

**TCKs IN THE CLASSROOM:
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF
THIRD CULTURE KIDS**

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TCKs in the Classroom: International School Teachers Professional Development in Response to the Needs of Third Culture Kids

ABSTRACT

In this paper we draw on an exploratory qualitative study of 20 teaching staff at an international school in Singapore to examine the professional development needs of international school teachers in response to the needs of third culture kids (TCKs). We argue that international school teachers require a specialised set of skills and competencies to effectively cater for the specific needs of TCKs in the international school setting, which may be lacking. This study presents new perspectives and insights in exploring what the specific needs of TCKs are, whether teachers at an international school in Singapore have the skills and competencies to be responsive to these needs, and where gaps in professional development for international school teachers may exist.

Keywords: career development, ethnic pedagogy, professional development

As the demand for expatriates in Asia increases (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2008), the necessity for international schools to cater for the children of expatriates ('third culture kids' or TCKs) has become critical. This is in part due to the growing numbers of children now entering international schools in Asia, resulting from the 'normalisation' of global mobility as a typical and expected part of one's career progression (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010). It is also, in part, due to the improved quality of international schooling options, including the growing popularity of, and demand for, the *International Baccalaureate* (IB), which has subsequently negated the necessity for many expatriates to send their children to boarding school or to return to their home-country to ensure a satisfactory education (Bunnell, 2005b). The purpose of our study is to examine international school teachers professional development needs in response to the needs of third culture kids. Our fundamental argument is drawn from Grimshaw and Sears (2008), wherein the needs of TCKs differ from those of non-expatriate families. As such, international school teachers may require a specialised set of skills and competencies to effectively cater for the specific needs of TCKs in the classroom. We contribute to the literature on international education by extending the very small number of empirical studies which explore international school teachers' professional development (e.g. Black & Armstrong, 1995; Black, Harvey, Hayden, & Thompson, 1994) and diversity in education (e.g. Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011). In drawing on data from 20 teaching staff at an international school in Singapore, our study aims to give international school teachers a voice in which to share their 'lived experience' regarding TCKs in the international school setting. A further contribution is that, by adopting a qualitative research approach, we reveal perceptions and findings that can be compared with other studies to deepen what is currently understood about

international education (e.g. Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). Additionally, we aim to provide useful insights for education administrators as to where current gaps and difficulties in professional development support for international school teachers may exist.

This paper commences with a brief overview of third culture kids, including the challenges and issues that TCKs face. Next, we briefly review professional development for teachers. This is followed by an explanation of our methodology, after which we present our findings, and conclude with a discussion and overall implications of our study for research and practice.

THIRD CULTURE KIDS

Third culture kids are the children of parents who live in a foreign country for their work (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). Such 'work' may include occupations in the military, diplomatic corps, mission field, non-profit sector, education, and international business. TCKs spend a significant portion of their developmental years (birth to eighteen) outside their parents' culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2011). Useem (1973) defines three cultures that TCKs inhabit. The first is a child's country of origin and/or parental culture, of which they hold a passport but may or may not have been born in. The second culture is the host country in which a child is currently living. The third culture is the community within the second culture that a TCK most identifies with in terms of a shared lifestyle and meaning, e.g. an expatriate compound, or an international school. The TCK experience is marked by the continual process of living in and among different cultures, which Pollock and van Reken (2001) argue '*affects the deeper rather than the more superficial parts of [TCKs] personal or cultural being*'. The TCK life is therefore impacted by two interconnected realities of being raised in, and experiencing: (1) a truly cross-cultural world beyond only watching, studying or analyzing other cultures from a distance; and (b) a highly mobile world which continually changes in terms of people, places, and things. For many TCKs, these realities manifest in a sense of rootlessness and a lack of full ownership in any one culture they inhabit in spite retaining a relationship to all (Pollock & Van Reken, 2011). Hence, the TCK experience often creates a subtle underlying tension as a child struggles to develop, at its most basic level, a sense of identity, relationships with others, and their own view of the world during a fragile stage of their development, i.e. the early and adolescent years. For this reason, TCKs can be perceived as victims of globalisation where culture and identity collide. Yet, the TCK experience can also foster positive gains,

and not in the least the development of a skill-set that is highly sought after on the international labour market (Selmer & Lam, 2004; The Straits Times, 2011).

In adapting from Grimshaw and Sears (2008), the conceptual framework that underpins our study relates to TCK identity as a socially constructed phenomenon in response to one's lived experience and social interaction with others of a similar background. It includes that individuals can be conditioned by others, as well as the '*broader narrative discourse*' that exists (p73), which may subsequently challenge their academic and social wellbeing (Fail, Thompson, & Walker, 2004; Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). We contend that international schools play an important role in helping TCKs socially construct their identity. This is because international schools share several common characteristics that TCKs come to understand as 'normal': teachers, staff and students are multi-culturally diverse, and there is a high turnover of the student body (Langford, 1998). Moreover, while the content of children's stories in the international school community may differ, the experience of the TCK is nonetheless universally understood much like a familiar script (Pascoe, 2009). We define an international school as one that is '*independent of any national system of education, and that offers a curriculum which is different from that in the host country*' (Black & Armstrong, 1995, p27). In essence, an international school is the 'third culture' in which many TCKs are immersed and in which they find comfort, security, and a sense of shared identity. The significance of the third culture is therefore critical and has been shown to help TCKs thrive in their international environment (Sears, 2011; Tsumagari, 2010), largely because it provides them with a sense of belonging in relationship to others of a similar background (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). Consequently, it is imperative that teachers' are knowledgeable about the issues facing TCKs so that they are responsive to their needs within the context of the learning and teaching environment. Indeed, research demonstrates that there are many factors that affect TCKs resilience that impacts on their academic performance, social and emotional wellbeing as both children and adults (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008). We argue that an environment in which the TCK phenomenon is reflected in the curriculum and can become part of the culture of a school community (e.g. its vision and mission) will enhance the overall wellbeing and wholeness of the child.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL TEACHERS

Interest in the professional development of teachers stems from the well documented research linking quality professional development and quality learning and teaching environments (Raban et al., 2007;

Rodd, 2006). This research has consistently demonstrated that the professional development of teachers is the cornerstone of excellence, wherein ongoing staff professional development contributes to the optimal development of children, and reflects the quality of the curriculum and pedagogy children are immersed in. Adapting from Evers, Kreijns, Van de Heijden and Gerrichhauzen (2011), we define teachers' professional development as authentic participation in professional learning sessions including training, reading, dialoguing, experimenting, reflecting, and collaborative activities, which can be both formally delivered and informally experienced as on-the-job work integrated learning. Professional development in recent years has evolved to a participant driven approach, focusing on process driven reflective practice and capacity building (e.g. Robinson & Carrington, 2002). This represents an intentional shift towards a constructivist approach to professional development, placing the teacher at the centre of these activities. Such an approach supports teachers in constructing their own knowledge and competencies for the context of their particular professional learning community. It also highlights the importance of collegial reflective dialogue in the workplace and is compatible with a focus on continuous lifelong learning for continuous improvement. Staff narratives of reflective practice provide the platform for capacity building. Resonating with the shift towards reflective professional development, this process supports teachers to engage as reflective practitioners in reflective action: to build on and from their experiences; and to be actively engaged in developing theories that they can use in practice (Gould & Baldwin, 2004). Reflective action focuses on ongoing learning for continuous improvement.

Despite the growth in size and diversity of international schools in Asia, Holderness (2001) argues that little formal research has been undertaken on international school teachers. Of existing research, a small number of studies have focused on methods to recruit teachers and the high turnover of staff (e.g. Cambridge, 2002), rather than how they are supported and professionally developed. To date, no research has examined the ongoing professional development needs of teachers and school administrators in international school settings. Bunnell (2005a) suggests that few schools offer a comprehensive induction-training program for new teachers, with Hayden (2002) commenting that '*no specific training is provided to international school staff ... before they embark upon their international school experience*' (p117). One possible reason for the lack of professional development is the contractual nature of international school teachers' appointments, where short-term and fixed-tenure contracts can result in professional development neither being offered nor requested (Holderness, 2002).

This is in contrast to Hardman's (2001) findings which show that the main motivator for joining an international school is 'professional advancement'. Hence, the concept of professional development in the international school setting appears to be of increasing importance (Richards, 2002).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Few, if any, studies have addressed the issue of international school teachers' professional development in terms of knowledge about TCKs and translation of this knowledge within the pedagogy of teaching. Building on extant literature (e.g. Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011; Evers et al., 2011; Sears, 2011), this research is salient in informing the professional development agenda for teachers in the international school context, both in Singapore and further afield wherever international school teachers may be employed. We outline three specific research questions:

1. How do international school teachers define TCKs?
2. To what extent do international school teachers have experience with, and exposure to, TCK professional development and learning?
3. What do teachers say they need in terms of ongoing professional development in relation to TCKs?

METHODS: TEACHER INTERVIEWS

In September 2011, we interviewed 20 teaching staff at an international school in Singapore using a focus group approach (i.e. two focus groups with 10 staff in each) to obtain data for a larger qualitative study on TCKs in the classroom. Given the limited time teachers have available to participate in outside activities, this methodology is seen as most appropriate as data can be collected quickly and efficiently over a short period of time. Focus groups can also facilitate better quality data collection where individuals may be reluctant to share or disclose their views and opinions in one-on-one settings (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). We draw on these focus group interviews to explore teachers' professional development in relation to TCKs. Participants were recruited via email invitation disseminated by a senior member of staff at the school who facilitated our access. An invitation letter outlining the project details were attached to the email invitation, along with a consent form. Staff volunteering to participate indicated their interest and availability to the senior staff member at the school, who then informed the research team. Participants ranged from active full-time teaching staff, counselors, subject teachers, learning support, and heads of departments. Participants were drawn across the primary and secondary school. These staff can be expected to be well-informed about both

professional development and international school settings. Focus groups were held immediately after school hours, in the school library, and were recorded. Focus groups ran for approximately 1 hour 30 minutes each, being facilitated by a member of the research team. Data was analysed using NVIVO v9.0. Transcripts were content analysed and common themes identified. To facilitate greater reliability and validity of the data, both researchers analysed data independently to facilitate a process of inter-rater reliability, coming together post-analysis to discuss discrepancies and agree on common themes.

FINDINGS

RQ1: Defining TCKs

Teachers' were unclear as to how a TCK is defined in terms of the role of the 'third' culture. Within the broader definition offered by Useem (1973), we found that the third culture is defined as one based on the national culture of the host country, as typified in the following comment:

When a kid moves to another country, then they have the culture of their parents - assuming that is one culture, which often it is not. Then they have the country's culture, and those combined make a third culture for a kid.

Most teachers' technical understanding of the 'third culture' that informs TCKs' experience was therefore limited. Findings here were consistent regardless of whether teachers were new to the international school context (i.e. their first international school post), were adult TCKs themselves, or had 20 years or more experience in overseas education.

RQ2: Teachers' Experience with TCK Professional Development

Our findings show that there is no clear answer as to how international school teachers' receive their learning and training specific to TCKs in the international school context, to then translate this training specific to TCKs in the classroom. Mirroring other findings in relation to general professional development (e.g. Hayden, 2002), teachers do not perceive that they are provided with specific and relevant *formal* training to help them acquire expertise on managing TCKs. As one teacher stated:

It's pretty much up to the individual teacher to take the initiative to try and address these things. In terms of a formal mechanism that not only educates staff but educates the community and also supports these kids? It doesn't exist yet ... the parents email us all the time, they will just come and pop in and have a chat, that's the only avenue that we have at the moment.

Of the professional development training teachers have acquired, much is received informally on an ad-hoc basis, typically by being overseas, working internationally, and the frequency through which they relocate to new locations. This personal experience then "*infiltrates through the classroom*":

It's the support network of their friends that helps ... for example, with the younger ones, if I was given a new student I would often take aside a small group of kids who I knew what their experience had been like and I would say, "Can you look after this guy for a little while, just show him around?" But that was something that I did. That wasn't something the school mandated. I was just trying to make life easier for these kids when they came in half way through the year.

On-the-job training

Professional development as on-the-job training emerged as a critical, albeit informal and reactive, method of training for international school staff. Teachers' capacity building in relation to managing the social and emotional development of TCKs was frequently gained through exposure to students' behaviour in the class, mostly without formal training as to how best to deal with it:

These kids didn't choose to be expatriates; most of the time the parents did. There's a high percentage of parents quite happy to go abroad but the kids are not ... for the older TCK, mum and dad are coming here for a career and they wind up on planes everywhere and not around. No one is there to actually see from a teen point of view, "I want to get pissed off with mum and dad and I want to show them I'm pissed off", but [the parents] are not even around. And so then it comes into the school ... it has to come out somewhere. They have to vent it somewhere.

Similarly, others' experience was gained through student interaction, with students' as teachers:

Picking their brains about what their childhood experience has been like, that's been really interesting for me just to hear that, because often I take for granted a lot of things that I might know about my students. I'm not a TCK. I thought I knew what their experience was like, but it has brought it home to me again, which has been good for me as their teacher.

RQ3: Teachers' Professional Development Needs in Relation to TCKs

Our third research question explores which areas of professional development enable international school teachers and staff to respond to the needs of TCKs. We identified seven important training needs.

Structure of training

An important issue is the structure and depth of the TCK professional development training that is received. Many staff spoke about attending school-sponsored workshops, however, these were perceived to be "*very informal, for example, staff induction on TCKs [was] sitting in a room full of 20 other newbies ... it was a 20-minute conversation*". Workshops that were provided were seen to be an opportunity for teachers to begin their reflection about supporting TCKs, where "*they don't provide a lot of answers, [but] it starts people on that journey of inquiring into what does it mean. We need to question how does that impact or influence our practice, our thinking*". Others were of the opinion that the TCK phenomenon is trivialized and not given the importance it deserves, instead being relegated to "*a very nice one-day celebration*" where the festivities amount to "*okay, everyone bring a flag and, okay, bring something from your country*". The general sentiment is that "*it's one day. What are you*

going to do for the rest of the days that the kids are here ... to make a school international? ”. One teacher summed up the feeling quite well by explaining “this is not just like any other subject area. [It] deserves a certain amount of time and resourcing ... in terms of identifying a cultural identity that is yours. I don’t think that it’s seen through that lens ”. Another suggested:

There’s the old expression which is very big with the IB organisation in terms of celebrating the five F’s: food, fashion, flags, famous people, and festivals. It’s very superficial, and trying to get people to go deeper into it cannot be done, for example, in a PYP 6 or 7-week unit of inquiry. There needs to be something that really takes root and becomes a part of the culture of the school.

Curriculum training and pedagogy

Teachers’ were adamant that professional development in regard to TCKs needs to be imbedded in curriculum pedagogy development more directly, at multiple levels. For example, those working with TCKs who enter school at the pre-school stage find that they are able to honour children’s heritage and life circumstances as part of their curriculum more readily than teachers of older students. This is because “kids at a younger age tend to be a lot more pliable, they roll with things a bit better” and because parents tend to be more involved in younger children’s classroom activities. This results in a greater degree of cultural communication between home and school. Additionally, familiarity and knowledge of a students’ previous school’s/country curriculum structure and pedagogy are seen as essential to support a child’s transition into the teaching and learning program. There is, however, an obvious tension between developing an inclusive curriculum “that is meaningful for all of the stakeholders” while also being “faced with having to deliver curriculum and then deliver results” As one teacher stated, “Are we dealing with the people, or are we dealing with the results? If we do differentiation, are [we] able to differentiate things really, really well at a higher level?”.

Pastoral care and counselling

Teachers identified the importance of pastoral care professional development facilitated by the school counsellors so as to better equip them to respond to the needs of TCKs. This was found to be a particular need for secondary school subject teachers and home group teachers who “don’t really have contact time with students, they just come in your classroom and go again”. Particular problems were identified as being specifically related to older TCKs, with many feeling inadequately trained to deal with the issues:

In my experience, the ones who have been TCKs from an early age I don’t struggle too much with those in the classroom. But I’m a middle school teacher and by the time they get to me, the ones who have just arrived and they’re 14 years old, it’s tough, they’ve never lived outside of their home country ... they’re angry with their parents ... it’s a difficult age to start with.

Induction training for staff and students

It is evident that teachers need a clear and transparent induction process to support their own, as well as students', transition into the international school context. Current induction programs were viewed as superficial, lacking in quality, and "a lucky dip". For students, the induction process seems to vary according to the dominant nationalities enrolled at the school and whether parents provide an informal support network. Another challenge is curriculum induction and the particular age at which a student enters the curriculum program of the school. Teachers recognize that there is limited, if any, support for students facing this challenge, particularly in relation to the language or terminology that is used as part of the curriculum. As one teacher explains, "*Apart from year 6 when they have an induction to the MYP [Middle Years Program], if you start in any year other than at the very beginning of year 6, you have to pick it up as you go on. It's pretty chunky stuff*". Providing a clear and transparent induction process was seen to ensure that teachers and students (and, in some instances, their parents and/or guardians) do not fall through the gaps in terms of transition, emotional, social, psychological, curriculum, and learning support. This induction needs to be ongoing throughout the year, but the question of whose jurisdiction it is to develop, implement and monitor the induction process remains unclear.

Language support

A central issue is that virtually all formal professional development that is offered to international school teachers is focused predominantly on English as an additional language (EAL), to support non-English speaking students in the mainstream environment. However, what appears to be missing is an understanding of cultural sensitivity in relation to the various languages that students' speak and not allowing segregation to occur in the playground and in class in terms of social groupings. The challenge here is whether teachers direct student groupings and seating, or allow students to self-select to sit with and form friendships themselves. Inclusiveness arose as an important issue related to TCKs, along with subsequent rejection and exclusion of minority students. This is a complex issue because language may hinder students' ability to integrate beyond seeking friendships from their own foreign language culture.

Identity and students' learner profile

Teachers acknowledged that students of certain ages struggle with TCK identity issues. There's a clear recognition that "*when they're younger they're not grappling with the bigger questions like the older kids are*" but that adolescents by their very nature "*are trying to identify who they are, where they*

fit, and who's like them". Findings in our study clearly showed that "TCKs need that conversation and outlet". As one teacher said, "we need the kids to be aware, to understand that they're not alone, and to celebrate that." In terms of professional development, more formal training is required on the IB learner profile, and in particular, the international mindedness attribute, as the following teacher explains:

International mindedness [is] the only learner profile that will establish all of these things we're talking about with TCKs. But without school context, without that vision and understanding, we will always come up against hurdles every time we look at this concept. It's very, very slow moving. It was evident throughout all of our evaluations and our authorisation processes, that that's something that we struggle with. The cost of [not doing] it is the identity crisis.

Repatriation and re-assignment

A consistent issue for international school teachers is the high mobility of students in and out of the school system, "a revolving door" as one teacher put it. Repatriation or re-assignment to another location was found to be a major source of stress because teachers often felt ill-equipped to prepare students, the class and themselves for the sadness and grief that accompanies the regularity of students transitioning out of the school. As one teacher explained, "I don't think we do it [well] at all. It's like, 'you're leaving? Bye'. More professional development training is needed to support and empower teachers to respond effectively, as evidenced by the following incident:

I had a situation last term where a year 6 girl went home to South Africa, and the rest of her class were inconsolable. They were howling, seriously, for the next couple of days. The girl who was leaving wasn't upset, but the kids here were because she was moving on. About three quarters of that class had been in Singapore for a while and there were a couple of kids who had only just met her this year, but it was a big thing and the co-ordinators had to come in and have a chat to these kids and try and calm them down. It was a big issue and very, very unsettling for the kids who were still here.

For many teachers, preparation for students' leaving was considered a significant gap, and the question frequently arose "in the wider sense of what we do, what are our duties in terms of preparing them to transition home? Is it our responsibility?". Some teachers felt that "we have to be realistic as to how we are supposed to prepare students to move back. I think ultimately [it is] the responsibility of parents".

DISCUSSION

On the whole, findings in our study point to a level of overall professional development training in relation to TCKs that seems to disappoint school teachers at an international school in Singapore. The reality is that virtually no professional development training is provided specific to the international context in which teachers are employed. While ad-hoc and informal training was used consistently by staff to address the needs of children and adolescents in their care, more formal and specialized training

is desired, and needed. Confirming some aspects of prior research (e.g. Holderness, 2001; Hayden, 2002), the issues that were poorly addressed include staff induction, student transitions and identity issues, pastoral care, and curriculum training. On a more positive note, our findings present an interesting perspective on professional development for international school teachers, which emerges as multifaceted and uniquely specialized in comparison to teachers in domestic school settings. Following Hayden's (2002) line of thinking, we propose that a three-stage model of professional development is necessary in order to equip international school teachers to effectively manage TCKs in the classroom: (1) initial teacher induction and professional development training; (2) continuing and ongoing professional development within schools for capacity building; and, (3) formal qualifications at the post graduate level for teachers in the classroom, as well as those in administrative, head, and strategic roles. On a practical level, teaching staff expressed an overwhelmingly urgent need for better induction programs for staff as well as students. Also needed is formalized training to imbed the TCK phenomenon into the curriculum and pedagogy, using the international mindedness attribute as a foundational construct. Additionally, there is frustration at the lack of pastoral care and counseling that is available to help staff deal with the high mobility and transitional nature that is an inherent part of the international school context. Clearer communication between parents, students and school staff in relation to students' welfare and other significant events in their lives, be it daily routine events (e.g. absence of one or both parents), or one-off more specific and unique events (e.g. family death, grandparent visits), would be helpful. This communication is not likely to be in the realm of counseling but rather as teacher communication. Ideally, teachers need to develop their capacity as communicators without being trained as a counsellor. Lastly, when a school represents a national curriculum (such as the school in our study), diversity among staff at all staffing levels, including teaching, administration, para-professional, welfare, counselling, and learning support, is critical to ensure a broader representation of nationalities and cultures on the teaching staff beyond the school's home-country culture. Doing so can develop 'international mindedness' so that children can be taught differently, and beyond only, the national curriculum of the home-country. People from different backgrounds who work together, engage and communicate with one another also demonstrate inclusiveness as an important international competency.

CONCLUSION

The aims of this study are to extend understanding of the professional development needs of international school teachers in response to the needs of TCKs. We acknowledge that our exploratory study is focused on one English speaking school in Singapore adopting only one national curriculum, which subsequently limits the generalizability of our findings, noting that there would likely be cultural and language differences among other schools and countries in Asia. To address this limitation, future research would ideally replicate our study across a range of schools in different locations in Asia in order to adopt a broader perspective, which our paper does not directly consider. The above notwithstanding, the contribution of this study is threefold. First, it demonstrates that formal professional development training for international school staff is lacking, wherein teachers predominantly rely on informal, ad-hoc and on-the-job training to acquire competencies that equip them to handle TCK issues. A second contribution is that our study moves empirical research on international schools beyond only a focus on recruitment and retention, to consider the professional development needs of staff as a necessary component of continued employment. Importantly, our focus on ongoing and continuous training and the building of a core set of international skills and competencies pertaining to TCKs may in turn have implications for international school staff recruitment and retention. Additionally, our study extends the focus of professional development for international school teachers beyond only induction training within schools, to consider other types of professional development which can be provided both internally as well as externally throughout the contracted period of employment, including the attainment of formal qualifications at the post-graduate level. A third contribution is that we have been able to demonstrate using a qualitative study that professional development in relation to TCKs is an important gap in international school teachers' capacity building, and is one which they would like to see addressed. Our findings therefore constitute an incremental but important step towards understanding how professional development in the international school context can help teachers acquire a specialised set of skills and competencies to effectively cater for the specific needs of TCKs. In doing so, the TCK phenomenon can be more specifically reflected in the curriculum to become part of the culture of a school community, which will ultimately enhance the overall wellbeing and wholeness of each and every TCK in the classroom.

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