

In the September edition of Educare, we asked for your experiences of transition from home schooling to attending school. Here is the story of one MK.

My first transition from home school to a classroom was in 1998 when I started 9th grade at the Rain Forest International School (RFIS) in Yaounde, Cameroon. My older sister had started two years before me, and I knew others there and was joining with friends in my year group, so I knew what to expect mostly: it wasn't a major transition. There were four year groups with about ten students in each. The main differences to home schooling were that there was more structure, and learning happened at more or less the same pace for everyone else in the classroom. There was also more variety of subjects, and even though I was in a hostel (boarding), there was more of a school/home divide. Homework was actually homework, and not just extra home-school work.

My second and more major transition was going into Year 10 at an all-boys grammar school in England in 1999, where the big differences included having to wear school uniform, addressing teachers formally, and being in a class of about 30 and a total school population of 1400. Although it had some kind of Christian-faith-based ethos, it was a far cry from the Christian ethos at a high school for missionary kids. Some of the main surprises for me included: not everyone came from the same sort of background or shared the same belief system and outlook (something which my 4-year-old son at pre-school is now encountering at a much earlier age); others of my age seemed immature to me; and there was less friendliness between age-groups compared to RFIS, where the school was like an extended family. It probably took about two and a half years for me to acclimatise to the different environment, insofar as I was ever able to adapt.

Nurturing Healthy TCK Identity

The following discussion is based upon Rachel Cason's presentation at the TCK Forum, hosted by Global Connections, on 10th October 2013. Although findings are based upon Rachel's PhD research on TCK life stories, the presentation was developed in grateful collaboration with Gill Bryant of WEC International.

My research is about stories. In my final undergraduate year of Sociology, I noticed that Third Culture Kids were almost entirely absent from any discussions around migration. I entered into postgraduate research out of a desire to explore the TCK experience in a way that would be representative of a broader range of experiences than my own. In this spirit of open-ended enquiry my research is based on in-depth, life story interviews – aiming to better understand the relationship between the TCK experience, and belonging, identity, and the role of place.

Earlier this year I was generously invited to the Global Connections TCK Forum in the UK to share some of what my research is teaching me about the ways in which TCK identity may be nurtured. Even in expressing a desire to 'nurture' TCK identity, there may be said to be an implicit understanding that TCKs face particular challenges to identity construction because of their experiences. The main characteristic of the TCK experience

is the high levels of mobility they negotiate and, I argue, this doubles as their main complication also in developing a healthy, stable sense of self.

Moving regularly from one culture and social group to another develops in many TCKs a sense of a 'chameleon' self. They enter a situation, assess it, determine what will be required of them, and produce the appropriate behaviour to facilitate fitting in. Wertsch has written a wonderful book on military TCKs, and I've found many overlaps between her observations and my own research findings. In an interview for a Brat film, she makes a comment which I find to be very applicable to TCKs from a range of backgrounds:

"What these children learn to do very well is to read other people and then to become the manifestation of that person's wants/needs/desires" [Wertsch, *Brats: Our Journey Home*, a Donna Musil film, 2005]¹

The concern of many who love and care for TCKs is that these young people develop a healthy and secure sense of self; one that may well be comfortable in different cultural situations, but that is not lost to them. If the TCKs were to stand still, in the dark, with no cultures around to mirror, and no outside expectations to meet, who would they be? This is the particular challenge of the need to constantly adapt. There are three special challenges to TCK identity construction, as suggested by my research. These are: a firm identification with mission, nationality, and uniqueness.

Identification with mission

Mission TCKs grow up typically identifying very strongly with their parents' career, or calling. They might accompany parents in their work, or even assist them. The mission school where I conducted field work held mission trips for the high schoolers, and organised a kind of community service where students were expected to give their time to the local community in some way – often through Christian outreach or visits to local orphanages. These TCKs may go so far as to identify as missionaries themselves. Certainly there is a sense in which they feel representative of the mission as a whole, no more so than on furlough (home leave). For many TCKs, there is a strong awareness of the importance of leaving their parents' supporters with a good impression. One adult TCK I interviewed remarked that:

"Missionary kids on furlough had better be well-behaved because mum and dad's income depends on it... You go out to people's homes to eat a lot. You don't talk very much unless you're spoken to. You mind your manners. You certainly will not complain about anything that is served to you. You will leave these people with a good impression."

This sense of self as a significant member of the sending organisation is important, and problematic for two reasons. Firstly, these TCKs will at some point leave the organisation, either for university or because their parents leave. Losing such a strong identification with mission, and sense of belonging to that community leaves an identity vacuum. Secondly, it is an important element of any identity journey to be able to separate oneself slowly and safely from one's parents and peers, to find a distinctive self. With high mobility however, separating from one's only stable community is often too risky. So when

¹ Wertsch, M. E. (2005) interviewed in "Brats: Our Journey Home", a Donna Musil Film, The First Documentary about Growing up Military, Brats Without Borders, Inc.

does this experimentation of self happen? Most likely when separated from family or mission – through schooling, or repatriation. However, this will be at time of transition, and not necessarily a safe time to risk conflict, air difficult questions, and experiment with allegiances.

Identity and Nationality

For some TCKs, while all the culture around them is shifting, nationality might be the one stable element that feels secure in their sense of self. For many, though, nationality, and an understanding of one's identity in relationship to citizenship and belonging, is not straightforward.

One TCK's sense of him or herself as British might be reinforced daily on the field abroad through a British curriculum, community celebration of British holidays, etc. Yet another might find themselves a member of a minority nationality within the expatriate community, perhaps growing up feeling as though they had more in common with their American expatriate peers, than with their own national culture. It is very confusing to be a British TCK, arriving 'back' in Britain and feeling more American than British, having never set foot in the United States. How can one's sense of self as British-American be taken seriously when one cannot claim full ownership of that culture?

Some TCKs found as adults that their appearance marked them out as belonging, but their accent belied them. Some could change accents to suit where they wished to belong. In this way appearance, or accent, or indeed nationality, could become cultural resources to negotiate a TCK's place in the world. Where TCKs felt uncomfortable blending in, hidden allegiances to countries or cultures could be externalised through the seeking out of other marginal or international groups. In this way in particular, mission TCKs seem to stake out their identity as not-belonging to a passport peer community.

Uniqueness

As children, TCKs are frequently reminded how unique their experiences and upbringing are. They feel set apart from the 'world' – both in a spiritual sense and in the way that they physically move away from countries and communities on a regular basis. It's common to hear TCKs explain that they feel frustration with their passport peers, who lack their three-dimensional view of the world, and cultural finesse. As adults, it becomes harder to stay unique as belonging comes more easily. They become familiar with pop culture and fashion, and so it becomes more important to find creative ways to nurture this element of a TCK identity.

For the TCK, feeling unique is often an integral element of the childhood experience of mobility. But it is possible for this sense of uniqueness to act as a barrier to belonging. When 'normal' is a dirty word, it can be difficult to empathize with non-TCKs, and to be willing to learn from them. It might be impossible to enter into equal, humble, human relationships with them. Therefore being unique can become a burden to the TCK.

Nurturing the Challenges

A better understanding of the particular challenges faced by TCKs is a crucial forerunner to the development of tools fit to meet these challenges. Having discussed some of the main challenges to identity formation above, I now lay out some suggestions, emerging from my experiences and observations during research, which may go some way to nurturing a healthy TCK identity.

Identification with Mission

- ❖ Create space for the TCK's own journey of faith, with less expectation of testimony giving. Story-telling reaffirms our identities publicly, but also requires a neat, publicly acceptable beginning, middle, and end. The natural confusion that is part of faith development could get squeezed out if TCKs are required to produce confident end product faith stories.
- ❖ Model vulnerability within your own mission community, and at home. Vulnerability sends a message that no one in Christ's kingdom is asked to 'fake' perfection, or to represent anything other than a fallen human saved by grace. It might even be appropriate to openly express a desire that the TCKs in your family and in your community do not need to feel responsible for the 'success' or 'failure' of their parents' calling abroad.
- ❖ Encourage a sense of an individual self, one that is not solely dependent (emotionally and in terms of resources) on the immediate expatriate community. Perhaps this could take the form of activities that nurture the TCK outside of family and expatriate circle. Maybe someone in the local church could teach embroidery to your TCK? Or carpentry? Or there is a local sports team they could join?

Identity and Nationality

- ❖ Observe how your nationality is depicted by the expatriate community and be mindful that this is the mirror by which your TCK may be most influenced in constructing a sense of a national identity.
- ❖ Encourage a sense of nationality, and an understanding of social history and politics. This will engender a sense of ownership in a national culture that may well aid in helping the TCK root and connect with his or her passport peers.
- ❖ Encourage local host country connections. There are few things more painful than trying to present oneself as 'African', or homesick for Africa, when you have no African friends or local language. Encourage engagement that is not totally dependent on the TCK taking on a 'helper' role.

Uniqueness

- ❖ It might seem unnecessary to mindfully encourage an appreciation of other cultures. Research has revealed, however, that often certain disparagement and stereotyping of local population often occurs within expatriate communities. Are nationals from the host country, for example, depicted as dishonest? Lazy? Encouraging a genuinely open appreciation of other cultural values helps to draw those threads that connect TCKs to the diversity of people around them.
- ❖ Consider avoiding the term 'mono-cultural'. Those Harry Potter aficionados will understand my drawing a parallel between the way in which many of us refer to mono-cultural with the same pitying disparagement offered to the non-magic folk, Muggles, by the magic community created by J. K. Rowling. Besides the mistaken assumption that non-TCKs experience only one cultural environment in their lives (a

possibility decreasing hourly with booming globalisation), the term ‘mono-cultural’ lends itself all too easily to a kind of competitiveness within the TCK world that can be distinctly unhelpful – “How many countries have you lived in? I’m facing more challenges/opportunities because I’ve encountered more cultures”, etc.

This discussion has outlined some of the challenges faced by TCKs in terms of their identity construction, and some areas in which these challenges may be met, and healthy identities nurtured. Missionary TCKs grow up as ‘mini-ambassadors’ for their faith, their countries, and their missions. It is important to remember that they did not choose this role, felt no spiritual call to the particular mobile lifestyle they lead, and may well find it difficult to discern how best to forge a path ahead in their lives post-mission. I suggest that in countering the challenges of negotiating mission identification, nationality, and the potential burden of uniqueness, these features of vulnerability, self-awareness and humility are some of the most powerful gifts we can employ in seeking to nurture healthy TCK identities.

I am always eager to hear from other researchers in this area, and from any TCK or anyone employed in caring for TCKs. I would like to share experiences or dreams for future development of resources and support for TCKs, and especially adult TCKs. Do contact me on rachelcason@live.co.uk; I would love to meet you and learn from you!



Growing up in a ‘God system’

What does this mean? Society is saturated with systems – a nuclear family is a small ‘system’ of its own. The system widens to include the extended family and the tribe. Organisations, both secular and religious, are also systems – the local school, a corporate firm, a government department, even a local sports club.

Missionary kids grow up in a ‘God system’ which expresses itself in diverse ways across the globe. Some are in isolated settings, being home schooled, and rarely see other members of the system of which their parents are a part. Their experience of the ‘God system’ comes via their parents, the mission organisation, and possibly via their home schooling programme. Others are in secular schools, with nationals or expats, where they experience another dimension to life, with a different set of values to that of their parents. Still others are in a large missionary subculture such as an MK boarding school, where they rarely if ever encounter anything outside the system.

Depending on the passport culture of their parents, on re-entry they may experience anything on a spectrum ranging from absorption into a Christian subculture in the ‘home’ country, to encountering the secular world both at school and in the local neighbourhood.

What is a system? It’s more than what each individual believes, and more than how each person would act if acting alone. It includes the unspoken as well as the spoken expectations and dynamics, and it consists of many interrelated parts and subsystems.

What is a healthy God system like? It creates stability, while promoting growth and change. It gives a place of security and belonging, and creates predictability, both positive and negative.

Third culture communities contain representatives of numerous systems – for example from military, diplomatic and corporate subcultures, as well as those in mission. The decisions made within these systems can affect families and override family decisions – for example, the deployment of military personnel, or the requirement for a corporate family to move for the good of the firm.

A healthy system is an open system, with clear boundaries and principles, but room for growth and change. It is characterised by personal growth, fulfilment and contentment, a sense of belonging, safety, the opportunity to choose, and mutual respect.

A healthy system has a life cycle within which there is some flexibility. The purpose and motivation of the system remains constant, but the methods used to achieve the goals may be adapted. It is important to know the difference between principles and methods, when assessing the need for change.

An example:

Church X has always had a focus on evangelism and outreach. Up until recently, the church held an evangelistic campaign every year. People were invited to meetings at the church by means of door-to-door visitation. Changes in the character of the neighbourhood, and the pressures of modern life with the anonymity that it brings, now mean that people will not answer their doors unless they are expecting someone – they simply do not feel safe. So the church has changed its tactics. There is now a 'messy church' event held every month in the local children's centre, advertised in the local free paper, at the centre itself and online. There is also a lunch club for the elderly, held at the church, which is advertised at the local doctors' surgery. The lunch club usually has a speaker, focusing on topics like keeping warm in the winter, or going online for the first time, but with a Christian epilogue or 'thought for the day' for around 10 minutes.

The church is still involved in outreach, but has adapted its methods.

Conversely, an unhealthy system is closed, with little or no opportunity for change. This kind of system develops where the means are confused with the underlying purpose. An individual in a closed system feels devoid of choice, and needs to become a clone in order to survive. Such a system stifles personal development and growth, and has no regard for individuals. People within this world may become defensive and paranoid, but are fearful about leaving because it may be all that they have ever known.

An example:

Student D was educated at an MK boarding school in country Z. In the classroom, lessons were well managed and the students were quiet and well-behaved. In English literature classes and in the school library, reading material was carefully chosen and censored. Some secular novels were allowed, but swear words were erased, and anything considered 'dubious' was carefully removed from the books. In science lessons, the theory of evolution was never even mentioned. Outside the classroom, there were

several devotional times each day, and older students were required to read through the Bible in a year. There were a lot of rules and expectations. Clothing had to be modest at all times, no secular music was permitted, and films that were shown had to be 'wholesome'. The students shared rooms in dormitories, and their rooms were inspected for tidiness several times a week. They were expected to eat a small amount of everything at meal times, and to take part in chores such as washing up and preparing vegetables. Small infringements of rules, such as failing to tidy up adequately or put dirty laundry in the correct basket, were subject to punishments.

Student D returned to her passport country at the age of 16, and entered a state school, where she rapidly became overwhelmed by the secular culture that she encountered. She stopped reading her Bible and drifted away from faith, in order to fit in better in the new environment. When she reflected on her time in the MK school, she was angry that she had not been better prepared to meet the secular world.

The MK school which I have described is fictional, but the practices described within it are all true aspects of life drawn from a number of different MK schools. There is no intention of criticising everything, as it seems to me that some aspects bring clear and lasting benefits. However, how could the 'God system' that student D had been brought up in be improved?

Perhaps the first thing to do is to consider and define the fundamental aims of the school. What sort of people do the leaders of this MK school desire their graduates to become? In what ways are the students being prepared for adult life in a world that may be hostile to the faith that they are being taught? To what extent is outward conformity valued above genuine questioning and wrestling with issues which may be uncomfortable to deal with?

How can we avoid the scenario whereby 'God' and 'the system' become one, and where the judgments of others in the missions community are seen to be equivalent to the judgments of God?

It is possible to grow up in a 'God system' without ever truly internalising its values, or meeting personally with God Himself. How do we face our MKs with a choice regarding their walk with God, rather than a situation that appears controlled and makes outward conformity inevitable? I am not advocating that we cease to model a godly lifestyle to our children, or fail to teach them the Scriptures. Many MKs, whether following the Lord or not, have an encyclopaedic knowledge of Scripture compared with that of the average churchgoer in the UK. However I believe it is unwise to be so protective that we fail to expose them to opposing points of view, out of fear that they will be in some way corrupted by them. Why not study evolution alongside the Biblical account of creation, and debate the issue?

As a former history teacher at an MK school, I taught a secular curriculum, but looking back I can see a missed opportunity of a different kind. Given my time over again, I would create a module of study based on the authenticity of the New Testament and the historicity of Jesus. I would face the students with the spurious gospels, such as those of Barnabas, Thomas and Philip. Why are these rejected? What is reliable historical evidence, and what is not? I would ask the students themselves to make the comparisons.

I would also seek to study secularism and the recent history of the students' passport countries. Why, for example, do so many teenagers in the West experiment with alcohol and drugs? Why do they have so little knowledge of Christianity?

Returning to the healthy God system, there are many advantages to be found therein. MKs frequently have opportunities to see God at work, transforming lives. They watch missionaries giving up years of lucrative secular employment, in order to move overseas, engage with the local culture and share their faith. They see Matthew 28:19-20 being lived out, and not simply read out. They often have inspiring people around them – their parents' team members, and local believers.

In the end the choice of whether or not to follow Jesus Christ depends on the individual. As John White says in his book, *Parents in Pain* [IVP, 1980, p 54]

[We] have neither the right nor the ability to choose [a] child's destiny. It is a matter that will be resolved between [the] child and God.

We can, however, seek to examine our 'God systems' and challenge assumptions which may be restricting growth and, however inadvertently, drawing our children down the road of outward conformity rather than the rough, turbulent path towards faith along which genuine questions are allowed.

Gill Bryant December 2013

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