

What is the Impact of International Transition on Social and Emotional Health

A case study of East Asian International Students
in the Coquitlam School District

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Submitted in partial completion of a Masters Degree
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June 2013

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
The Purpose of the Study	2
The Research Problem	2
Evidence Justifying the Research Problem	3
Deficiencies in Evidence	4
The Audience	4
Literature Review	5
Introduction	5
Adjustment Issues for International Students	5
Possible ways forward to support International students	7
Stressors for Secondary English Language Learners	7
Acculturation Challenges specific to East Asian Students	8
Presence of International education in B.C schools	10
Methodology	12
Research design	12
Participants	14
Data Collection	14
Focus Groups	15
Instruments	16
Limitations	17
Ethics	18
Findings	18
Discussion	20
Language	20
Forming Friendships	21
Loneliness	22
External Environment	23
Finding Support	23
Recommendations	26
Conclusion	26
Future Study	28
References	30

ABSTRACT

In the Coquitlam school district, International students arrive in great numbers and contribute a substantial amount of money to the district (Kuehn, 2012). But what is happening to them after they arrive? At such a vulnerable time in their lives, these young people are uprooting their lives and travelling across the world alone. The bulk of research surrounding international students focuses on those enrolled in post-secondary schooling. This research focuses on the stressors in the lives of International students in the Coquitlam high school system.

A series of 4 focus groups were conducted to interview 12 students of Chinese or Korean heritage. The students ranged in age from 15 to 18 years old and all attended the same high school in the Coquitlam school district. The interviews were transcribed and the results were compiled to represent the voice of these 12 students.

Subjects came to Canada eager to further their education but most were concerned with forming new friendships. After a transition described as confusing, challenging and lonely many struggled to forge meaningful relationships. Their friendships were almost exclusively with International students of the same age, from the same country, who arrived in the same year. Participants indicated that students born in Canada or those with landed status rarely befriended them. It was also noted that students did not turn to school counselors for support. Participants made several recommendations to ease this transition for future International students.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

What is the impact of transition on the social and emotional health of East Asian International Students entering the Coquitlam school district?

Purpose of the Study

The intake of International students benefits the Coquitlam school district to the tune of 14 million dollar annually, but how are these students transitioning to life in Canada (Kuehn, 2012)? Statistics Canada defines an International student as a student studying in Canada who does not have permanent residency status (www.statcan.gc.ca). These students face a tremendous number of stressors beyond those experienced by local students including; racism, communication struggles and cultural conflicts. There is a need to study the impact of these stressors in the school environment on this vulnerable subset of our student population (Lee and Koro-Ljungberg, 2007). With this knowledge we may be able to better understand and support these young people.

The Research Problem

Recent studies have suggested that International students in BC are a forgotten and vulnerable group among our school population (Wong, Homma, Johnson, Saewyc, 2010). By examining the stressors faced by these students in our school environment we can better understand how to ensure a positive experience for all of our visiting students. British Columbia wants to increase the number of International students in secondary schools by over 12% in the next 4 years (Fowlie, 2012). It is imperative that we understand the struggles of these students so that we can help them to gain the most from their experience here as well as enrich the classrooms that they attend. This study's

purpose was to examine the experiences of Asian International students when interacting with their peer groups in Coquitlam Secondary Schools.

Evidence Justifying the Research Problem

The motivations for students to leave their homeland to further their studies vary from escaping an unstable political or economic situation to an interest in learning English in an immersed setting (Popadiuk, 2009). These students land in our schools and face multiple stressors such as cultural conflicts, communication struggles, racism and bullying (Lee et al, 2007).

There is evidence that incoming International students suffer from peer bullying and racism (Hanasaab, 2006). This torment is sometimes in the native language and thus easily hidden from school personnel (Lee et al, 2007). This can lead to lowered self-esteem and diminished confidence levels at a formative stage in development. Our zero tolerance approach to bullying needs to better protect these children and researching this area will help us eliminate such actions.

Cultural conflicts and communication struggles can also lead many International students to feel isolated (Seo, 2005). In moving from their home countries these students often find themselves in a “relational deficit” at a time when they need more than the usual support (Sawir, 2007). This loneliness can be exacerbated by an inability to communicate effectively that is harmful to their emotional health. Understanding the experiences of these students in our schools would better prepare us to act preemptively to support them.

Through personal experience, the researcher has noted that students are often being placed in settings that do not match their language skills. Many colleagues have

reported students acting out in a variety of ways in the classroom often attributing this to the lack of academic match, low language acquisition or lack of motivation resulting from the knowledge they will be leaving in a year anyways (Nelson, 2012). This study helped shed light on the emotional impact of such placements.

Deficiencies in Evidence

Most research surrounding International students has been centered on the university age class (Leung, 2001). According to Lee and Koro-Ljungberg, the adjustment factors of immigrating students have been studied, but far less research has been done on teenagers that stay for one or two years (2007). These secondary students are at a far more vulnerable stage in their development than their older university aged counterparts. Both sets of International students share many common stressors but the difference in maturity levels poses significant concern. This research bridges this gap and helps provide our schools with an understanding of the student's challenges. With this knowledge we can begin to optimize the potential of the students and the schools in this potentially exciting and mutually beneficial relationship.

The Audience

Interviewing students in the Coquitlam school district helped the researcher to better understand the nature of the challenges faced by International Students. Administrators and teachers can plan integration and support in schools to prevent difficulties and assist students more fully when challenges do arise. The increase in International Education will only continue and understanding the students in this unique position is important to ensure a positive relationship between our schools and their home countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

International students are identified as students studying in Canada who do not have permanent residency status in Canada (www.statcan.gc.ca). Most International students embark on this adventure during their university years but a growing number are taking on this exciting challenge as teenagers (Fowley, 2012). In the Coquitlam school district, the International Education program promises to offer International students a program that fosters friendships with local students and enhances the schools by creating an opportunity to better understand diversity and increase global understanding (International Education in Coquitlam, n.d). To achieve this lofty ambition the district must gain an understanding of the adjustment stressors felt by our incoming students so that intervention programs may be set up to support them.

This literature review addresses the following topic: *What are the main adjustment stressors for East Asian International students in Coquitlam Secondary schools?* For the purpose of this study the focus was on students of Chinese or Korean heritage. The literature was divided into the following groupings: 1) adjustment issues for International students; 2) research on stressors for English Language Learners (ELL) in high schools; 3) studies specific to the impact on Asian students: and 4) the presence of International Education in BC.

Adjustment Issues for International Students

International students arrive in a foreign land and are expected to wear several hats simultaneously such as: learners, learning sources for domestic students, potential workers, cultural diplomats, friends at times, and strangers at other times (Hanassab, 2006). Through these various roles an overwhelming stressor found in the literature is

loneliness. Grinberg and Grinberg (1989, p. 23) put it aptly: “in migration one ceases to belong to the world one left behind, and does not yet belong to the world in which one has nearly arrived.” Sawir, Marginson, Deumart, Nyland and Ramia (2008) studied over 200 International students and found that two-thirds of them suffered from bouts of loneliness. Personal loneliness and social loneliness were both prevalent (Sawir et al, 2008). Andrade (2006) found that only a small percentage of International students develop a close friendship with a domestic student. They were much more likely to develop friendships with other International students due to a lack of English skills and cultural understanding (Andrade, 2006). This social isolation often leads to feelings of discrimination and homesickness (Hanassab et al, 2008 ; Andrade, 2006). The International student’s transient lifestyle presents language and cultural challenges, emotional distress, vulnerability, homesickness and feelings of alienation (Hanson, Clausson and Janlov, 2011).

Although many International students experience loneliness, studies point to certain factors that may make some individuals more, or less, susceptible. Hansson’s research involving school nurses in International schools found that the more often students moved the less likely they were to experience social health concerns (2011). This adaptability is generally not present with students in their first move abroad and these students often feel “lost” during their first year (Hansson, 2011). Crano and Crano’s 1993 study was designed to gain an understanding of the impact of adjustment on International students in the United States. It concurred with Hansson’s findings that the more often a student moved, the more adaptable they became (Crano et al, 1993).

A further finding indicated that female students were more likely to suffer from stressful life events while studying abroad than their male counterparts (Crano, et al, 1993). International students in the Coquitlam School district are often in Canada for a short period of time so the presence of loneliness, and cultural disconnection within the first year is noteworthy.

Possible ways forward to support International students

Andrade (2006) found that support programs for the needs of International students are not as extensive as they could be. Peer mentoring programs and an outreach support program are suggested (Andrade, 2006). Although institutional support is suggested, it is through the cultivation of stronger bonds between International and Domestic students that the best support can be found (Sawir et al, 2008). This would allow these students to remake their own cultural maps on their own terms (Sawir et al, 2008). In a practical finding Lin, Kim, Kim and LaRose determined that a way to bridge this gap is through social networking sites like Facebook (2012). This study indicates that using these sites has a positive impact on social adjustment and psychological well-being for International students (Lin et al, 2012).

Stressors for Secondary English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELL) are students who are learning English as an additional language to their native tongue(s). Although not all ELL students are International students (most are residents, or awaiting residency), nearly all International students are ELL students.

Although ELL students of all ages face challenges, the cognitive and linguistic demands are considerably greater in secondary schools than in elementary schools

(Lucas, 2000). Additionally, navigating the physiological, emotional and hormonal changes of the teenage years can be very complicated (Lucas, 2000). Facing these complicated transitions as a non-native speaker often results in additional stress (Hansson et al, 2011). These struggles are linked to the strong pressures to conform for secondary students as those who stand out may be stigmatized (Lucas, 2000).

All secondary students go through developmental transitions from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. This turbulent time is often more challenging for ELL students due to a cultural gap between home and school (Sheng, Sheng and Anderson, 2011). ELL students' English proficiency level is a leading factor that influences the feeling of disconnection and increases the risk of dropping out of school (Sheng et al, 2011).

Furthermore, several studies indicate Asian students can be victimized by bullying from the majority group, other minority groups or their own ethnic population (Seo et al, 2005; Liu, 2002; Lee et al, 2007). Bullying is reported to have originated with language difference and cultural differences and often causes students to migrate to peers of the same ethnicity (Liu, 2002). In some instances, as language acquisition increased the incidences of bullying decreased (Lee et al, 2007). Bullying amongst peers in their native language is a concern as it is hard for domestic staff to regulate (Lee et al, 2007).

Acculturation challenges specific to East Asian Students

Research suggests that there are acculturation challenges specific to students of Korean and Chinese origin.

Role of Confucianism and Xiao Qin

Studies of University, Middle School and Secondary Korean students all found that bringing Confucian ideals to a non-Confucian society was a source of stress (Seo,

Koro-Ljungberg, 2007; Lee, Koro-Ljungberg, 2007; Lee 2012). Koreans believe that through better education, resulting in a higher status job one obtains a higher position within Confucian society.

The parent's drive for a higher family position fuels a passion for education that is unrivaled in the world and is described as "education fever" (Seth, 2002). Often, Koreans place higher importance on the parent-child bond than on the marital bond. The child's success is considered to be a source of family fame. In China this bond is known as "xiao qin" (Bodycott, 2009). This bond signifies that parents will do all they can for the child's education and be repaid with long-term love, respect and care. Evidence of this drive is found with parents pushing their children through ESL programs and into mainstream classes (Liu, 2002). This results in a tremendous amount of pressure not traditionally found with our local students.

Cultural History

Schools that host International students must respect the cultural history of the students in order to give them proper guidance (Seo et al, 2005). Korean's ethnocentrism and extreme nationalism are firmly rooted in their history (Lee et al, 2007). Korea is an isolated country struggling through past conflicts with neighbouring China and Japan. Additionally, the country was torn apart by civil war from 1950 to 1953 and under constant nuclear threat ever since. This feeling of isolation is mirrored by the Korean International students abroad (Seo et al, 2005). Additionally, the Korean population is racially homogenous with little exception, increasing the strong identification with a single family (Lee et al, 2007). As such, Koreans have been raised to become aware of

‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ identities (Lee et al, 2007). Difficulty creating bonds with domestic students may, in part, be linked to this characteristic.

China’s rich history has a tradition of valuing education. Understanding the impact of this history on our incoming International students is important. Since the formation of the People’s Republic in 1949, China has had universal access to education to the end of grade 9, but the quality of that education has been questioned based on an excessive focus on memorization and repetition (Jacobson, 1988). This can make the more active engagement typically found in Canadian schools unfamiliar and thus stressful for the immigrant students striving hard to succeed in an unfamiliar milieu . Additionally, the ethnic Han Chinese make-up the vast majority of the country’s population. This ethnic homogeny is similar to that of the Koreans and may have a similar isolating impact (Griffiths, 1988).

It must be noted that students from autonomous regions within China, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, will have a slightly different homeland experience than those from mainland China. These regions have been independent governing regions and have ideals more in line with the West. International students from these regions may have an easier time with transition to Canadian culture (Minichiello, 2001).

Presence of International Education in B.C Schools

International education in British Columbia is big business. As one of eight growth sectors in the new BC job plan, the government is aiming to increase enrollment by 50% over the next 4 years, 13% of that in the K-12 area (Fowlie, 2012). The homestay industry in BC is estimated to bring in over 60 million dollars annually including tuition, room and board (Wong, Homma, Johnson and Saewye, 2010). In the Coquitlam school

district alone, International students account for more than 14 million dollars in revenue to the district (Kuehn, 2012). This is not simply a local phenomenon, as globally the current enrollment of International students is 3.3 million and by 2025 the number is projected to be 7.2 million (Fowlie, 2012).

Wong et al (2010) studied East Asian International students in B.C and found the pursuit of overseas education had an impact on student's social health.

Compared to immigrants, male International students were more likely to skip school and logged far more time on the computer (Wong et al, 2010). Compared with the mainstream student population males were more frequently engaged in sexual behaviors, more likely to smoke (1 in 5) and more likely to have used cocaine (Wong et al, 2010). Additionally, they were just as likely to binge drink and less likely to report physical abuse than the mainstream student population (Wong et al, 2010).

According to Wong's study (2010) there were problems with sexual health amongst female International students. Compared with the mainstream student population, a higher percentage of students reported having had sex and 20% of these students used a substance before sex (Wong et al, 2010). Alarming, 25% of students reported some form of sexual abuse (Wong et al, 2010). Additionally, substance abuse was found to be an issue as a higher percentage of students reported binge drinking and they were three times more likely to use marijuana or smoke cigarettes than the mainstream student population (Wong et al, 2010).

Supporting International Students in BC

Popadiuk (2009) focused on supporting International students in the Vancouver School district. This study examined students from three secondary schools in an effort to

find the areas of support needed for these students to be successful. Citing previous studies indicating International student's difficulty adjusting and high levels of stress the study initially focused on the role of counselors in the support network. The research found that it proved difficult to fight against the negative stigma that many other countries have against counselors (Popadiuk, 2009). "In light of this, it stands to reason that if we knew more specific information about the actual experiences of adolescent International students from their own perspective, adults may be in a better position to provide more effective support within the constraints of limited resources" (Popadiuk, 2009)

This final statement by Popadiuk is the piece that this study examined. The study surveyed the main stressors for Asian International students from their own perspective. This gives us as educators a better understanding of their experiences and an ability to develop proactive intervention programs to support this potentially at-risk group.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a qualitative research project using a case study approach. A qualitative method was chosen as the personal opinions and feelings of the participants were sought (Creswell, 2011). These opinions and feelings could be used in future research to guide the design of intervention programs to help international students transition into the Coquitlam school district. The participants' wide-ranging insights provide a far richer set of data than a quantitative study would have provided. It is the explanations behind the responses that provide the basis for the recommendations section of this report.

There were several challenges to using a qualitative study for this project. The main challenge is that the results are not generalizable to a wider population (Creswell, 2011). The responses found in this study are specific to this group of students at this school in the Coquitlam School District. Therefore, intervention programs based on this study will need to be adapted for the specific populations that they are meant to serve. A further challenge revolves around language. Fully understanding the questions during the focus groups were left to the abilities of participants of various levels of English language proficiency. Additionally, the student's subsequent responses in their second language needed to be clarified and understood by the researcher. Translating between languages leaves the potential for misunderstanding as well as the potential for the bias of the interpreter to affect the accuracy of interpretation. For this reason a volunteer translator was not used. The researcher attempted to reduce these challenges by keeping focus groups very small and checking with participants throughout the study.

Case study approach: An Instrumental case study was chosen because this approach allows for the in-depth examination of one group of individuals (bounded system) through the collection of multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2011). In this study the data consisted of four focus group sessions. The students were treated as independent subjects and then the results compared to determine any common findings within the group (bounded system). This approach was applicable to this study as the project explores only the opinions of a select group of students at a specific school at a particular time.

A difficulty with the Instrumental case study approach in this research is that the individual nature of the questioning calls into question the optimal sample size in the

case. Individual interviews with a few select students would have enabled the researcher to gain a more thorough understanding of their particular stressors but a larger sample increases the breadth and potential applicability of the results (Creswell, 2011). The struggle between the depth of understanding and the breadth of questioning in this research model was compounded by the time constraints of this particular study. This study focused on fewer participants for a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

Participants

Participants were selected through the purposeful sampling of those enrolled as International students at the chosen site. This site is a secondary school located in Coquitlam, British Columbia. In consultation with the on-site International education coordinator the researcher presented the opportunity to take part in the study to approximately 30 eligible students. Over the period of 3 months a total of 15 students were selected for the study. Of these 15 students, 12 students continued with the study until its completion. Criteria for selection included; willingness to participate, East Asian nationality, language proficiency and proximity to arrival date (within the past three years). At the onset of the study all International students that volunteered were given a letter of consent for their guardians and themselves to complete. Those who agreed to participate were asked to take part in a focus group session. Focus group topics included but were not limited to; demographic information, self identified stressors, experiences prior to arrival, experiences in the Coquitlam school district, and recommendations. A group of no more than 6 participants were selected for each focus group. This number enabled the interviews to take place in the allotted time frame of the study and allowed

for a variety of viewpoints to be shared. Participants were provided snacks and refreshments in appreciation of their time.

Data Collection

Prior to the study, the researcher was granted permission from SFU, the Coquitlam school district and the site school. After permissions were received and consent given by the participants and their guardians a classroom at the site school was provided to conduct the focus groups.

Data was collected in the form of focus group sessions. Criteria for selection included; willingness to participate, East Asian nationality, language proficiency and proximity to arrival date (within the past three years). The researcher noted focus group responses throughout the sessions.

Informed consent was obtained from the interviewees and their guardians prior to the focus groups commencing. Subjects understood their right to refrain from all or part of the study at any time and of the confidentiality and anonymity of their answers.

Focus groups: Focus groups were chosen for this research project as they allowed for interaction amongst the participants in order to yield deeper information (Creswell, 2011). International students may be hesitant to provide information in an interview setting and a focus group serves to encourage participation in a welcoming environment. Where possible, students were put into groups of similar ages and cultural backgrounds in order to generate the best information possible. This data collection strategy enabled the researcher to collect data in a comfortable setting.

Open-ended questioning allowed the participants to provide useful information that could not be directly observed and enable the participant to describe detailed

personal accounts (Creswell, 2011). This setting allowed the researcher to clarify responses and explore links between participant's answers

Focus groups had disadvantages as well. Note taking was difficult as discussions were free flowing and participants have varied language proficiency (Creswell, 2011). Subjects may have been hesitant to respond honestly as they may have felt as though they were being examined. Additionally, the focus groups were vulnerable to peer influence. Older students tended to dominate the discussions so constant monitoring and redirection was needed. Designing a welcoming atmosphere and encouraging open communication from all participants helped to obtain rich data. Phrasing questions in ELL friendly language and rephrasing questions throughout the session enabled wider participation through inclusion.

Focus groups were semi-structured to allow participants to respond to each question thoroughly and expand on responses when needed. Participants were reminded of the purpose of the study at the onset of the interview and encouraged to ask any clarification questions at that time. Participants gave up an hour of their time for the focus groups. The researcher transcribed answers during the focus group sessions.

Initially, individual interviews were to be included as a follow-up to the focus groups. However, this data collection method was ultimately not used due to the unique characteristic of the adolescent International students who were the subject of the research. Vulnerable participants can feel intimidated in this setting and encouraged to respond in a particular way (Creswell, 2011). International students may feel hesitant to respond honestly as they may feel as though they are being examined.

Instruments

Data was collected using four focus group sessions consisting of two to six students. Detailed information concerning participant's experiences were explored in order to gain a better understanding of the transitional stressors faced by the students.

Focus group questions included:

- What is your name, country of origin and grade?
- Why did you decide to come to Canada?
- Before you came to Canada, what were you most excited about?
- How would you describe your transition to Canada?
- Before you came to Canada, what was your main concern when you considered coming to Canada? In what ways has this changed once you settled in?
- What are some of the challenges you've found since your arrival in Canada?
- What was helpful to you when you arrived in Canada?
- What were the difficulties in transitioning to the school?
- Have you ever spoken to anyone at the school about these issues? Who was that person? Who (outside of the school personal) do you talk to about these issues?
- What could be changed to help current International students transition smoothly to Coquitlam schools? What could be put in place to help future International students when they arrive?
- Do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Limitations

As a qualitative study bounded by one school and International students from a specific region the results of the study cannot be generalized (Creswell, 2011). Students from other regions, or enrolled in schools with different demographics may respond

differently to the survey and interview questions. These limitations are expected and noted in the study.

Language challenges may affect the reliability of the study. Students may have answered questions during the focus group without fully understanding the question asked. Participants responded with varying degrees of English proficiency, which may have held unknown assumptions that cannot be inferred but may have affected them. The fact that the researcher recorded participants' responses during the focus groups may also have had an impact on students' willingness to answer fully and honestly.

Ethics

Student names and school names have been omitted in order to keep identities confidential. Informed consent was obtained from the parents, students and teachers involved in the study prior to focus group sessions. This consent covered all information regarding the study, use of information from the study, role of students as participants, and the rights of participants to withdraw or refrain from aspects of the study. It also advised those involved that participation would not impact either the student's standing at their school or the school's standing in the district.

FINDINGS

Data was collected using focus groups conducted at one school site. Of the 30 International students who were offered the opportunity to take part in the study, 15 volunteered to participate and 12 completed the study. Four focus groups were conducted ranging from two to six students per session. Focus groups took place in a classroom at the school site and were from forty minutes to one hour in length.

The researcher transcribed responses by hand during the focus group sessions. Sessions were loosely based on a predetermined set of questions but were free flowing in nature. At the conclusion of the focus groups participants were asked to make recommendations to support incoming International students. Hand written notes from the four sessions were later transcribed and combined to summarize findings.

These findings were then coded into recurring responses across all groups and these responses were combined into major themes; Language, Forming Friendships, External Environment, Loneliness and Support.

The recurring responses are listed in Table 1, Coded Themes below clustered according to thematic groups. Note that a more comprehensive description of the themes can be found in the appendix.

Table 1: Coded Themes

Theme	Responses
Language – Classroom instructions/expectations	9
Language –Class interactions – teacher/students/group work	6
Language – Exiting ESL (EAL) programs	5
Language – School interactions – PA system/bell system/ “special days”	6
Language – Social interactions – slang/conversation/informal topics	10
Language – Social interactions – crowded hallways/lunchtime	9

Theme	Responses
Forming Friendships – International students (same age, arrival, home)	12
Forming Friendships – Other International students	7
Forming Friendships – Other EAL students (non-international)	5
Forming Friendships – Local students	0

Theme	Responses
Loneliness – Hallways/lunch – many people, but no one to interact with	5
Loneliness – Hard to enter casual groups, already formed through years	8
Loneliness – Holidays / birthdays / special days	4
Loneliness – Difficult to blend into culture when no Canadian friends	10

Loneliness – Expect help from locals of same heritage - never happens	8
Loneliness – Some embarrassed/ laughed at when speak	5

Theme	Responses
External Environment – Bus schedules/laws	9
External Environment – Strangers outside of school – expectations	4
External Environment – Quiet streets, little action – results in boredom	5
External Environment – Always raining - depressing	6
External Environment – Costs, food, phone plans, misc.	8
External Environment – Health care: Dr. /Dentist -wait till return home	8

Theme	Responses
Support – Friends at home – mainly late night gaming not discuss stress	6
Support – Friends at home not understand – China no FB	8
Support – Local community of your heritage – pressures to conform	7
Support – Homestay families – all favorable	12
Support – Other international students – most helpful	12
Support – Canadians on the street helpful but not in the school	5
Support - Requested support from school counselors	0

** Total number of respondents: 12*

DISCUSSION

Language

Language proved to be a constant source of stress for the students interviewed. Academically, participants indicated that their language limitations made it difficult to fully understand instructions from teachers, fully appreciate feedback and take part in group-work. In addition to challenges arising from their language difficulties, participants did not have prior experience working in groups and found this to be a significant adjustment. When asked to form groups, participants found it difficult to connect with other students and often ended up grouping with other International students. Such a trend in groupings made engaging in meaningful learning interactions challenging. One participant explained

that she “dreaded” attending classes without seating plans because the pervasive trend for informal “International student groups” to emerge. This was a source of frustration discussed at length during the focus groups as the students wanted to mix with other classmates in order to improve their language skills.

Participants explained that entering mainstream classes by exiting ESL programs was an important milestone for them. Thus, not getting into mainstream classes as soon as they desired was a common stressor amongst the group. Many felt that ESL classes were useful, but also felt that there was a stigma attached to being in them. Almost half of the participants indicated that avoiding the stigma associated with being in an ESL class was a significant source of stress for them. The tension between the recognized need for ESL support and the strong desire to get out of ESL classes as soon as possible was a common theme.

Finally, students arriving from China were not used to changing classrooms during the day. The protocol surrounding this was confusing and language challenges exacerbated the confusion. It was difficult for students to understand the expectations of traveling from room to room and arriving on time and being prepared for class. The rules surrounding this movement (bathroom breaks, food, lockers, etc.) were difficult for some students to comprehend even after several months in the school.

Forming Friendships

Participants described the transition to Canada as confusing, challenging and lonely. During this transition, 60% of the participants reported that they struggled to forge meaningful relationships either with local students or with students in their

own language group who had arrived previously. During the focus groups, participants clarified “friend” to mean someone they might spend time with outside of the classroom.

Friendships were almost exclusively with International students of the same age, from the same country, having arrived in the same year. Participants experienced reluctance on the part of International students who had arrived previously to form friendships with them. One participant described this as “creating a distance” between those who are newly arrived and those who arrived previously. Interestingly, there was no evidence of students who were born in Canada, of the same heritage, befriending any of the participants.

All participants indicated that students born in Canada of Chinese or Korean origin have never attempted to help them in their native language. One participant indicated that, “ ‘CBCs’ – Canadian Born Chinese – never mix with newly arrived Chinese”.

Additionally, none of the students reported having forged a friendship with a “Canadian” student. Participants indicated that having no common interests and having difficulty breaking into established friend groups were barriers to these friendships. Most participants indicated that this is the most challenging and disappointing aspect of their transition to Canada.

Loneliness

Without the bond created from friendships, participants identified loneliness as a constant source of stress. In all focus group participants discussed the loneliness associated with lunch times and crowded hallways despite being

surrounded by a sea of bodies. These times seemed to highlight the lack of connection. Birthdays, holidays and other special occasions brought about more profound feelings of loneliness for participants although all indicated that homestay families attempted to reduce these feelings. Two participants reported strong feelings that with a Canadian friend they would have been able to better blend in with the local culture and this would have eased their loneliness.

External Environment

Participants also reported that the transition to Canada brought stressors to their lives outside of school. In all focus groups, participants reported stress surrounding bus schedules and the accompanying social expectations. The lack of buses in this suburban community, expectations to line-up and payment methods all were discussed at length. It seems the inability to navigate such a basic service acts as a further barrier to inclusion. Other stressors mentioned included costs of haircuts, distaste for western food, expensive phone plans, rainy weather and the relatively quiet street life. Interestingly, the older participants discussed the difficulties surrounding seeing the Doctor and Dentist. Most indicated that they wait until they return to their home country to address medical issues.

Finding support

All but one participant indicated that they were happy with their homestay family and found them supportive during the transition to Canada. Participants shared stories of being touched by birthday celebrations and being included in family events and trips. The few participants who were living independently enjoyed the freedom associated with that situation but admitted that there were

also challenges. Cooking their meals and being disciplined with homework and sleep were challenges for these students. All participants indicated that teachers were approachable and helpful when academic assistance was needed.

Although all participants indicated that they keep in touch with friends in their home country, only two discussed speaking with these friends about stress in Canada. The majority of students replied that interactions with friends from their native country consisted of late night computer game sessions. Chinese students were unable to communicate via Facebook as this is unavailable in China. All but one student indicated that their friends at home do not understand the challenges of being in Canada so they do not discuss these issues with them. Feeling unable to share these unique experiences with those to whom they have historically been close appears to reinforce feelings of aloneness for the participants. These responses echo themes in the literature regarding newly arrived International students leaving their home country but not yet belonging to their new country (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989).

The local Korean and Chinese communities were both spoken of favorably in the focus groups. Participants indicated that these groups help them feel more comfortable in their new home through food, language and celebrations. Interestingly, however, eight of the participants also indicated further stress from these groups as they feel pressure to conform to the expectations from Korea and China respectively. For example, one participant from China explained that when he goes to an event hosted by the Chinese community he must “change clothing and

how I act towards others when I visit this group.” This recurring transformation may lead to challenges surrounding confused feelings of belonging and self-identity.

It was noted that the majority of those interviewed spoke of loneliness, confusion and emotional challenges associated with their arrival in Canada but none of the students reported having met with a school counselor about these issues. One student mentioned speaking with a representative from International Education about issues but not with anyone associated with the school. Participants were not willing to elaborate on why they did not speak with school counselors.

Recommendations

At the conclusion of each focus group, students were asked to brainstorm and suggest ways to help reduce the stress on incoming International students. Participants highly commended the orientation that the school provides but wanted to see a volunteer present to translate for the new students. Many of the students mentioned feelings of confusion and frustration at the challenges associated with processing such vital information in English. Most students mentioned the idea of a “buddy system” during the early part of the year, or at least at this initial meeting. Such a system would pair up an International student from the previous year with one that has just arrived to help answer questions and guide them through the initial stages of transition. Students could meet formally during ESL classes in the first few weeks and then informally thereafter. Additionally, students promoted the idea of “school hosts,” a volunteer group filled with Canadians, also becoming formal “buddies” with the newly arrived student. This would help to make initial contact

with local students and help ease the transition into Canada and high school in Coquitlam.

Conclusions

The participants in this study indicated that their transitional stressors focused around; language struggles, attempting to form friendships, adapting to their new environment, persistent loneliness and searching for support. Many of these responses confirm findings from previous research, but the discussion related to forming friendships and searching for support was most enlightening.

Through discussions with the focus groups it seems that the Confucian ideals of China and Korea may persist for these students when attempting to form friendships in Canada. In Confucian societies it is believed that through age and better education, one obtains a higher position within society. Social norms, such as depth of bowing and language formality, are often governed by how one ranks compared with those they are interacting with. A participant explained that in Korea students may get along well with each other but if they are not of the same age and family rank then they cannot be friends.

Although several participants explained that they enjoyed the social freedom that Canadian society provided, the Confucian belief system appears to continue to be a strong force amongst this International student population. It was interesting to note that the vast majority of those studied indicated that their only friends were International students, from the same country, of the same age who had arrived in Canada at the same time. It was surprising to hear the lack of support that International students received from members of their own ethnic groups who had

arrived previously. The eagerness of established students to separate themselves from newly arrived students seems to indicate a strong social hierarchy at work. It seems plausible that, along with age, education and family status, the hierarchy for this population might now be influenced by the time spent in Canada. The longer an International student is in Canada, the further up the social ladder they appear to climb in relation to newly arrived members.

Furthermore, the complete lack of friendships with local students is unsettling. In a country that prides itself on tolerance and inclusion this does not appear to be the experience of our newly arrived students. Regardless of whether the responsibility lies primarily with the local students or with the International students the current situation remains troubling. The parallel social channels present within the school walls may lead to feelings of envy and mistrust as the number of International students continues to grow. The participant's recommendations of a "buddy system" when new students arrive may help bridge these groups to avoid more serious problems in the future.

Although the participants reported several sources of significant stress throughout the focus group sessions, none indicated that they sought out a school counselor for support. This was not completely surprising, as previous studies have indicated that International students may avoid speaking formally with counselors as this may have carried a stigma in their home country (Popadiuk, 2009). The only group with whom students indicated that they had spoken with for support was other International students of the same age. Participants indicated that this relationship was helpful and appeared to create a bond amongst these students.

Although this reliance on peer support is not exclusive to this subset of teenagers it is worrying in that they were unable to find a consistent adult with whom they could speak. The participants appear to be stretched between two cultures without a dependable, present adult to whom they can turn. With this dilemma in mind, creating programs like those suggested by the participants of this study would seem to be an important avenue for alleviating some of the stressors on these young people at such a vulnerable and confusing time.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Further study should focus on what is happening to our students as a result of these stressors and what are the short-term and long-term impacts on their lives as a result.

Studying the short-term impacts would require setting up a trusting relationship between a cross section of students to gather comprehensive, confidential information about their immediate response to these challenges. This would be challenging as students may be wary of adults in positions of perceived authority asking these questions and what impact their answers may have on their future educational plans. Gaining this understanding would lead to providing a far more comprehensive support program for these students. Within this study, exploring the lack of connection between International students and school counselors would be an interesting focus point. Is this due to perceptions carried forward from the students' homeland or is something else at play here?

Studying long-term impacts would require tracking the students to see if they stay in Canada for university and beyond or return to their homeland once their schooling is complete. Ideally, it would also interrogate their feelings later in life about Canada and foreign experiences in general. Understanding the emotional impact of the long-term decision-making process of these students may be valuable in determining the second-order economic impact of the government's push to increase International student enrolment. Besides the obvious cultural exchange potential of having these students in our classrooms is there a long-term economic benefit to the province and nation as well? Do these students enroll in post secondary school here, work in this country or do business with this country while employed in their homeland? Answering these long-term questions would go a long way to proving the tangible benefits of increasing our participation in International education.

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Appendix 1: Focus Group

Opening Statement:

Welcome to our focus group today. The purpose for the meeting today is so that I can get a better understanding of what it's like to be an International student here in Coquitlam. With this information I hope that we can help support International students better and make their experiences even more positive.

In a focus group it's important that we all get a chance to voice our thoughts on each question. If you don't feel comfortable answering a question you do not need to. You are all encouraged to answer any of the questions as you'd like. For the first question I will go around to each of you. After that we can discuss the questions as a group. Please respect other people's opinions in our group and allow those in the group to speak until they are finished before you start. All discussions had in this room are confidential.

Notes: Our goal is not to come to a consensus but to hear all of your voices

Sample Questions:

- What is your name, country of origin and grade?
- Why did you decide to come to Canada?
- Before you came to Canada, what were you most excited about?
- How would you describe your transition to Canada?
- Before you came to Canada, what was your main concern when you considered coming to Canada? In what ways has this changed once you settled in?
- What are some of the challenges you've found since your arrival in Canada?
- What was helpful to you when you arrived in Canada?
- What were the difficulties in transitioning to the school?
- Have you ever spoken to anyone at the school about these issues? Who was that person? Who outside of the school personal, do you talk to about these issues?
- What could be changed to help current International students transition smoothly to Coquitlam schools? What could be put in place to help future International students when they arrive?
- Do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Appendix 2: Table 1: Coded Themes

Theme: Language	Responses
Understanding Classroom instructions and expectations of teachers	9
Interactions within the classroom with teachers and students. In particular in regards to group work assignments	6
Having a desire to Exit the ESL (EAL) programs to avoid the stigma associated with these classes	5
School wide procedures including – understanding PA announcements, how the bell schedule works and “special days” that alter the schedule	6
Peer interactions involving slang language, taking part in large group conversations and discussing informal common topics	10
Social interactions in the crowded hallways or during lunchtime	9

Theme: Forming Friendships	Responses
Friends with International students that are the same age, from the same country and arrived at the same time as participant	12
Friends with International students from a different home country than participant	7
Friends with EAL students that are not International students	5
Friends with a local students	0

Theme: Loneliness	Responses
Considers the hallways and the lunchroom particularly lonely because there are many people, but no one to interact with	5
Find it difficult to enter into casual friend groupings with local students because these have already been formed through years of going to school together	8
Find various holidays, their birthday or other special days especially lonely	4
Difficult to blend into culture when they do not have Canadian friends	10
Expected to receive help from locals of same heritage but was not helped when they needed the support - never happens	8
Have been embarrassed or been laughed at when they’ve tried to speak in class or in social situations	5

Theme: External Environment	Responses
Bus schedules, timings, procedures and rule surrounding the road	9
Interactions with strangers outside of school. The expectations of “talking to strangers” and interaction with people that are homeless	4
Used to street markets, loud streets, lots of people and the lack of this “action” results in boredom	5
The weather - clouds and rain are depressing	6
Various costs including food, phone plans, haircuts, etc. are inconsistent with what they experienced in their home countries. This resulted in stress between the participants and their parents at home	8
Health care: Dr. /Dentist. Most participants waited to have a procedure done until they returned to their home country	8

Theme: Support	Responses
When interacting with friends at home this mostly consisted of late night gaming but not discuss stress in Canada	6
Friends at home do not understand the experiences of being in Canada so these issues are not discussed – Chinese participants indicated that a lack of Facebook in China makes keeping in touch more difficult	8
Local Korean or Chinese community place pressures on the participants to conform to the expectations of their home country	7
Homestay families attempt to help when possible	12
Other international students were the most helpful course of support	12
Canadians on the street were helpful when asked a question but Canadian students in the school were not very helpful	5
Requested support from school counselors	0

** Total number of respondents: 12*