

BRINGING THIRD CULTURE KIDS TOGETHER: BUILDING A TCK NETWORK IN YOUR LIBRARY

by Rebecca Lee Perkins



‘I am
A confusion of cultures.
Uniquely me.
I think this is good
Because I can
Understand the traveler, sojourner, foreigner,
The homesickness
That comes.
I think this is also bad
Because I cannot be understood
By the person who has sown and grown in one place.
They know not the real meaning of homesickness
That hits me
Now and then.
Sometimes I despair of understanding them.
I am
An island
And
A United Nations.
Who can recognize either in me
But God?’
“Uniquely Me” by Alex Graham James
(qtd. in Pollock and Van Reken, 37)

INTRODUCTION

Several months ago, I had the privilege of reading *Born Confused* authored by Tanuja Desai Hidier as a requirement for a seminar on issues and trends in young adult literature. In this novel, an Asian teenager struggles with self-identity while living with her Indian parents in the United States. Feeling the impact of both an eastern and western culture, she expresses:

...not quite Indian, and not quite American. Usually I felt more along the lines of Alien (however legal, as my Jersey birth certificate attests to). The only times I retreated to one or the other description were when my peers didn’t understand me (then I figured it was because I was too Indian) or when my family didn’t get it (clearly because I was too American)... Sometimes I was too Indian in America, yes, but in India, I was definitely not Indian enough (13)

This statement compelled me to continue on a most fascinating and reflective reading experience. As I paralleled my own life experiences against the experiences of the girl in the story, I was reminded of the overwhelming sense of loneliness that accompanied my final return from Africa to the United States at the age of seventeen. After spending thirteen years in Kenya, intermingled with a few years of furlough, I found that it took increased amount of energy to adjust to the fast-paced, materialistic lifestyle of the United States, and I, like the heroine in Hidier’s story, became frustrated over the lack of knowing how to fit into the culture, understand myself, and relate to my peers.

As I have matured, I have become more aware that my life experiences are not uncommon. In my research, I have found there are many who, like me, are members of an increasing population known as “third culture kids” (“TCKs”) – individuals deeply impacted by multiple cultures. As people from all parts of the globe become more mobile, it is inevitable that TCKs will continue to increase in number. And these TCKs, undoubtedly, are making use of libraries all over the world every day.

With this in mind, I will share how and where the term “third culture kid” originated, provide information that will help librarians to know how to identify and better serve their TCK population, and in conclusion, offer practical ideas in regard to programming and collection development specific to meeting the needs of the TCK.

WHERE DID THE TERM “TCK” ORIGINATE?

In the 1950’s, two social scientists from the University of Michigan, Drs. John and Ruth Hill Useem, went overseas for the purpose of studying Americans in different occupational roles who were stationed with their families in India. In the course of researching the lifestyles of these Americans, the Useems were also introduced to expatriates of other nationalities. The doctors were surprised to discover that all the expatriates representing multiple subcultures shared a lifestyle that was unique – neither Indian, nor one that mirrored any of their respective home cultures. In defining their

discovery, the Useems described the various birth cultures of the expatriates as their “first culture.” They identified the Indian culture as the “host culture” or the expatriates’ “second culture.” And finally, the shared lifestyle of the expatriate community within the host culture became the “third culture.” In describing this third culture, the Useems used phrases such as “culture between cultures” or “interstitial culture.” The children who lived within this third culture were defined as third culture kids (Pollock and Van Reken, 20).

The definition of the term third culture kid has seemingly gone through an evolutionary process. Barbara Schaetti, Principal of Transition Dynamics, suggests that the Useems regarded TCKs as those who live between two cultures, but more specifically, those who live between “western” and “non-western” cultures. Then in 1984, Norma McCaig, President of Global Nomad Resources, used the term “global nomad” interchangeably with TCK. She gave more depth to the definition of TCK by claiming a TCK is “a person of any age or nationality who has lived a significant part of his or her developmental years in one or more countries outside his or her passport country because of a parent’s occupation” (1). Dr. David Pollock, founding member of Global Nomads International, and co-author Ruth Van Reken, of Cultural Connexions out of Indianapolis, Indiana, agree that, “A common misconception about third culture kids is that they have been raised in what is often called the ‘Third World.’ While this might be true for some TCKs, the Third World has no specific relationship to the concept of third culture” (21). The same authors state, “A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside 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 similar background” (21). This definition seems to fall more in line with what the Useems proposed.

Pollock and Van Reken note that the world has changed dramatically since the Useems did their initial research on TCKs. No longer do expatriates necessarily live in a communal system like a military base, missionary compound, or a business enclave. Thus, the validity of the term “third culture” or “third culture kid” has been questioned. Recently in an interview, Dr. Ruth Hill Useem claimed, “Because I am a sociologist/anthropologist I think no concept is ever locked up permanently... concepts change as we get to know more; other times concepts change because what happens in the world is changing” (qtd. in Pollock and Van Reken, 19). Even more recently, Dr. Useem broadens and defines “third culture” as “a term to discuss the lifestyle created, shared and learned by those who are from one culture

and are in the process of relating to another one. TCKs, then, are children who accompany their parents into another society” (qtd. in Pollock and Van Reken, 21). Pollock and Van Reken agree with this generalization of the third culture concept because they have witnessed TCKs, in spite of their individualistic third culture experience and mix of nationalities, sharing and connecting below the surface on a deeper level of life experience (21).

Thus, by definition, a TCK is not someone who has grown up in a “third world” country. Rather, a TCK is one whose way of thinking and lifestyle has been greatly affected as he or she lives and is enmeshed in two or more world cultures. All TCKs, instead of being defined by a point of origin, are defined by an idiosyncratic set of experiences. TCKs are not always easy to spot because many are in the process of trying to blend into a culture; however, TCKs do have some identifying characteristics. Librarians have a better understanding of how to reach this growing population of adolescents if they are aware of the very things that make them unique.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT DEFINE A TCK

Robin Pascoe – diplomat’s wife, author, and journalist – refers to Pollock and Van Reken’s research, and writes about the positive and negative elements that pull TCKs from all cultural backgrounds together.

A unique characteristic about TCKs is that they are accustomed to change. Moving from country to country every two to three years is normal whether they like it or not. In addition, many travel back and forth to boarding school every few months. The unfamiliar becomes predictable because change is a part of their identity. With frequent changes, TCKs develop a migratory instinct that creates a pattern often carried over into their adulthood. For example, TCKs may go to more than one college, or they might change jobs frequently. On a negative note, sometimes TCKs may feel there is no need to work through problems because, according to their experience, one can leave troubles behind. Settling in one place is not easy because they deal with the urge to get up and move again.

Operating from a large knowledge base, TCKs are often highly motivated and strong academic achievers. TCKs have a broader picture of the world around them because they have been exposed to more countries than most individuals; they also have perspective on international issues. Articulate and well read, TCKs are usually self-sufficient, disciplined, independent, and may know several languages.

A TCK will have numerous relationships established across the world yet be without a stable peer group. TCKs friendships are brief and more intense as they

realize they will not be staying in one place for a very long time. It is interesting to note that TCKs are rather diplomatic. Well behaved as they are, TCKs spend more time with adults over their counterparts back home. They also get along with their siblings who take the place of friends in the early days of adjustment to a different country.

TCKs often have delayed adolescence and a period of rebellion. Job opportunities for teenagers who are overseas are very few. In addition, a lower number of relationships established with other TCKs make it more difficult for them to break family ties. Experts say that many TCKs work through adolescent rebellion at age twenty and beyond. TCKs are definitely different, but not necessarily special. TCKs are told they are special by some, however, upon re-entering their homeland, reality would show they are just different. For them, believing they are special could cause problems (Pascoe, *Culture Shock!*, 171-174).

Moving beyond these more specific characterizations to looking once more at the bigger picture, Pollock and Van Reken would attest that two key realities mold the life of a third culture kid. The first of these realities is that they live within more than one culture, and their physical surroundings usually fluctuate with every move they make. The second shaping factor is that they are raised in a highly mobile world. More than likely, their life will consist of coming and going along side those with whom they identify (22). These two atypical distinctions could give cause for some instability and delayed self-actualization. With this background information, discussion will now be offered on how to network and provide for TCKs within library communities.

MAKING THE TCK FEEL AT HOME IN YOUR LIBRARY

There are many ways libraries can serve the TCK population. In making collection development decisions for the TCK group in your community, the most helpful resource is the TCK group itself. Generally speaking, TCKs interests are wide spread, however, having a variety of sources that cover international issues, cultural studies, world history, geography, and travel will be of value to this population. Self-help resources that focus on socio-psychological issues that relate to their personal experience will be of benefit to them as well.

TCKs love to share their life experiences and have a wealth of resources that can add cultural enhancement to the library environment. Often, TCKs will have traditional costuming from the countries they have lived in, as well as foreign decorative pieces that enhance library multicultural displays. TCKs may be willing to talk to children about their life in another country, share a song in a different language, or talk

about a curio that has particular relevance to a story that has just been read. In serving the library, the TCK is benefited by sharing from his or her life story.

Providing opportunities that will allow networking between those who share similar TCK experiences is the key to successful TCK programming, and getting TCKs to return to the library. TCKs, though citizens, most likely do not feel at home in the country where they find themselves. Regardless of whether or not they are dealing with identity issues, TCKs still need a place to belong – a place that feels like home! Perhaps a reemphasis of Pollock and Van Reken's quote would be helpful: "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" (21). In other words, when a TCK is able to share their experience with another TCK, a connection is made that only TCKs can understand. In making that connection, a deeper relational need is met that is satisfying and dynamic! It would seem, then, that by offering library programming that allows TCKs to connect with each other, the potential for building a network of these individuals is great.

While focusing on the initial stages of building a network of TCKs, attention should be given to programming ideas that have a multicultural and ethnic appeal. Providing an informal event of this nature is paramount because, in getting TCKs to share with one another of their life experiences, friendships that prove meaningful will likely be formed. Those that connect with each other will probably want to somehow meet again, and this is yet another opportunity for the library to increase its service to this community.

Thinking of programming from a practical standpoint, here is a list of ideas that may promote more brainstorming:

- Ethnic Dinners (feature a country per dinner suited to the TCKs)
- International Movie Night (complete with popcorn and drink)
- Book Discussions (let the TCKs in the group pick the book)
- Scrapbooking cultural history (building the TCK's life by pictures)
- Karaoke (singing songs from around the world)
- A Night on Cultural Folk Lore
- Program to integrate foreign exchange students into your TCK group
- Travel Logs of trips taken (projecting picture presentations on a screen and displaying curios collected)

In determining the programming that will be most effective, it is important to remember that the program itself will not be as valuable to the TCK as the opportunity to be with another who has similar life experiences. TCKs are likely to have many interests because of where they have been in their lifetime, and due to their wide base of interests, it is probable they would come to many of the library programs regardless of whether the programs were specifically for TCKs. However, connecting TCKs to TCKs at the library is the answer to bringing them back to the library to participate in other programs and events offered!

REFERENCES

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