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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Life Between Nations: Third Culture Kids

Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

Fall 2019

By

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Mentor

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## Life Between Nations: Third Culture Kids

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“Third Culture Kids” (TCKs) spend several years of their childhood living in a different culture than the one their parents grew up in. Each TCK has a different experience, from location to number of moves to years spent abroad, but TCKs tend to share a unique bond, one that can only form from an understanding of what it is like to grow up between nations. Research and observations of TCKs began in the 60’s but the modern understanding of what a third culture kid is has been formed in the past 20 or so years. While there is abundant research on TCKs and the different experiences and challenges they have, there seems to be a lack of fiction targeting older elementary and middle school aged TCKs. Through this creative research project, academic research regarding TCKs was collected and compiled so it could be used to write a middle school level story about life in an international school. Children spend a lot of time at school, especially when they are introduced to a new culture or temporary home. The halls of an international school best embody the cultural melting pot that is the “third culture”. This project and the story that accompanies it was written with the goal of perhaps one day helping a TCK as they begin a new chapter of life growing up around the world.

*Keywords and phrases:* Honors Thesis, Undergraduate Research, Creative Research Project, Third Culture Kids, Cross-Cultural Kids, International Schools

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Underwood for her help and guidance with this project. With her help I was able to look beyond my own experience as a third culture kid to make the halls of the American School in Tokyo come alive.

I would also like to thank my parents, Rodd and Carroll Neely for taking me to Japan all those years ago. Their constant support has made it possible for me stay curious about the world around me. And of course, without them and our few years overseas, I would not have nearly as much writing material.

## **Setting the Stage**

Middle school can be difficult, not always on an academic level but almost always on a social level. Growing up, getting older, learning about the world and gaining a better understanding of where one might fit in are all part of this age. For the average student, they go to school in a country in which their parents and siblings were also educated. Their classmates and teachers and coaches all come from the same cultural background. There is an unspoken understanding about how their corner of the world works and students, these middle school kids, learn about their culture and the unspoken rules of their world by consistent interactions from people who are the same. So, what happens when a student's family moves halfway across the world to a new country with a new language and a new culture with a different set of unspoken rules? Simply put, the student is still learning and growing and absorbing information in the say way. However, they may now be in an international school full of students from all over the world, full of classmates and teachers and coaches who all have different cultures and understandings of how the world works based on their understandings.

When this student one day returns to their "home" country, they are now surrounded with people who know that culture well. They know the rules well. They know what's expected and normal in their circle. Since the returning student most likely looks like all of their new classmates, they are also expected to know the same information and they are expected to understand culture in the same way as those around them. For a period, there might be a disconnect between the students who stayed and the student who left as they try to understand each other better through the lenses of their experiences.

The student who returned is not exactly like their classmates from across the world, but they aren't the same as their classmates back home either. So, that leaves the question, where do they belong? Where are they from? This move makes them expatriates, people living outside of the country they are from. Researchers have spent several decades studying children of expatriates to better understand how a life split by two or more cultures can change how they perceive the world, how they view their place in the world, and how they find a place of belonging and home amongst others who grew up like them.

John and Ruth Useem began to take an interest in third culture kids in the 50's and 60's as American businessmen began to move to India to work with some larger international businesses. As the American and Indian workers began to work together and learn from each other, they took bits and pieces of each other's cultures into the work environment. This resulted in a workspace that was different from the United States but also different from surrounding Indian companies. This difference was termed the "third culture" (Useem & Useem, 1967). Not exactly American while not exactly Indian. It also led to workers at these multicultural businesses to become "men in the middle" with the ability to effectively communicate and understand people from both cultures (Useem, 1963).

The parents in the workforce had to learn how to navigate a new culture of course, but in a different way than their children. The Useems shifted their research from the "men in the middle" of the workforce to the children who were growing up with influence from both the home culture and the host culture. This mixing of the home culture and the host culture forms a third culture and thus the term "Third Culture Kids"

(TCKs) was formed. Since then people have written articles, studies, and books about third culture kids and their experiences growing up around several cultures.

The basis of this creative research project stems from connecting the difficulty of middle school with the complexities of forming a cultural identity while abroad. This has been done by gaining a strong background into the world of TCKs through research and personal accounts of being a TCK. The research that was done was used as a starting point for writing a middle school level story set in an international school in Japan. The story looks at the interactions between students from different backgrounds and cultures all navigating middle school as third culture kids and cross-cultural kids (CCK) with the hope that it might one day be able to help students learning to navigate similar situations. The following section will dive deeper into the more recent research regarding TCKs and CCKs before the creative aspect of this project is discussed in more detail.

### **The Research:**

The truest or most accurate definition of a third culture kid has been attributed to David Pollock from his book *Third Culture Kids: Growing up Among Worlds*;

A person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside of the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the 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 the same background. (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999, p. 19)



Understanding that TCKs are in a position where each new culture is ultimately temporary is an important part of understanding why they are different from immigrant or refugees who might have similar experiences while learning how to operate in multiple cultures. Researchers noticed that people who were not technically TCKs related to the same feelings and situations that were often described in TCK experiences. Another term was coined to fill the gap left by the limitations of the TCK definition. The term “Cross-Cultural Kid” was coined by Ruth Van Reken, the co-author of *Third Culture Kids: Growing up Among Worlds*. She formed this definition in response to people who related heavily to the characteristics of TCKs that were found in her book but were not technically TCKs. The definition goes as follows:

A Cross-Cultural Kid (CCK) is a person who is living in – or meaningfully interacting with – two or more cultural environments for a significant period of time during the developmental years of childhood (up to age 18). (Van Reken, 2001, p. 33)

These two definitions set the foundation for an understanding into the world of third culture kids, cross-cultural kids, and international schools.

Pollock and Van Reken’s book on TCKs has been considered the authority on the topic since it was first published, and for good reason too. Many of the characteristics that they describe have resonated with TCKs across the world for years. This pair highlights two sides of a spectrum in many different characteristics that can arise from a childhood spent abroad. For example, adaptability vs. lack of cultural balance or blending in vs. defining the differences or even appreciative of authority vs. mistrustful of authority (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999). No two experiences are the same and no two

TCKs will adjust to the challenges of forming a cultural identity in the midst of change in the same way. The characteristics laid out in this book heavily influenced the characters in the project. More details about that will be explained later.

While TCKs have access to experiences that most people never will, there are also some difficulties that come with being raised away from their passport country. Identity is formed during childhood and cultural identity is formed by interacting with and learning from the world around you. For children who move between cultures while growing up, this can add some confusion or uncertainty as they form their cultural identity. Many TCKs end up acting as chameleons in each new environment so they can blend in with the culture. For example, they can act and speak one way at home, one way with peers from an international school, and another way with peers from “home”. While this is helpful in the moment, there is the possibility that it could have longer lasting effects as their identity is formed into adulthood (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004).

Many researchers believe that 9 to 15 are some of the most crucial years when it comes to identity formation for TCKs. This was found to be especially true for Japanese TCKs who spent several years overseas. Asako Uehara did a study in 1986 and noticed that Japanese students who had lived in American between the ages of 9 and 15 were more likely to identify as American than Japanese (Fail, et al., 2004). The Japanese have their own term for TCKs, *kaigaishijo* for children who live with their working parents overseas and *kikokushijo* for children who return to Japan at the end of the assignment. In the 1960’s this was considered the *kaigaishijo-kikokushijo* problem since upon return, these students did not act Japanese and educators assumed they would be academically behind. The general attitude towards these children began to change in the 80’s and has

drastically improved over the past 20 or so years. Companies and universities began to see that these students could be an asset since many were bilingual and had a decent understanding of another (most likely western) culture (Fry, 2007).

By looking at the Japanese TCKs, we can gain a better understanding of how third culture kids can seem to have multiple identities when they are interacting with different people or when they are living in different places. Various studies have been done relating to TCKs to check their religious tolerance (Melles & Frey, 2017), their likelihood to be a future business expatriate (Selmer & Lam, 2004), and even the effect that multiculturalism can have on personality (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). Living an international and almost nomadic lifestyle can impact a person in many different ways however many of these differences are best noted and looked at through the lens of the international school.

International schools are where the third culture comes together for children. Just as the initial research from the 50's and 60's cited the third culture of work; international schools are where students interact with the third culture the most. They are influenced there by their home culture, their host culture, and dozens of other cultures that their peers and teachers may be from. International schools also allow students a place to become more interculturally aware and mindful of those around them (Poonosamy, 2019). Each international school experience is different; however, it is that difference that TCKs often bond over. They can feel at home with someone who lived a very different life based on the fact that they both understand that life at an international school is different.

Part of this connection may come from the fact that many accredited and well-recognized international schools use the same curriculum. The International Baccalaureate program allows students to move schools, even countries, but still be on track with a single curriculum. Each school may implement it differently, but it is still used to promote cultural understanding, even if it is through a more western worldview (Poonoosamy, 2018). These schools can offer a sense of familiarity to TCKs from the west while at the same time seeming completely foreign to TCKs and even CCKs from other areas of the world.

Since international schools are so diverse, educators are interesting in ways to best reach their students. One way to reach them is through the school counselor. Articles and papers have been written to address ways that guidance counselors can assist students from many different backgrounds adjust well in their constantly changing world. As Limberg and Lambie put it, “School counselors need to recognize both the positive and negative impact of globalization on students’ development and design their school-based services to address the diverse needs of all students and stakeholders, including TCKs” (Limberg & Lambie, 2011, p. 47). Counselors need to be especially prepared to assist students with the difficulties and negative effects that they could experience while transiting. Changing schools in their home country is difficult enough but adding in a new school and a new country at the same time might seem like too much to handle at once. Even though TCKs have the chance to experience more of the world than most people their age, it comes with a sense of loss after each move. This article suggested a “school-based transition program” that would allow the student and the family to have some support during different transition periods. When implemented, it looks like

meeting with the student and the family at the school before the first day. It involves checking in on the student during the semester. And finally, it involves talking with the student as they prepare to return home as well. Having a place to sort out a confused identity and feelings of loss can lead to lower levels of anxiety in TCKs (Limberg & Lambie, 2011).

Third culture kids live between nations, not fully part of anyone group and extremely adaptable in new situations. As the world is becoming more connected, the ways that TCKs interact with their peers is rapidly changing. Children can easily keep in touch with friends around the world in a way that previous generations could not. In the coming years, educators and researchers may become more interested in the roles that technology may play in the lives of TCKs.

Third culture kids are ultimately at home everywhere and nowhere. Some do not know where home really is or what group they belong to. Having a title gives can give a sense of belonging to some adults as they sort through their childhood experiences in comparison to those around them. The third culture for most TCKs is not first formed with their peers who were born and raised in the host country, rather it usually found in the local international school. These schools are where the third culture flourishes as the overall cultural makeup can have a high turnover. As one author put it, international schools are “creative communities with a cause” (Taylor, 2015). There is no community quite like them anywhere else, and that is where is creative part of this creative research project begins.

## **The Purpose**

Perhaps one of my biggest motivations for doing this project stemmed from a place of wanting to help someone. Moving can be difficult. Starting at a new school can be difficult. Moving to a new country where you do not speak the language and starting at a new school with people who may or may not speak your language as well as you do is challenging. Especially when a child in this position is not too sure of how long they will be staying or if they will be moving again. Life as a TCK can be deeply enriching and extremely rewarding, but sometimes kids do not know that at the time. If a simple story could begin to open their eyes to the larger world around them, it could make the transition easier and the overall experience better.

Another strong motivator for this project was curiosity. I had the opportunity to live in Kobe, Japan, for five years with my family. We moved for my dad's job just like many other expatriates. Despite the fact that I was in the middle of my own third culture, I did not hear the term third culture kids until I returned to the States. Off and on over the past few years I have looked into TCKs and the third culture so going into this project I had a general idea of what I might learn. However, doing this project the way that I did, I have learned more than I anticipated and more than I could have learned without some guidance.

What I would consider my third, and perhaps more personal reason for this project comes in the form of a promise I made to myself in eighth grade. Sitting in my homeroom at my international school in Japan, I told myself that I would write a book one day. It seems fitting that the story I promised to write is in part inspired by that very

same international school. Being able to do a creative research project has allowed me to fulfill a dream of little thirteen-year-old me.

### **The Creative Process**

As with any creative writing project, this one started with an idea. My first idea came to me as I began researching TCKs and the transitions that they experience. I wanted to tell a story about repatriation—the process of returning “home”. I had the idea for a family returning to the United States in time for their youngest daughter to start high school in the States despite the fact that she and her brothers had grown up around the world. The inspiration for this story came in part from firsthand accounts I had read regarding repatriations and the feelings that come along with it and in part from my own experiences. One of the books I read when considering this story line was *Rituals of Separation: A South Korean Memoir of Identity and Belonging* by Elizabeth Rice. I read her story and others like it in my research and wanted to replicate the same feelings in the characters of my own story.

However, as I began to dig deeper into my research about TCKs and the communities that they form, I found myself being lured into the idea of international schools. I began to see a story set in an international school, with several characters navigating their own culture, the host culture, and the school culture. If I was going to write a story about the third culture, I decided that I needed to dive into the third culture rather than look at it through the lens of someone who had recently left.

Another motivator in my decision to change my story came from the realization that I really wanted this to be a middle school aged story. Middle school is sort of the in-

between, no longer a child but not yet a full-fledged teenager either. Developmentally, it is a time of great change, lots of learning, and some internal struggle. This age group, roughly eleven to fourteen, is a time of growth into oneself and one's environment. I wanted to see a story focused on this age group as they navigate their home lives and their lives in the third culture.

Once I had my general storyline and overall motivation established, I took what I had learned from my research – primarily the different characteristics that I gathered from Pollock's book, I slowly formed characters. Since I have never attempted a story of this size before, I wanted to keep it as simple as possible. So, I had my main character, Baylee Williams, a rival, Karen Ikeda, and a handful of side characters.

The decision to place the school in Japan came from my experience. I did not want to add too many unfamiliar elements, like a country that I know nothing about. If I needed to write scenes about an American learning about or interacting with Japanese culture, I felt qualified enough to do it justice. The American School of Tokyo needed teachers of course, and in true international school fashion, they were from a handful of different countries and cultures. The majority were from English speaking countries of course, but a few were not Americans. While this did not play a large part in the story, there is a possibility to incorporate this into later stories.

Once I had the characters, settings, and general feel of the school established, I created a short outline in order to keep myself on track of what should happen which day in Baylee's journal. It was a simple outline just written date and event. This simple outline was enough to get me started, but I found myself deviating from it rather quickly. Some people do well with a detailed outline for writing, but with this being my first big



writing project, I adjusted along the way to ensure that the story would be complete and the ending reasonable.

One of the biggest challenges I had was simply sitting down to write. Some days I would be able to write a couple thousand words at a time. Other days I had no idea what should come next. This project challenged me in ways other writing jobs have not and I am glad that was I was able to learn more about TCKs and international schools by telling a story.

### **The Research and the Creative Project**

With my research and my idea in hand, the next step in the project was to put the two together. I attempted to incorporate research I had gathered about TCKs, CCKs, international schools, and educating TCKs together in subtle but clear ways. I did not want the research to be very obvious, as if I was attempting to make it more about the research than the characters and their stories.

I started with what I considered the easiest part, the main characters. I took the characteristics from Pollock's book and thought about where Baylee and to some extent Karen would fit in based on the descriptions. I was then able to incorporate these characteristics into their personalities. But I did not want it to be set in stone, for example Baylee started out isolating herself from others but in the end was able to realize that there might be some benefits to relying on those around her. In a similar manner, Karen was able to go from distancing herself from those who were only going to move again to seeing the value in friends who might only stay for a year or two.

I focused on three main comparisons that Pollock wrote about: adaptability vs. lack of cultural balance, blending in vs. defining the differences, and the importance of now vs. delusion of choice. I applied these to both Baylee and Karen, even though Karen is more of a CCK rather than a TCK. Baylee starts off as very adaptable, she can adjust to any new situation with relative ease. However, she does this by keeping her distance from others. She prefers to step back and blend into the background rather than go about and make connections with everyone she meets. She also embodies the idea of the importance of now. She wants to be a famous news reporter and she is going to do whatever it takes to get there, even if the opportunity she is going after will not be available to her after her next move.

Karen in a way is the opposite of Baylee. Karen is half-Korean, half-Japanese, going to an English-speaking school. There is a strong disconnect between her school life and her home life, yet she is also expected to fit in as a typically Japanese student (because she looks Japanese). While she may not realize it yet, she does not have a secure cultural identity. In addition to this, she makes it clear to her classmates that she should be more important than them because she has been at the school longer. She wants the new kids to know that she has been there longer and therefore knows the school better than they ever will. Finally, she believes that Baylee should be in the delusion of choice group. Karen thinks that school leadership positions should only be given to those who are going to be around for longer than a year or two.

This expert from the story highlights a bit of this dynamic. Baylee has just gotten home from school, where she had another bad run in with Karen:

I am actually literally very livid right now. I do not have the right words to explain how much I hate Karen Ikeda. Sure, hate is a strong word and should be reserved for equally strong feelings. Like how I hate people who are mean to dogs or how I hate people who think that their backpack deserves a seat on the subway.

But I did name her my arch nemesis. So maybe it would be weird if I didn't hate her.

Ugh, today was just a crap day.

I hate middle school.

Okay, so the beginning of the day wasn't too bad. It was good even. I got an answer right in math and we got to practice creative writing in English and soon we'll get to do experiments in science class. So, like, school wise it was a decent day and I am civil with my classmates. Although Miles keeps trying to get me to be friends with his other friends. He doesn't seem to get that I'm more of a lone wolf who occasionally asks for assistance when in a new environment.

That sounded dumb. But honestly does it even matter? It was a day and I am allowed to be dumb and I'm allowed to fill my notebook pages with nonsense about what a terrible person Karen is and how stupid she is for thinking that she can beat me at writing. (Neely, 2019, p. 11-12)

Baylee is frustrated with Karen for trying to keep her away from a leadership position for the school newspaper. She is upset with Miles for trying to help her make friends, she is used to being on her own and she likes it that way. Even some of Karen's motivations can be seen here. Karen's hostility does not come from thinking that she is a better writer, it comes from knowing that Baylee will leave. And if she is going to leave, what is the point in trying to be nice? On top of the factors that come with being a TCK and a CCK, this part also highlights the fact that middle school is sometimes just hard.

In addition to shaping the characters and their interactions, I also attempted to include research that would impact the day to day workings of the school. Baylee and her classmates participate in a school sponsored peer support group once a week. A couple of eighth graders facilitate conversations about life and it often branches into parts of life that are unique to the TCK and CCK communities. In addition to this, the school has middle school wide assemblies to talk about various school issues, cultural issues, or simply to find a way to form a stronger community. Baylee also refers to times that she has had to speak with a guidance counselor. While she did not understand why it was necessary, some of my research suggested that these kinds of check ins can assist students as they transition.

There are certainly countless other aspects of TCK and international school life that I could have looked into and applied to my story. However, I did not want to bombard the reader with facts or strict examples. Each experience and each child is ultimately different and the research that has been done focuses on trends and on how most children respond. For a novel that is meant to help someone trying to make better sense of their third culture kid journey, I wanted to keep it as simple as possible.

## **Conclusion**

Third culture kids experience a different kind of childhood, especially when compared to their friends and family back “home”. Because of this, they tend to find community not by appearance or shared hometown or home state but rather through their experience of living around the world. When a group of TCKs gets together, it does not take long for stories to begin to flow and for bonds of understanding to form.

With the changing world however, TCKs as we know and understand are changing. With ways of communication and transportation changing and becoming more accessible, more people are living these cross-cultural lives. More people are able to stay in touch with “home”. These changes could bring about a new and different understanding of TCKs in the next 10, 15, or 20 years. This is especially true since the book that is considered the authority on all things TCK was written twenty years ago. A lot has changed since then, and while that does not change the truth and importance of what was written, it could leave gaps for what the TCK experience will be like in the coming years.

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