

Towards a TCK Curriculum

How literature and writing assignments can help TCK students make the most of their backgrounds

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“A **third culture kid** is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years [from birth to 18 years of age] outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.”

--David Pollock, from *Third Culture Kids, Growing Up Among Worlds*.

The Pol Van Cultural Identity Model:

Cultural Identity in Relationship to Surrounding Culture

(Adapted from *Third Culture Kids* by David C. Pollock and Ruth Van E. Recken)

<p>FOREIGNER Look Different, Think Different</p>	<p>HIDDEN IMMIGRANT Look Alike, Think Different</p>
<p>ADOPTED Look Different, Think Alike</p>	<p>MIRROR Look Alike, Think Alike</p>

Behavior often seen with hidden immigrant or adopted identities:

Chameleons: those who try to find a “same as” identity. Try to conform externally through clothes, languages, or attitudes to whatever environment they are in.



Screamers: Those who try to find a “different from” identity. Let other people around them know they’re not like them and don’t plan to be.



Wallflowers: those who try to find a “nonidentity.” Rather than risk being exposed as someone who doesn’t know the local cultural rules, they prefer to sit on the sidelines and watch, at least for an extended period, rather than to engage in the activities at hand.

Main challenges faced by TCKs and ATCKs:

- Finding a sense of personal and cultural identity
- Dealing with unresolved grief

REASONS FOR UNRESOLVED GRIEF:

1. Hidden Losses
 2. Lack of permission to grieve
 3. Lack of time to process
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IMPORTANCE OF NAMING:

1. Themselves and their experience
2. Their behavioral patterns
3. Their fears
4. Their losses
5. Their wounds
6. Their choices



GIVING VOICE TO THE TCK EXPERIENCE

“Children raised as foreigners often question the whole concept of home, never feeling that they quite belong anywhere... often, they find that the only permanence is in memory and in the stories they tell... In a nomadic world, telling our stories is one way to establish our place in time, especially when ties to extended family and community become tenuous and personal histories may be fragmented by moves, scripted by family mission, or silenced by the need to conform. Finding a voice can be difficult when language and location are always changing... telling our stories binds us in an act of remembrance.”

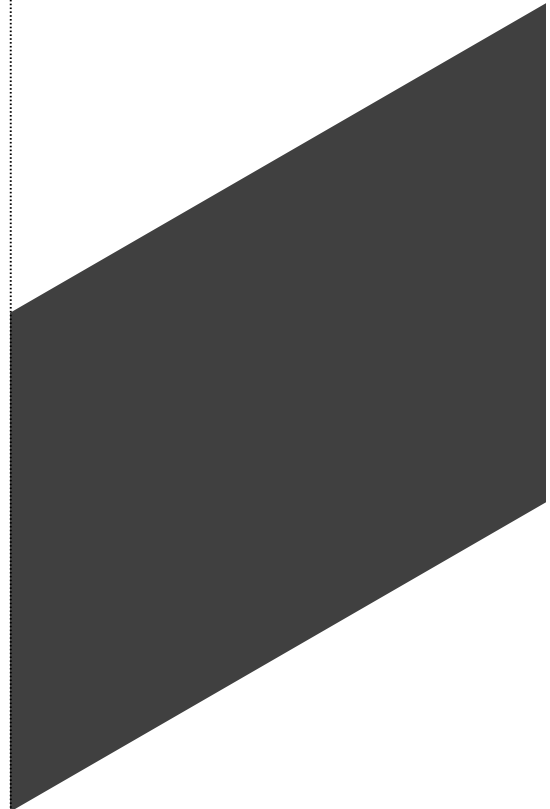
--From *Third Culture Kids, Growing Up Among Worlds*

“My feeling is that it is crucial for military brats to put the right name to ... yearning, face our unrequited need to belong and address it as best we can. Because if we do not, the yearning, like anything imprisoned in the unconscious, will play havoc with our lives... we must find our own answers to the unresolved question of belonging. And we do find belonging, partially—although the nature of belonging, for those not born to it, is that it must be found over and over again.”

--Mary Edwards Wertsch, from “Outside Looking In”

“Silence does not disperse fear, does not eliminate it. Rather, it is our voices and actions in the face of fear that are transformative. Coming to language is a process not unlike walking that cable high in the air with nothing but space below. I write by feeling my way along words that shape the silence around them, impelled by a fierce awareness of the voicelessness that precedes me, the huge price I have already paid to fear. The farther I go on the more I understand that words are not the tightrope on which we balance, but the steps themselves that carry us forward into the headiness of motion, toward the articulation of home.”

--Lisa Suhair Majaj, from “Beyond Silence”



IMPLICATIONS FOR DEALING WITH TCK'S IN INTERATIONAL AND AMERICAN SCHOOLS

“Although culture isn’t taught from a book, no educational system develops in a cultural vacuum. Teachers learn a particular style of teaching based on the philosophy of how that culture believes children should be taught. A curriculum, along with the teaching method, is a direct reflection of the cultural values and beliefs of the society. Those who believe in the curriculum do so because they feel the values and practices it emphasizes are correct. In a traditional monocultural community, both school and home reinforce what the other is unconsciously teaching at the “under water” level of culture. For many TCKs, however, what and how things are taught at school maybe vastly different as they shift from school to school while moving from one place to another. In addition, in an international community the individual teachers themselves often come from many different cultures. This can add significant complexity to a TCK’s cultural development—let alone his or her academic achievement.”

“Norway became my well-kept secret. I was a fiercely patriotic little girl, and every May 17 I would insist on celebrating Norway’s Independence Day. My American classmates had their Thanksgiving and Halloween parties. I was never invited, except for once, when I left the party in tears because I didn’t understand the English in the video they were watching. Little did it help that we had a teacher from Texas who taught U.S. History that year. When I put Florida on the wrong side of the map she scolded me for it. That memory is still very vivid in my mind. I was forced to hear about the wonders of America, and no one cared to hear about Norway. No one seemed to care that English wasn’t my first language, and the school wouldn’t give us time to study Norwegian during school hours—we had to study Norwegian during our vacations. I used to think that was really unfair.”

“If a school is a place for learning the values as well as the behavior of culture, what happens when children attend a school with completely different customs, values, or religious orientation from that of their parents? What happens when the basic educational needs, (e.g. “correct” spelling, penmanship, math processes, language) required for success in their passport cultures aren’t taught in the school they attend? This often occurs for globally nomadic families when the choices for schools that teach the academic curriculum of their home country may be limited to schools based on a belief system or in a language that doesn’t match their own. Even something like the style of teaching—such as rote versus inductive methods—can add to the stress of learning.”

(Excerpted from *Third Culture Kids, Growing Up Among Worlds*, pp. 49-50)

SOURCES:

Pollock, David C. and van Reken, Ruth. *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*. Boston: Intercultural Press, 2009.

Unrooted Childhood: Memories of Growing Up Global. Ed. Faith Elise and Nina Sichel. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 2004.

Not “coming home” alone

By [Steph Yiu](#) (from *Denizen Magazine*, <http://www.denizen-mag.com/?author=1>)

I had only known Caleb for three months before he died.

We were just getting past the stereotypes. Him: a tall, blonde, cheery kid from Hong Kong. Me: a not-tall, Asian, cheery kid from Singapore. We were both Third Culture Kids, working as dorm resident assistants, attending university far from home.

At Caleb’s memorial, his dad read his suicide note. “I’m sorry,” Caleb [wrote](#). “I’ve been living a lie.”

I collapsed into tears. Until that moment, I refused to believe that it was suicide.

We were so alike! We were international, Third Culture. We joked about how we hated answering “Where are you from?” and the stereotypes put upon us. We were smart, worldly, well-traveled. Why suicide?

That was 2005.

Today I’m still seeking answers to questions that I am afraid to ask. I still don’t know why Caleb decided to leave. But I am sure of one thing. Third Culture Kids need a lot of support when they leave their expatriate communities.

Going away to college is the first time many TCKs emerge from the expat bubble. Suddenly they’re left to fend for themselves, cobbling together an identity that makes sense to their confused peers. Caleb often joked that he was that “blond kid from Hong Kong,” but it couldn’t have been easy, being far away from his family, straddling the worlds of American and Cantonese culture.

I mean, this is what we all get used to: “Wait, you’re from (insert country)? I thought you were American!”

TCKs who go home for college are hidden immigrants: they look and sound like everyone around them, but don’t think the same way. These TCKs watch, bewildered, as their new friends drink themselves into a stupor. They listen, unable to participate, as their peers talk about favorite childhood TV shows. They grocery shop, overwhelmed, when the cereal aisle just doesn’t seem to end.

TCKs often find they have more in common with international students, who may in turn reject them because they just seem “so American.” Repatriation is when they start to figure out that they don’t fit in, and realize that it’s going to be a lifelong struggle to find a sense of identity. According to author Esther Schubert’s *Keeping Third-Culture Kids Emotionally Healthy: Depression and Suicide among Missionary Kids*, TCK suicide rates go up after their first year “home.”

So where are the support groups? Well, first of all, TCKs are hard to identify. At my alma mater, Northwestern University, the international office only got a list of students who were non-U.S. citizens. Many of the TCKs I knew had American passports. In 2000, Cate Whitcomb, then working for student affairs at Northwestern, decided to seek these students out. She searched for students that had different countries listed as their nationality and their permanent address. In 2006, she started a TCK group.

Whitcomb looked for these students because she was a TCK herself. From age two to age 18, she lived in Mussoorie, India, and attended boarding school. She knew how hard it was to be a TCK in college. During her college years in the 1960s, whenever she told people where she was from they would say: “Ew! Why are you from there? That’s weird!”

“You just cannot make assumptions by looking at people and saying, ‘I know who you are and where you’re from,’” she said in a 2007 interview at Northwestern. “When we reduce each other to what we see, we have nothing.”

Our TCK group met once a quarter for a brunch. We mingled, shared and commiserated in “culture shock” stories. There were smiles all around. As the number of TCKs increases on college campuses, I expect more of these groups to pop up. However, [Lewis and Clark College](#) in Portland, Oregon, has us all beat. They started [a TCK group](#) in 1992.

The associate dean of students, Greg Caldwell, knew nothing of Third Culture Kids until he visited [Yokohama International School](#) in Japan and was asked if his school had any program for TCKs.

“I had no idea what he was talking about,” Caldwell said in an interview this week. “I said, what is a TCK?”

He set out to identify TCKs on his campus. As it turned out, all high schools have a College Entrance Examination Board code used for the SAT and AP exams, and international schools start at a certain number. They found the students who came from international schools and informally marked them with a “K,” for TCK.

Nothing much came out of it until he met [Norma McCaig](#), the founder of Global Nomads International. On her suggestion, he pushed to include a question on Lewis and Clark’s college application form: “Have you ever lived in another country for more than one year due to a parents’ work?” They hit jackpot.

Since then, they have started TCK Tuesdays, where TCKs and friends are invited to mingle and hear from TCK speakers. They began inviting TCKs to international student orientation. They have a TCK advisory board, a TCK intern at the international office. They’ve even tried a TCK education group, where they visit different campus staff meetings to teach university officials about the needs of TCKs. For example, they reminded the Registrar’s office that graduation applications need more than just a “city and state” box for addresses. They told the Financial Aid office that their advertised 1-800 number doesn’t work from overseas. Today, there are approximately 130 TCKs on their campus, of which two-thirds are American citizens.

“Some TCKs never come to any [of the programs], and some of them come to everything,” Caldwell said. “The needs of the student vary, so it’s not something we make anyone do. But there are some people who really need it, and really benefit from it.”

For me, hearing about Caldwell’s program was very encouraging. Sometimes, all TCKs need is validation; to know that they are an equal member of society. Not just someone that exists between-the-lines, on forms, on applications, on citizenships, on identity, on what we put down as “home.” A TCK support group doesn’t have to do a whole lot more than that.

“We identify, recognize, and celebrate. We validate the TCK experience,” he said. “Many people on this campus will know what a TCK is.”

I’m not saying a TCK group would’ve made all the difference in Caleb’s life and death. And I don’t think TCKs should only hang out with other Third Culture Kids — quite the opposite. I just think that a little bit of validation, a friendly support network, and advice from older TCKs can make that college transition less overwhelming. Too often TCKs are alone in their repatriation struggle, and in this day and age of globalization, that’s just unacceptable.