

# Your views...

## I'm still a TCK purist!

Mary Langford argues the case for 'the understood jargon' that you can Google...

If the editors' Comment in the most recent issue of *International School* was intended to stimulate debate, I was riled to rise to the challenge. As an Adult TCK, having worked with TCKs in international schools since I first pitched up on British shores in 1980, having spent nearly 5 years (1992–97) thinking about, reading about, speaking to and researching TCKs for my Master's dissertation, and having taught and presented on this topic for many years, I was affected by this Comment. Perhaps the proper reaction to the points raised would be based on a rational, research-based response to counter the notion that the term TCK is obsolete. My response is, however, based on experience and emotion.

This issue has not been helped by Ruth Van Reken's efforts to 'amplify' the term to 'Cross Cultural Kid', at the time (I believe) she produced the second edition of the book written originally with the now late David Pollock. In my view, and I have said as much publicly from the first time I heard the phrase and definition, the term 'Cross Cultural Kid', as defined by Van Reken, can apply to virtually every child in the world, except those in the most remote, monocultural environments who are not tainted by the internet and MTV. In trying to helpfully create this more inclusive term, Van Reken risks diminishing what I believe are still the unique attributes of TCKs. I may be a dinosaur, but I remain a TCK purist!

The TCK's experience stems from the idea that international relocation happens because of a parent's job, and with that goes the baggage of the child being identified (and judged) as the dependant of someone with a corporate culture – be it military, diplomatic, NGO or business. Dutch Professor Geert Hofstede spent years demonstrating that there exist organisational cultures (different from national cultures) in his work with IBM and others; the possibility that dependent children whose international journey is made at the behest of some 'organisation' can be influenced by the expected behaviours and values of that organisation is, therefore, logical. The frustration experienced by such children, knowing that at any time the organisation can dictate another move, is also understandable and logical. TCK (diplobrat) and BBC journalist and author Libby Purves has described such a lifestyle as continually moving 'at the whim of some unseen power'. This experience is unique to the TCK. That the TCK is growing up knowing that the working parent's professional reputation might be affected by his or her child's conduct and behaviour is another pressure that other 'Cross Cultural Kids' may not experience. Refugees or asylum seekers may experience moves brought on by powers beyond their control, but that is more likely to be a political event leading to civil unrest or war, or a natural

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phenomenon such as a flood or volcanic eruption that destroys their homeland, rather than the likes of Coca Cola or the Foreign Office!

The other variable here is the number and frequency of moves. While many immigrant or possibly refugee children, both of which categories qualify as 'Cross Cultural Kids', move with a sense of the move being one-way and possibly tied to one destination for a new and better life, the TCK knows that the move is most likely temporary, sometimes with no sense of how temporary: 1 year, 4 years ...? So, how much should one immerse and invest oneself in the new setting, making friends, working hard at school, knowing it won't last? Refugee children and families may hope and aspire one day to return to the land of their origins, but that future is often anticipated to be a long distance in the future. For TCKs the move home may be a 'dead cert', but what is all the more challenging is that it may not happen until that TCK enters university and when, as they cease to be 'dependants' of their parents, they may lose the residency or visa status that allowed them the right to stay in the foreign place they have come to regard as 'home'. There may be no going back – or if they can go back it's as a tourist, which excludes the TCK from the entitlement to feel a sense of belonging. Tourists visit a place: they don't 'belong' in the place.

It is true that TCKs may have much in common with Cross Cultural Kids, but there are still elements of the TCK concept and experience as originally defined that are unique. I was reminded of this once again this autumn as my school welcomed new families. As well-travelled, experienced and even sophisticated as our international school students are turning out to be, there are still families who move abroad with children for the first time, who exhibit all of the 'culture



shock' cycles identified by numerous experts (an emotional high followed by a plunge into the depths of despair), facing the same challenges identified by Useem, and later Useem and Baker-Cottrell: classic TCK stuff. Even the multi-mover, experienced TCKs who have joined my school go through that initial period of reticence as they observe and figure out the new culture, or what my former colleague and cross-culture trainer Corinne Rosenberg described as 'the way we do things around here'. The facility and ease with which our new multi-mover, sequential multilingual TCKs at school engage with English as another new language with more ease than the monolingual first-time movers is another indicator and characteristic of the TCK. The pain that we know some students are experiencing because they failed to 'leave well' their last location, in part because of the short notice given by the employer, is painful to watch no matter how often we see it.

My emotional response stems from my day-to-day interactions with people I encounter in my work in an

international school. It's fine for the academics to challenge the relevance in 2017 of this term first coined in the mid-20th century. I agree that the 'species' is becoming increasingly complex with the growth in dual-national and second generation TCKs. There are new areas that should be explored through research. Maybe new 'terminology' needs to be devised for these kids. Perhaps TCK2 would fit? I personally loathe the TCK label, but it's the understood jargon, and the one that works on Google! The original, garden-variety TCK first identified by Ruth Useem is still out there, and is still moving abroad for the first time and still experiencing the same sentiments, confusions and awareness of 'being different' that I first felt when I repatriated to the USA from Belgium at the age of 6. Rant over!

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## Is the label applicable in the real world?

Shamiela Davids says that calling young people 'TCKs' overlooks the reality

Thank you to Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson for opening up discussion (in the last issue of *International School*) about the scope and appropriateness of the term Third Culture Kid (TCK). My contribution is to ask to what extent the term has applicability in the reality of the world today. I asked my class of Year 13 students, many of whom are international, the provocative question: did they think the term Third Culture Kid was rather quaint, and elitist? The term seems to reflect the reality of a very small proportion of those who are internationally mobile. In its narrow definition the term appears to refer only to those living in and being educated in foreign countries because they are the children of professional expatriate families; in other words, owing

their mobility to their parents' employment. In my view, this overlooks the reality of many young people in the world today who are the victims of forced demographic shift, instilling in them not a rose-tinted global worldview of multiculturalism but a permanent, aching sense of alienation and dislocation. In other words, could we apply the term Third Culture Kid to refugees and asylum seekers, and how might that fit?

The concept of the TCK is interesting because it raises issues of identity. So much of what we identify with comes from our surroundings. A problem faced by most young people being raised in one culture while identifying with another is that they feel their identity is, on the one hand,