The Experiences of TCKs in an International School

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Abstract

The children attending the international school in this study can be typified as third culture kids, or TCKs, experiencing several stages of Pollock and van Reken's (2009) transition cycle; from initially being involved in their current community to reinvolvement in the new host country, each relocation begins with preparing to leave. Along the way there is grief, excitement, loss, and apprehension but also an understanding that there will be a moment to settle before the process begins again. This study provides insight into the experiences of twelve 6-10-year-old TCKs during their transition to a new school in Brussels, Belgium. Data gathered through focus groups and structured activities solicited non-verbal (drawings and notes) and verbal (stories) narratives, contributing to the literature of TCKs s.

Introduction

The children attending the international school in this study can be typified as third culture kids, or TCKs (Pollock & van Reken, 2009). Their experience is marked by high mobility and a cross-cultural lifestyle taking them across the globe, accompanying parents often in pursuit of their professions. A typical TCK might experience several stages of Pollock and van Reken's (2009) transition cycle; from initially being involved in their current community to reinvolvement in the new host country, each relocation begins with preparing to leave. TCKs are in transition while arriving in the new location, with possible feelings of being overwhelmed before settling into an 'entering' stage. Along the way there is grief, excitement, loss, and apprehension but also an understanding that there will be a moment to settle before the process begins again. This project aims to provide insight into the experiences of twelve TCKs during their transition to a new school. Data gathered through focus groups and structured activities solicited non-verbal (drawings and notes) and verbal (stories) narratives, contributing to the literature of TCKs aged 6-10 years.

Literature

Defining TCK

The term 'Third Culture Kid' has been subject to much critique and modification since Useem's conceptualisation in the 1950s. Originally coined to describe American missionary kids growing up in India, the term counted the first culture as their parents' country of origin, the second as the host culture and the third a blend of the first and second cultures 'which is created, shared and carried by persons who are relating societies, or sections thereof, to each other' (Hayden, 2006, p.44). Useem's work (1967) incorporated distinct organisational families of the time, such as children of military personnel and those doing missionary work. Although the prominence of these organizations was the reason for many to relocate, globalisation and individual mobility across borders surged in the past fifty years with

individuals and their families relocating for international work, with reduced or little affiliation to their country of origin. However, the lifestyle characterising these relocations persists and can be characterised by Pollock and van Reken's definition of TCKs:

> *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 (2009, p. 13, emphasis added).*

Both descriptions emphasise the relational aspect as a defining TCK feature. It is in relation to others with a similar lifestyle that sets them apart. While the literature generally agrees with this (Russell, 2011; Moore & Barker, 2012; Dillon & Ali, 2019), naming them 'TCKs' or some other nomenclature is a subject of debate. Hayden (2006) notes that using a generalised term discounts the many levels of complexity characterising a globally mobile lifestyle. For example, are children TCKs if their pattern of mobility and straddling of cultures is due to refugee status? Or is the term reserved solely for those willingly traversing borders? Is the parents' position relevant? Another criticism of the term is its focus on children who are internationally mobile or attend international schooling in multicultural cities, often because of affluent parents. Bonebright (2010) acknowledged that affluence and internationalism were advantages of the TCK experience, collating evidence of a high TCK rate in higher education, whereas equally mobile students such as those of refugees or domestically-mobile families are often termed 'immigrant'. Dillon and Ali (2019) warn that a rose-tinted view of TCKs as exotic expatriates risks 'other'-ing these different groups of children. However, it may be that these groups simply do not expect to be repatriated, which was a characteristic of the third culture Useem described. Aside from intentions to return to the parent's passport country, the overall rapidly growing trend of populations on the move has created contrasting elements defining a globally mobile lifestyle. The UN World Migration Report (2019) estimated that 272 million people, 3.5 per cent of the global population, lived outside of their home country. People no longer relocate primarily for an international organisation or religious group, but also of their own volition, due to economic circumstance or forced displacement, which could be a driving force behind the terminology debate. Pollock and van Reken (2009) also conjured a separate term for adults going overseas for the first time after growing up in a monoculture environment: Third Culture Adults or TCAs. Still others referred to 'sojourner' (Sussman, 2000) which differs from TCK in that parents seldom accompany children. Badwan (2015) used it to describe students abroad in UK Higher Education. Further, Dillon and Ali (2019) examined 'cultural chameleons', 'strange ones', 'cross-culturally mobile students' as terms and concluded that 'TCK' was synonymous with individuals not sensing full ownership of neither the home nor host culture, identifying with those of similar backgrounds and living in cultures that were not their home culture. Another term satisfying the above criteria – *global nomad* was coined by Schaetti and Ramsey (1999) which included the qualifier that such mobility is due to the parent's occupation. Together, these described qualities show that *TCK* and *global nomad* are viewed as synonymous terms. For ease of reference, TCK will be used throughout this paper.

Characterising TCKs and the wider discourse on ownership of culture identity also has real-world implications and spilled over from academia into the public sphere in 2016. In a party conference speech, then Prime Minister Theresa May warned,

> But if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means. (May, 2016).

Although the focus of her speech was on corporate behaviour, the spirit of global citizenship under fire was arguably shared by individuals too. Based on Dillon and Ali's (2019) description, in this context it is entirely possible to identify both as British and as European without belonging to a European state. The fact that global citizenship was a guiding principle in the foundation of the United Nations (Bachelet, 2018) seems to run counter to the politicising of cultural identity for party-political gain. Nevertheless, May's Brexit rhetoric served to bring the issue of internationalism and global identity into the public domain and fuel discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of a globally mobile lifestyle.

The TCK profile

Schaetti and Ramsey (1999) identified *change* as the one constant in the TCK's life. Being subject to multiple relocations throughout periods of significant development, from birth to eighteen years, leads to the question what impact such a lifestyle has on their personality and social-emotional development. Gilbert (2008, p.94) noted that because of their high mobility TCKs are in a 'perpetual state of transition'. Aside from adjusting to differing cultures, language and countries, TCKs also have to adjust to new educational environments. Given that access to education is enshrined in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989), where and how they receive education has become a focus point of the TCK research.

Sears (2012) also acknowledged the *interplay between language, culture and identity* on the life experience of young TCKs. They found that these individuals played different roles associated with specific cultures, characterising TCKs by their ability to manage these 'multiple selves'. Related to this adaptability, Cockburn (2002) added that grief and loss also characterise their experiences. Peterson and Plamondon (2009) observed gender differences too, with less positive affect in men and higher levels of authoritarianism in women. Their research also indicated that certain aspects of a global lifestyle during the developmental years were associated with more positive traits like openness and a broader world view.

Critics of the TCK label such as Rooney (2018), however, take issue with the aforementioned TCK profile. They argue that the negative emphasis on lacking a sense of belonging, loss and culture shock is damaging for teaching strategies and counseling, especially when linked to the individual's lifestyle as opposed to other variables. Rooney (2018, p.13) calls for the TCK label to be dropped, '…a confusing term associated with too many negative connotations'. Echoing Dillon and Ali's warning (2019), Rooney recognises that TCKs can be more uniquely challenged than their non-globally mobile peers, but calls for commonality and recognition of differences rather than highlighting the 'other-ness' of cultures and experiences.

Although some variables attributed to TCKs are experienced by the general population, especially in a rapidly globalizing world, it is still important to recognise the unique interplay of variables and the frequency with which they occur, singling out TCKs as a distinctly challenged group. Specifically, TCK identity formation (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008), relationships (Sears, 2011) and world view (Poonoosamy, 2018) are areas of interest.

TCKs in international schools

International schools have a role to play through formal transition programmes in mitigating negative effects of a globally mobile lifestyle (Bates, 2013). As institutions marked by diversity in student population, curriculum or language of instruction, definitions of international schools vary. Chesworth and Dawe neatly characterised international schools as those 'established to cater for students from a wide variety of cultures who are likely to be internationally mobile as their parents move from country to country' (Hayden, 2006, p.12). Fitzsimons (2019) identifies international schools as a physical representation of a 'third space', borrowing the term from Bhabha (1994) who used it to emphasise the merging of identity and cultures. Within this space, Morales (2015) called for multiculturally competent school counselors while Dixon and Hayden (2008) suggested formalised induction programmes for incoming students would be beneficial. International schools, then, seem to be in a unique position to respond to learning barriers arising from TCKs' globally mobile lifestyles.

Next to hiring policies and concrete procedures, the curricula chosen by international schools often serve to develop qualities in their pupils that are arguably positive characteristics of the TCK profile. The International Primary Curriculum (Fieldwork, 2019, p.14) for example, adopt a temporary fixed position of 'international mindedness' aimed to develop an 'increasing sense of self, of others, the community and the world' and 'should be embedded across learners, teachers and the school community through the tool of the curriculum and in all aspects of school life and beyond'. For individual students, personal learning goals on adaptability, resilience and communication speak to the ability to manage their multiple selves, a positive trait gained through TCK's unsettling and disorienting transition experiences (Sears, 2012). Further, the mission statement of the International Baccalaureate group (IBO, 2013, p.7) to 'develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect'. At the forefront of these curricula dominating English-medium international schooling is the ethos to create open-mindedness and an international outlook, exposing students to the multiple cultures of their peers. These globally accredited curricula also help facilitate the TCK moving on to the next country or repatriating back home, making it possible to obtain an international accreditation such as the IB Diploma or Cambridge iGCSE.

Despite adapting their curricula and school ethos, some note that international schools can and should be doing more for TCKs, especially in countries where local students can also enroll (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2018), as is the case for the school in this study. For example, even though transition programs are found useful in easing TCKs' distress, specific methods supporting transition are rare (Bates, 2013). Raising staff awareness about the needs of TCKs could better inform schools' programs. There are several transition theories which could

inform these such as U and W-curve models and the Intercultural Literacy model, compared by Bates (2013). These describe the chronological stages of an individual's adaptation to their host culture, although there is a limit to TCK generalizability. Pollock and van Reken (2009) offered a Transition Cycle model to better account for the relationship not only between the TCK and their host culture, but also between the individual and their school or family. An aspect that was lacking in the compared models. The five experiences in the cycle are as follows: *involvement – leaving – transition – entering – reinvolvement*, later simplified by Limberg and Lambie (2011) to align with school counseling processes: *transition – entering – leaving*. During transition, TCKs experience arrival at a new school and the culture of the school itself. Next is the entering stage of adjusting and living in the new culture, and finally leaving their current school. With the TCK experience described as such, there is an opportunity for intervention. During the *transitional* stage, TCKs might be observed to be reluctant to make friends or are overconfident of their academic skills. When *entering*, they might seek to establish connections with others with similar experiences, but they might also isolate themselves. In the leaving stage, it was noted by Pollock and van Reken (2009) that TCKs might show an increase in poor behaviour and begin to withdraw from friendship groups. Recommendations for each stage included involving orientation with the family during transition, having a buddy programme in place for the entering phase and some sort of responsive service like creating student T-shirts or books when they are leaving.

The need for such transition programs is also supported by the fact that psychological needs of students 'are as critical to their success at school as are the academic needs' as argued by McKillop-Ostrum (Hayden, 2006, p.73). When in transition, they lack rootedness in the (new) local culture and initially rely on the support of their international schools. From changing schools, friendship groups, learning a new language, familiarising themselves with different curricula and school ethos, children lack agency throughout a relocation process that is simply not created for them. Hayden (2006) warned that parents and educational institutions risk taking children's adaptability for granted without putting the necessary steps in place to ensure TCKs are supported along the way. Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2017) found that schools making an effort to understand TCKs' global mobility, better helped them adjust to the new locale. It also had significant impact on adolescent TCK's identity development. When schools provided some sense of direction and guidance to TCKs it allowed them to better develop a personal ideology (Bailey, 2015).

International schools have shown adjustment in their curriculum approach and support systems that can help the TCK transition experience. However, there is value in eliciting the voice of TCKs themselves at the present time rather than as adults. Gaining insights at the time of TCKs' transition means that international school provisions are grounded in student experiences, as opposed to reflection down the line, facilitating change at a greater frequency. For this reason, this study aims to explore the experiences and expectations of TCKs in an international school, as well as TCK awareness and transition strategies of their teachers.

Methodology

Ontology

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers and TCKs themselves on TCK descriptions, understanding and explanations of transition in relation to schooling. Given that perceptions are intangible, unconsciously held, and based on subjective thoughts and feelings, a qualitative approach (Wellington, 2015) was needed to encourage participants to describe TCK experience and an interpretive approach (Cohen et. al, 2013) to analyse those descriptions to determine perceptions.

These aims were chosen based on research pointing to a lack of focus on specific methods used in educational settings for supporting TCKs in transition (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2017), and a lack of focus on children themselves, at the time of their experiences: 'the voices of younger children are too infrequently heard and, too often, adults visit on children views and perceptions based on their own understanding of the world.' (Dixon & Hayden, 2008, p. 488). Recognising children's autonomy, acknowledging their right to be heard and adopting a child-centred paradigm in research moderately supports Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989). Harcourt and Sargeant further propose that including children's perspectives needs to be considered at all stages of research, with such inquiries ultimately demonstrating '…a tangible benefit for children.' (2011, p. 422).

Using an ethnographic model (Charmaz, 2006), this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of TCKs in an international school?
   1.1. What support do TCKs want when transitioning to an international school?

2. How do international school teachers define TCKs?
   2.1. What strategies do teachers use to support TCKs in class during transition?

An interpretive paradigm shapes the research with non-directive interviewing and accounts constituting the qualitative data generated by focus groups.

Working within an ethical framework

Ethical aspects of working with children shaped research design. Permission to undertake the study was granted by my Head of School. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Sheffield following submission of project information sheets (see Appendix A) and personalized consent forms. Participants did not receive compensation and no coercion was used to solicit participation. I liaised with the class teachers of prospective participants to explain the proposal to their class. In presenting the study, I avoided the language of power that could assume already-granted permission. Both the children to be included in the study and those selected for piloting were then invited to participate. In seeking informed consent, next to parental documents, child-friendly project details and consent forms were created to better situate the research within children's 'sphere of understanding' as suggested by Harcourt and Sargeant (2011). Ground rules were also established following Gibson's (2012) notes on child-friendly interview techniques, with children having a chance to contribute additional rules before each session.

These ground rules aimed to set boundaries but also to mitigate a classroom climate of obedience given the research was conducted at school. For this reason, the library reading corner with relaxed seating was chosen to hold the focus groups. This context and my position as a teacher in school, also informed ethical implications of working with children and the influence this could exert on the focus group process. Building trust is a key aspect of conducting focus groups with young children and increased comfort can facilitate trust (Gibson, 2012). This was engendered because the students knew me and the research took place in a familiar setting. In an effort to reduce the power differential, some appropriate personal information was disclosed to participants. Gibson (2007) found that this approach was useful in moving from a hierarchical relationship towards more of a partnership with children. The disclosure of suitable personal information such as being a Canadian-born individual to parents of the UK and the Caribbean and attending schools in both the UK and Canada resonated with those students who had a globally-transient lifestyle. On the other hand, developing an awareness of the structures of compliance inherent in teacher-student and adult-child relationships was also critical in shaping design. Reiterating the message that initial consent is not a final decision, opportunities to withdraw consent were presented after the ground rules. Throughout the project I maintained a critical reflexivity, acknowledging my cultural positioning and how my representation influenced rapport with participants. In this way I negotiated different identities as described by Savvides et. al (2014).

Focus groups

Age differences within cohorts was minimized to 1-2 years and the lower age limit was six years old, heeding Gibson's (2007) advice that students' developmental cognition should be taken into account as well as their age. Mixed gender groups for children aged under eleven were used, as suggested by Morgan et. al (2002). I recruited fifty-two children who were admitted to the school in the past fourteen months and who had lived in at least two different countries through non-probability purposive sampling strategy. A pilot study was proposed to determine an appropriate space to conduct the focus group, adjust the wording of guiding questions/prompts (see Appendix E) and determine suitable activities. The pilot study was anticipated to run with students who had been at the school between twelve and fourteen months, while the focus group would use students admitted within the academic year.

A focus group approach was also planned to gain teachers' perceptions of TCKs. Borrowing from creative problem-solving approaches (Higgins and Reeves, 2006), a silent brainstorm would orient responses to the question: *'In what ways might we support globally-mobile students?'*. I sourced teacher ground rules from the online Academic Skills Centre from the University of Sheffield (2020). A primary staff meeting invitation where project details were outlined served to recruit teacher participants and distribute adult consent forms.

Practicalities of recruitment and feasibility of the study itself were made difficult by the onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19), which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 12 2020 (WHO, 2020). In the lead-up to this statement, my school witnessed an attrition rate in attendance, with parents also pulling students from after-school clubs to limit exposure in public spaces. Other international schools in the region that had begun to close ahead of government recommendations compounded this effect. The Belgian Federal Public Service announced that from midnight the following day lessons were to be

suspended (FPS, 2020). Amidst the outbreak of the pandemic, response rates for teacher participation were nil. Due to these circumstances I abandoned the pilot study and organized focus groups on the final day of school with those children who had granted consent.

Method

A total of 12 students were recruited (cohort 1, $N_{age\ 6-8}$ = 3; cohort 2, $N_{age\ 8}$ = 3; cohort 3, $N_{age\ 10}$ = 6). Initially students were encouraged to move around the space in a warm-up session reiterating a participatory message, aiming to promote group cohesiveness (Morgan et. al 2002). Self-disclosure and reduced inhibitions were induced through a structured activity adapted from McCabe and Horsley (2008). The technique borrowed from participatory research methods and was used to generate individual initial ideas and issues around the topic of 'changing schools'. The structured activity (see image 1) served as a springboard into discussion, setting a framework in which to guide the focus groups and refer back to as an aide-memoire. Options to draw or write made the task accessible to older and younger participants whilst ensuring the task offered continuity to the design of the actual focus group (Gibson, 2007). The impetus to use non-verbal data collection was based on the child-friendly Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (Lijadi & van Schalwyk, 2014) which also posited that the use of shorter exercises serves to maintain children's concentration and interest.

Image 1: Structured activity

A focus group interview was chosen because of the emphasis on interaction within the group and ability to empower participants to speak out in their own words (Cohen et. al, 2013). The non-directive interviewing technique was followed as a developmentally-effective method to explore young children's perceptions, allowing for spontaneous sharing of thoughts. As children are more likely than adults to need help in telling their stories (Gibson, 2012), this technique granted flexibility. Prompts and follow-up questions helped encourage thoughtful and detailed responses. Dominant and reticent participants were managed through a reminder of the ground rules, balancing whole-group vs. individual questioning and use of non-verbal participation strategies. Given the small group sizes, focus groups were considered manageable by a single researcher (Morgan et. Al, 2002) and audio recording was deemed to be the least intrusive method of capturing the spoken word. I transcribed all focus groups verbatim.

Analysis and Findings

Focus groups ran for approximately 1 hour each. Data were analysed and coded using NVIVO v9.0. An analytical framework was established following Limberg and Lambie's (2011) simplified three-stage Transition Cycle Model. The two stages *leaving* and *transition* were selected as themes (see Table 1) to organise the data in line with the research questions.

Table 1
Data analysis: themes, emerging categories and descriptors

Themes	Categories	Descriptors
Leaving	Reasons for relocating	Loosening ties, disappointment, anticipation, impending move
Transition	Changes Keeping in touch Surprises Thinking ahead Curriculum Relationships Hopes	Leaving community, panic, family dysfunction and chaos.

Twelve children participated across three focus groups: 6 boys and 6 girls, from 4 different countries (see Table 2). Given the quantity of data and qualitative nature of the design there was no correlational analysis or inferential statistics. The small scale of the study set in one international school is a limitation, and thus the findings make no claim to be generalizable.

Table 2
Profile of participants

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3
Age	6 → 8 years	8 years	10 years
Nationalities	Indian, British, Indonesian	Indian, American	Indian, British, Romanian, Indonesian
Male	2	2	2
Female	1	1	4

A defining feature of the TCK profile is relocation due to parental employment (Dillon & Ali, 2019). This was true for every participant and always attributed to the father's profession. Older children seemed to be aware of an on-going pattern of mobility, as put by one participant, aged 8: 'My father has been working in a company for 20 years, that's why he's been shifting a lot'. One Year 5 boy also mentioned an element of choice, despite a lack of autonomy often noted (Pollock & van Reken, 2009) in TCK profiles: 'But we could also choose not to go but we do go just for the experience to see new countries'. Notable was that on average these young children had lived in three countries, so each had experienced at least two international relocations before turning ten.

The themes *leaving* and *transition* are explored below, with subcategories that arose through a constant comparative and contrast method (Wellington, 2015). To support each of these themes, verbatim quotes from the three cohorts' transcriptions are used in each subcategory.

Leaving: Relationships

> *When I told like, 'I'm going to Belgium' to all my friends, they took my lunch bag alone. And with the marker, they wrote all the messages… I couldn't take the lunch bag over here so I just took a picture… then they all gave me gifts…and their phone numbers.*

In addition to a high level of mobility, TCKs also experience loss more frequently with each move (Pollock & van Reken, 2009). The impact of leaving was most often discussed in relation to abandoned friendships. Some, like the 10 year-old girl in the above example, recalled acts of kindness and memory-making by old friends too.

During the leaving stage not only are friendships impacted, but the family unit itself too. Ten of the participating children had a sibling who accompanied them. Approaching departure, this 8 year-old girl described changes within the family, between parents and amongst siblings:

> *He [my brother] also used to learn French in India. So he was learning facts about Belgium and then he used to tell us. And then my mother started speaking French and then she always says, 's'il vous plait, do this please, wash the dishes s'il vous plait!'*

One child's family had already made three domestic moves before relocating to Belgium. He understood with each move that access to friends was more complicated. However, he was able to look forward to an unknown future while acknowledging the apprehension he felt during transitioning, typifying the TCK experience as being 'between two worlds':

> *Before…when we move to places that are near our school, or near our house, we can still visit at our friend's house. But if it's too far, we can't just keep on going like every day. So, it takes a lot of time…I'm missing my friends. And being nervous. A little bit excited to learn languages and make new friends.*

Transition: Relationships

In the transition stage, children have arrived at their new destination, start to settle in and become acquainted to it, yet Pollock and van Reken (2009) describe it as 'chaos'. Indeed, across each cohort, students recalled feelings of anxiety: 'I was…a bit scared to make new friends.', 'So in the first day, I didn't know what to do. I was so nervous', and 'My sister makes me laugh when I'm scared of making new friends'. Interestingly, for the majority who had a sibling, reference to them was most frequent when discussing transitioning as opposed to other stages. TCKs often have strong family bonds. Bates (2013) found that the most cohesive families were those who made attempts to strengthen the family unit while maintaining a mobile lifestyle. The stress management of a sibling could constitute this support, providing a buffer during transition.

Some cohort differences were observed. With lower primary students unfamiliarity of peers was a frequently cited concern as put by one boy aged 8: 'I was kinda scared, like, how will they look like? …what will they be like?' Moving from South East Asia to Belgium, his comment on the appearance of other students was an insight into cultural adjustment. One of the youngest participants, offered a unique problem upon his arrival: 'Then I didn't know the language of them. That's why I just, I was playing with my brother.' The majority of children spoke English as an additional language, while some were fluent in up to four languages together with two native English speakers. Transition experience and making friends was clearly influenced by language proficiency. Amongst upper primary students, apprehension about making friends was evident, but transition was also viewed as a positive opportunity to explore new relationships with students and teachers as told by "Jay," a ten-year old girl:

> *I know how to make friends. I know to introduce myself already, because I've done that a lot of times before and it becomes easier and easier then every time you do it.*

Older children tended to have more relocation experiences, which is posited as a reason for their more positive outlook on relationships as this ten year old recalled:

> *They wanted to learn new games from me…I taught them so many games that I used to play in India with my old friends. And they all loved it. And we all… I felt so comfortable.*

During transition, Pollock and van Reken (2009) note that although TCKs carry knowledge of people, places or processes from past experiences, they rarely get to use that knowledge in their new environment. The example of sharing something as simple as a playground game fostered connection and continuity with the past and served to build relationships with peers. Finding commonalities was also a tactic in relationship-building by another participant aged eight, describing meeting her best friend: 'She was sitting right next to me and she loved the same thing I loved…Chinese food!' Across all cohorts, references to friends were the most frequent. The acknowledgement of friendship loss and anticipation of making new friends was bridged by accounts of how TCKs also maintained relationships:

> *It's hard going to a new place because friends are very important. They keep you in contact and they're someone to always to be with to be fun with and if you go to somewhere else, it's usually hard leaving them' ("Shree", 10 years old).*

Between leaving and transition: Keeping in touch

While most participants recognised that friends were important, older children made more frequent references to maintaining contact, often grouped by country:

> *Yeah, the ones from Malaysia we…talk on my iPad with all of us, just talk on the weekends together. And then there's one from Zambia and the rest… I don't keep in contact that much" ("Jay," 10 years old).*

The lived experience of TCKs are impacted by changes in communication across distance. While transitioning, they are navigating new relationships in their school and community, but some also keep in touch with those left behind, often through the internet:

> *They're one of my best friends so I just want to keep in touch and they're the only one who ask me… I communicate with one on Roblox and one on Facebook ("Lee," 8 years old).*

The skills needed to communicate digitally are acknowledged as literacy-rich learning experiences for TCKs, with a call for international educators to further explore these online spaces within the curriculum of social citizenship (Hannaford, 2016).

Transition: The Unexpected

Hayden (2006) proposed two forms of culture shock are experienced by transitioning TCKs: one towards the host country culture and another towards the culture of the new international school. Whether it was the host country's history, school administration or aspects of the curriculum, each cohort identified unexpected aspects during transition. They looked back fondly on some parts, while looking forward to discovering others, as one ten year old girl stated:

> *It was good because it was really different to Malaysia or any other place I've lived in because in every other place it was hot. And that just be like one season for the whole entire year it'd either be hot and get a little bit chilly and that was it. But in, here, they have like, all the seasons and it actually…snowed a bit and that's the first time I've ever seen snow. So I like it. And there's much more history and architecture in here than Malaysia.*

This novel experience contributed to her culture shock towards the host country. Other students were surprised by available resources in their new school:

> *In my older school we had our own woods...even primary students had things that you can play with like unicycles, skateboards, scooters and those stuff' ("Ellie", 10 years old).*

Some were impressed by opportunities for residential trips, personal laptops or the relaxed attitude of staff. Still, some parts of the daily school routine proved memorable for these Year 4 boys: 'I was thinking like - what is PE?', 'Like IPC, I didn't knew what was the full forms' - both students expressing unfamiliarity with the names of lessons. Although these examples are not necessarily barriers to learning, these questions could easily be assuaged by prior information on the new school and host country. Inclusive of aspects like climate and host country traditions, as a Year 5 girl pondered: 'I wish I knew more about the culture and how they like… celebrated things here'. Some participants also named more practical aspects like getting to know teachers or contacting classmates in the hope to:

> *…know more information about the school, like more about your curriculum, what we know and being prepared and then you can come and you can be ready and not nervous' ("Aryan", 10 years old).*

Conclusion

This study explored TCK experiences in international schooling through children's journeys across themes of *leaving* and *transition*. Recorded experiences pointed to some negative shared aspects, such as grief of loss over places or people. However, there were also positive elements like the resilience these young children expressed and their ability not only to recognise the less desirable parts of their experiences, but also their expectations of improvement. Repeated cycles of transitioning, entering and leaving could be the source of this confidence, dependent on age and number of relocations. In terms of immediate support for TCKs, one common area was the presence of a sibling. Often this was linked to playtime, when all students can interact freely on the playground, along with their siblings. For some students though, transition was a moment of anxiety either due to language constraints or lack of peers. Older participants also identified specific information as welcomed support, like details on their new teachers or getting an 'inside scoop' on the workings of their new school. In response to these findings, a buddy system at international schools could help minimize potential negative impacts TCKs sometimes experience, especially when they struggle with grief over their previous environment or when they don't have a sibling to fall back on.

This study also highlighted the significance of friendship formation during TCK's transitions. As the international school of the participants accepted host-country students, further research could explore the experiences of those less globally-mobile children who are 'left behind' by their transitioning peers. Emulating Fitzsimons' (2019) use of students forming a research advisory group could also be a component of future research to inform the way schools support TCKs. As the cultural composition of a school informs its identity (Poonoosamy, 2018), comparing TCK experiences between international schools that differ in their student demographics could also be worthwhile.

The ability to collect and analyse data simultaneously and refer back to one another across multiple meetings of the same focus group was reduced by the unprecedented restrictions on schooling and the wider public as a result of COVID-19. Future research could therefore explore the emergent category of sibling impact on transition experiences, or compare this study's findings to how TCKs progress academically and the perceptions held by their teachers and peers. Further data could also be collected over a longer time frame by following TCKs through each of the three Transition Cycle stages. This to further identify at what point TCKs begin to feel comfortable and settled in their host school, both personally and academically.

> *If you keep doing it, it's hard to get used to everything. But it's not always the dark side that you should look at. It's also the good side. Because there are still new things. You can see more cultures, more languages, more people. And it's always interesting to see that ("Shree", ten-years old).*

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