years since graduation. This might suggest that mobility in childhood does predispose one to be more mobile in adulthood. 97% of the sample had gone on to further education for an average of 5.4 years which confirms the view that international school students are a highly educated minority. (Useem and Cottrell (1994) found 81% had at least a bachelor's degree.) 33% of them chose to major in languages which, again, confirms the view that exposure and opportunity to learn other languages is one of the key benefits enjoyed by international school students. Of the 86% working full-time, half of them are employed in business management or education. 61% mentioned that their jobs have international aspects which supports Gerner's predictions (1992) that internationally mobile young people were more interested in careers with international aspects. A total of 82% claimed that there were international aspects to their lives. Almost half travel overseas several times a year and 16% have married cross-culturally and are raising their children bilingually. 84% speak at least 2 languages, compared with Willis et al's findings (1994) that over half were bilingual or multilingual.

As regards their attitude to their former school, 78% recorded a very high enjoyment of their schooling. The exposure to people from different cultures was cited by over

50% as a reason why they enjoyed the school. The following comments which were received are not a benefit of the curriculum per se, so much as the effect of the make-up of the school itself;

*"The biggest difference with international schools I think is that almost all of the kids have moved at least once and know what it felt like to be the 'new kid'...you learn to judge people for what they are on the inside not their looks or colour." and*

*"It has affected my lifestyle, my outlook and my sense of belonging... I learned to be part of the whole world... I truly love to experience new things and travel... Feeling of Internationalism... Understanding of other cultures."*

The long-term effect of the international school can be evidenced in cross-cultural skills and a global understanding which are the byproducts of friendships rather than taught subjects on the curriculum.

What other legacies are there from such a childhood? One obvious one is their high degree of adaptability, as a number said;

*"I find it easy to adjust - I had to." and "I have been used to moves since I was very young - therefore I adapt easily."*

One issue that it is difficult to assess is the issue of long-term commitment in terms of relationships or to a job. Individuals who have experienced constant change in childhood might exhibit what Toffler predicted in 1970, "a posture of non-commitment...the supreme exhilaration of riding change...they seem to crave change..." (Toffler 1970:281). The author's research revealed that the average length of time in a job was 11.1 years and the average length of marriage was 12.7 years (bearing in mind that respondents were 20 years out of High school), which would not suggest any problem with long-term commitment. However, it must be remembered that the sample was small and biased in the respect that the respondents form a group of highly successful people, in touch with their former school 20 years after graduating and therefore present a very positive picture of the ex-international school student.

One interesting finding was with regard to the sense of belonging. Participants in the survey were invited to rate their sense of belonging to a country, geographical area, community and to particular relationships. In keeping with the definition of the TCK, the majority rated their strongest sense of belonging in terms of relationships rather than place. As one respondent said,

*"I have decided to make Montreal my home- almost all of my friends have similar backgrounds (immigrants from somewhere)... I did much moving about until I realized I would never quite fit in anywhere."*, which highlights the frequent dilemma of the TCK; "home" is everywhere and nowhere, they fit in easily and they never feel that they really fit in.

One thing is certain, they fit in best and relate best to others like themselves. It behoves international schools to consider contributing to the small amount of research in this area. If schools were to make staying in touch with their alumni a priority and to consider surveying them at regular intervals, a huge database of information and a

network of internationally experienced people could be built up. This information would be of use, not only in counselling international school students, but also in serving as a network to put ex-international students in touch with others like themselves. To the "*multinational soul on a multicultural globe...resident aliens of the world, permanent residents of nowhere.*" (Iyer 1993:13), relationships are important and in this day of electronic mail, it is becoming easier and less expensive to maintain contact regardless of geographical separation. This huge multi-talented group of TCKs and adult TCKs warrants further study in order to help society take advantage of their full potential.

Helen Fail, October 1995 published in International Schools Journal xv:2 April 1996

### **Bibliography**

- Cottrell, A.B. and Useem R.H. (1993), 'TCKs Experience Prolonged Adolescence.' (Article 3) Newslinks xiii:1, Princeton: USA.
- Cottrell, A.B. (1993), 'ATCKs have Problems Relating to Own Ethnic Groups.' (Article 4) Newslinks xiii:2, Princeton: USA.
- Cottrell, A.B. and Useem, R.H. (1994), 'ATCKs Maintain Global Dimensions Throughout Their Lives.' (Article 5) Newslinks xiii:4, Princeton: USA.
- Echerd, P. and Arathoon, A. (eds) (1989), Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family, California: WCIU Press.
- Gerner, M., Perry, F., Moselle, M.A. and Archibold, M. (1992), 'Characteristics of Internationally Mobile Adolescents.' Journal of School Psychology 30:197-214.
- Goodman, R. (1990), Japan's 'International Youth': The Emergence of a New Class of Schoolchildren. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Iyer, P. (1993), 'The Soul of an Intercontinental Wanderer.' in Harper's Magazine, April 1993, USA, taken from a speech given at Yale University.
- McCaig, N.M. (1992), 'Birth of a Notion.' The Global Nomad Quarterly, 1(1):1.
- McCluskey, K.C. (ed) (1994), Notes from a Travel(l)ing Childhood: Readings for Internationally Mobile Parents and Children. Washington DC: Foreign Service Youth Foundation.
- Toffler, A. (1970), Future Shock, London: The Bodley Head.
- Useem, J., Donoghue, J.D. and Useem, ;R.H. (1963), 'Men in the Middle of the Third Culture.' Human Organization, 22(3): 169-179.
- Useem, R.H. and Downie, R.D. (1976), 'Third Culture Kids.' Today's Education, Sept/Oct.
- Useem, R.H. (1993), 'Third Culture Kids: Focus of Major Study.' (Article 1) Newslinks xii(3), Princeton: USA.
- Useem, R.H. (1993), 'TCKs Four Times More Likely to Earn Bachelor's Degrees.' (Article 2) Newslinks xii(5), Princeton: USA.
- Werkman, S.L.(1986), 'Coming Home: Adjustment of Americans to the United States after Living Abroad.' in Austin, C. (ed) (1986), Cross - Cultural Reentry : A Book of Readings, Texas: ACU Press.
- Wertsch, M.E. (1991), Military Brats, New York: Harmony Books.
- Willis, D.B., Enloe, W.M. and Minoura, Y. (1994), 'Transculturals, Transnationals: The New Diaspora.' International Schools Journal, XIV:1 29-42.