

# Third Culture Kids

## *The Value Of Transitions Programmes For Third Culture Kids*

In the dozen or so years that I have contributed to 'American in Britain' on the subject of the impact of mobility and transition on families and children, known as 'third culture kids', I have occasionally written a more personal reflection. This happened when I wrote about my own move to the Costa del Sol to take up the headship of a small British international School, and when my father passed away and I considered the impact his international

career had on my own childhood of mobility. Changing jobs and moving into a school that is culturally very different from previous ones where I have worked has given me cause to consider how schools manage transition, and more importantly, whether transition management is institutionalised by schools.

Families who are relocating to a new country can spend long hours worrying over selection of the right school for their children. In the UK, families have choices and therefore decisions to make. In much of the country, the choice is between state schools or independent schools mostly offering a UK curriculum. For families relocating to the greater London area, the independent international schools, or the state/independent national schools such as the French Lycee, German School, Swedish School or Japanese School, amongst others, become additional options to consider. Discerning families, including families who are experienced multi-movers, use a variety of criteria to select the right school: curriculum on offer, class sizes, location, ESL support (in the case of non-English speakers) or SEN provision, facilities, extra-curricular activities, teacher qualifications, university offers made to students; all of these criteria are suggested by numerous relocation 'how-to' guides as important points to consider. But, how many parents ask about the school's transition programme?

Transition programmes are becoming an increasingly important feature for international schools. For four years, as Deputy Executive Director of the European Council of International School (ECIS), I managed a programme by ECIS in conjunction with the University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) entitled the International Teacher Certificate Program (ITC). This programme addressed those specific qualities, characteristics and skills that are particularly critical for international school teachers. One of the five standards addressed in the ITC was dedicated to 'Transition and Mobility', and required that teachers engage with the theory and practice surrounding Third Culture Kids (children who move internationally by virtue of a parent's occupation) and the impact that relocation has on students, teachers and parents in the school community. ECIS and CIE regard an understanding of the experience of transition as an essential prerequisite for the exemplary 21st Century international school teacher.

Through my own research on this subject and my four years observing ITC teachers worldwide – from Poland to Panama, Thailand to Togo, and The United Arab Emirates to the United States of America – engage with this subject, anecdotal evidence suggests that in most international schools the management of transition is a somewhat hit and miss,

with individual teachers or constituencies within the school community doing their bit, but often without a strategic or holistic integrated institutional approach. PTAs are often the champions of transition services, perhaps because parent volunteers have time to give to supporting these matters, but also because they are often the ones who feel first-hand the stress, confusion and bewilderment that can arise from the experience of mobility. In some schools there are teachers who are very attentive to helping their pupils adapt to the new school or country. Many schools organise one-off events such as orientation, days or weeks when new classes can bond and get to know one another; or seminars from college-bound students. Counsellors may work one-on-one with conflicted students responding negatively to the transition experience. But often these approaches are not consistent and are reliant on the very laudable initiative of individuals and not driven by the policies of the institution as a whole.

Most international school educators who have an interest in transition programming would acknowledge that the most impressive model is the one developed by the American School of the Hague (ASH). With some early financial support from grant awarded by Royal Dutch Shell's Outpost (family support services) and developed by a passionate team from the ASH counselling department, the programme was eventually named 'Safe Harbour'. According to the Safe Harbour website, 'The purpose of A Safe Harbour is to help students, parents and staff cope with the challenges and maximise the opportunities that are inherent in the experience of international relocation and cross-cultural mobility.' Safe Harbour features publications, events, mentoring programmes, speakers, celebrations and rituals, with lines of responsibility and timelines clearly designated. The strength of Safe Harbour is that it is aimed at the entire school community; that is the parents and the staff as well as the pupils, and not merely at the point of arrival (whenever 'arrival' occurs) but also at the preparation for departure. The Safe Harbour diagram includes everyone and gives everyone a task. It is institutionalised so that the ebb and flow of transient staff and families do not pose a threat to the continuity of the programme.

Both as an admissions director in an international school, and working for a time with my friend and colleague Martin Humphrys, a leading educational consultant serving expatriate and British families seeking school placements in the UK, I was always quite frank with parents. 'The local English schools are not there to serve international families. Don't go expecting them to make all of the accommodations your child may require to

fit in to their system.’ But, most of the international schools are there to serve expatriate international transient families. London boasts some fine international schools, yet none of them appears to have a programme that quite matches up to the Safe Harbour model, a complete ‘soup to nuts’ comprehensive programme with roles and responsibilities for everyone in the community.

Many overworked administrators and prudent school boards and governors question the value of a transition programme in their schools, and consider them to be a frivolity when there are so many demands on staff and budget. But, the justification is there. While the children are the focus in schools, we know that the way children settle in is influenced by the way their parents are managing the challenges of relocation and transition; that children pick up on the ‘vibes’ of the parent. But, the educators, too, are an important part of the process for children, and it is important to consider that many international schools in London are enriched by teachers who themselves have worked internationally, bringing a wealth of experience and motivation to share these culturally rich perspectives with their student.

But this can come at a price as these educators, too, experience culture shock and must

manage their own transitions. Research has shown that when newly relocated international school teachers are given support by the school, they, in turn, are better prepared to help their pupils adjust, and understand the concept of ‘transition education’. This is why bodies like the European Council of International Schools and University of Cambridge International Examinations have included this as a feature of their prestigious International Teacher Certificate programme which is gaining currency worldwide in a number of ways, and why teachers who have completed the programme are now working in their own schools to help institutionalise the transition activities they provide.

According to the Safe Harbour website, it is about doing everything possible to help children make the needed adjustments as quickly as possible. Best stated by Carol Mecklenberg and Doug Ota, founders of the programme, ‘Learning happens best in a community of emotional safety and in a climate of mutual support, as “transitions” are challenges that face us all. Whether you are coming, staying or going, a student, parent or staff, A Safe Harbour seeks to help every member of the community feel welcome to “sail forth” to enjoy his or her own international experience. You may not notice that the Harbour is

here, but when you need to “pull up your boat and dock”, someone will always be there to catch the line!’ ■

*Mary Langford was recently appointed Head of Primary at the King Fahad Academy in London, an IB World School with an Islamic ethos offering the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme. Her Master’s research at University of Bath centred on how international schools respond to internationally-mobile pupils.*

**Mary Langford will be hosting a free seminar at The 2012 Corporate Relocation Conference & Exhibition on Monday 6th February, at Hotel Russell, Russell Square, Bloomsbury, London**

**If you would like to attend this seminar that is free of charge, please email [helen@theamericanhour.com](mailto:helen@theamericanhour.com) to reserve your place.**

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