

Effects of Literature and Multi-Cultural Experience on Growth and Development of TCKs

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Abstract

This work investigates the impacts of changing education systems on Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Particularly, how Classical Literature influences the education, growth, behaviour and personality development in the nomadic lifestyle of TCKs. While plenty of research exists on the positive attributes of TCKs around the world, this study will also focus on the negative impacts of a peripatetic childhood by looking at existing literature and surveys, while closely examining the stability provided by the Classics. We see that although TCKs are indeed adaptable, approachable and flexible as previous research suggests, TCKs also have to contend with negative traits like loss of identity, feeling of displacement and cultural duality during their growing years. Here, we see that Classical Literature provides a Touchstone, points of reference and stability to the TCKs.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids, Classical Literature, Secondary Education, Behavioural Studies, Education Board

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Introduction

The term, ‘Third Culture Kid’ (TCK) was first coined by John and Ruth Hill Useem (1963), sociologists living in India, who observed American expatriate families there (Kwon, 2019; Halme, 2019). This greatly energized research in this field (Useem et al., 1976). Alternate terms such as “nomadic children” (Eidse et al., 2011), “global nomads” (McCaig, 1996), “transculturals” (Willis et al., 1994), and “internationally mobile children” (McLachlan, 2007) were also used until ‘TCK’ became a universally acknowledged phrase through the popularisation of the book *Third Culture Kids* by Pollock et al. (2010). TCKs were described by Pollock (1988) as:

... an individual who, having spent a significant part of the developmental years in a culture other than the parents’ culture, develops a sense of relationship to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any.

On average, TCKs are frequently bilingual or even multilingual from a very young age, due to early exposure to diverse languages and cultures (Eidse et al., 2011; Pollock et al., 2010). They seem more interested in global politics and learning foreign languages (Davis et al., 2010; Useem et al., 2011) than their non-TCK peers who stay within the country of their birth. They tend to be more open-minded (Dewaele et al., 2009) and have an expanded worldview (Eidse et al., 2011; Ezra, 2003). They are extremely complex people (Useem et al., 1996). However, they also tend to develop problems related to self-identity (Fail et al., 2004; Useem et al., 1996), sense of belonging (Pollock et al., 2010; McLachlan, 2007), isolation and depression (Davis et al., 2010; Devens, 2005). We now look at some of these in more detail through the following research questions:

1. How does a multi-school experience impact the growth and development of TCKs during childhood?
2. What are the effects of Classical Literature during childhood on the growth and development of Third Culture Kids?

This article deals with the challenges faced by TCKs, focusing on the impact of changing education systems and culture on the development of education and identity in TCKs. At this juncture, it is also fascinating to note the role that Classical Literature plays in the psychological development of young minds. Classical Literature, for the purpose of this work, points to the collection of Greek, Roman and Early English texts which form the foundation of Literature as we know today. These include the works of Homer, Virgil, Ovid and, to a certain extent, Shakespeare.

Methodology

The autoethnographic style was introduced at this juncture as a way to tell the ‘journey’ of the researcher in the ‘quest’ of finding the result of a particular thesis or research question. As hoped for, the work would be full of emotion and personal experiences that would not only pull at the heartstrings of not only the researcher but also evoke a reaction from the reader as well (Ellis et al., 2000). In other words, while a typical research has one linear process of thought that is restricted by the limitations of its paradigms, the autoethnographic style of writing constantly and consistently flows in many tangential directions but remains true to the topic/thesis as the researcher reigns in the thoughts by providing evidence and proof at every turn.

Autoethnography, as the name suggests, is the systematic analysing (graphy) of the personal experiences of the researcher (auto) with respect to the cultural influences of their immediate surroundings (ethno). In other words, the autoethnographic style of writing is the combination of two other styles of writing - an autobiography and an ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). Rather than collecting data from an immense number of sources and collating their various components in order to try to create a conclusion that may or may not answer the research question, the authors of the autoethnographic style of writing explores all the facets and nuances within one (or at most a handful of) case study, going deeper into the particular case. In this way, the research thesis is explored in a deeper and a more profound manner without straying too far from the initial question at hand.

While the autoethnographic form of writing is more subjective (Sikes, 2015; Reissman, 2008), it also presents a nuanced, emotional outlook on the research question(s) at hand (Ellis et al., 2000). Custer (2014) further states that this transformative research method requires depth and innovation while evoking empathy and vulnerability in both the reader and the writer. As the problems raised in the project regarding the TCKs have to do with humans, their interactions with their surroundings and their relative self-identity within their own society (Pollock et al., 2010; Fail et al., 2004), it becomes important to consider emotionality, reflexivity and depth which are present in the autoethnographic style of writing (Jones et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2000; 2010). This article, written through the qualitative paradigm, supported by primary data in the form of personal journals, diaries and accounts and secondary data in the form of quantitative data from existing literature, seeks to find the answers to the main research questions.

Discussion

1. How does a multi-school experience impact the growth and development of TCKs during childhood?

(i) Fitting-In and Culture Shock

As pointed out before, changing schools and education systems every few years make TCKs more adaptable and good at 'blending in' (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996; Kwon, 2019). They are sensitive to others and often stay quiet rather than invite ridicule (Useem et al., 1996). However, they often have trouble fitting-in with the new, host culture (Pollock et al., 2010; Devens, 2005; Fail et al., 2004). Even returning to their original home (or passport) culture does not help leading to feelings of 'prolonged' or "delayed adolescence" (Useem et al., 1996). Although Martinez (2019) and Dunsmore (2019) claims that an initial 'cultural shock' is important for an individual to adapt and survive in the ever-changing surroundings of the 21st Century world, Rafika et al. (2018) argue that 'culture shock' has adverse and lasting impacts on the young mind, especially on a TCK who has been torn out of their own home culture at a very early stage of their childhood (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996). Even when coming back to their host countries they feel "re-entry problems" or "reverse culture shock" (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996) – they still don't fit-in (Walters et al., 2009).

In such cases, receiving support and guidance from their school from that stage in their childhoods could greatly help their futures (Morales, 2015; Vidal, 2000; Halme, 2019). Through their survey (604 respondents) Useem et al. (1996) show that TKCs are extremely complex people, with "bland and unremarkable exteriors, however, [have] considerable

talents and a wealth of memories.” They also continue to worry about blending in, even in adulthood.

According to Useem et al. (1996), coming in from different education systems and cultures causes TCKs to retain not only knowledge from their earlier schools/colleges, but also about the cultures of their previous host countries. Most of the samples within the secondary data were found to be internationally experienced and were seen to continue their international involvement, with 90% reportedly having more understanding and awareness of other peoples and cultures than most Americans, owing to their diverse education abroad. Over 90% have at least yearly contact with people from other countries with 25% interacting at least once a month. More than 60% say that “maintaining an international dimension in their lives is important to them” and keep informed about the places they have lived abroad hoping to revisit. Interestingly, according to Useem et al. (1996), consistent with their general interest in going abroad, most keep a current passport, which is also true in my case as a TCK.

Similarly, looking back through my records I see that changing schools had a very detrimental impact on my academic and emotional well-being. In one occasion, there was less than five months for me to learn a years’ worth of CBSE (Indian board) curriculum. My grades suffered. An extract from a full-length poem (Chakraborty, 2019) that I wrote at this stage indicates the extent of my frustrations and my perspective on schools in India which seek to make ‘accomplished’ products of children:

...and make of them ‘accomplished men’
with everything but their own minds.

I have seen many such a place
spread across seas and lands,
where these children have been laid to waste,
thrown their lives in Devils’ hands.

They sleep, they eat, they walk, they sit,
they do what all children do

Here, it is evident that Literature played an important role in the development of TCKs. After having read multiple forms of poetry in diverse languages, it was the Classical form of Poetry which was embraced while writing these verses. Literature, in this case, has its own place as an unshakable touchstone in the English syllabus. The unchanging works of Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare create solace and comfort for these nomadic children who have to face changing boards and syllabi from all around the world. Consistency, then, becomes key in the mental make-up of young adults.

(ii) International Interests

Most TCKs have clear plans and achieve academic success in their secondary education (Kwon, 2019). However, Ebbeck et al. (2007) examined TCKs’ adaptation to new school environments and found that they feel highly vulnerable and nervous about starting a school in a new educational context and country. Repetitive relocation and transition to new school, culture, and country often make them feel rootless and isolated (Fail et al., 2004) and cause challenges in building relationships with teachers and peers (Lijadi et al., 2014). 90% say that

they are "out of sync" with their age group throughout their lifetime, especially, painfully, during the late teens and twenties (Useem et al., 1996).

TCKs are also often seen to develop added interest in international affairs (Kwon, 2019; Pollock et al., 2010). For instance, in their survey Useem et al. (1996) found that 25% of the respondents chose majors that were obviously international in content. Even my choice of major was, incidentally, International in nature i.e. MA in 'International Education' as opposed to many of my peers who chose 'Education' as their major. 71% say third culture childhood and education experiences affected their college choices and experiences (43% say 'greatly', 28% say 'somewhat') (Useem et al., 1996). For many TCKs their choice of a major is influenced by their overseas experiences. Useem et al. (1996) explains:

... [TCKs] who chose biology had been captivated by early exposure to African wildlife; historians and artists cited their exposure to European art ... For many TCKs their future growth and career choices are born out of their overseas experiences.

Personally, I found myself gravitating toward English Literature from the Undergraduate level as English – both language and literature – were constants in my life, and written classics are forever engraved as unchangeable parts of history. This goes back to the claims made by Pollock et al. (2010) and Useem et al. (1996) that many TCKs search for permanency and stability in their lives and try to achieve this through academia. Works translated from foreign languages such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Márquez or *Rhinoceros* by Ionesco also attract the minds of these children who do not see language as a barrier to learning. The Old Classical Epics like Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* teach of the follies of Anger (Chakraborty et al., 2023), Manipulation (Chakraborty et al., 2022) and Ambition (Chakraborty et al., 2023), characteristics that are very much a part of our lives even today.

(iii) Early Support

According to the research by Useem et al. (1996), TCKs never fully adjust – they adapt, find niches and become “loners without being particularly lonely” (Useem et al., 1996). During these growing years some young adult TCKs appear to their close peers, parents, and counsellors as being self-centred adolescents, as being luxurious to the point of extravagance, as not being able to make up their minds about their futures (Useem et al., 1996; Walters et al., 2009).

While receiving early support at the school level would greatly help them in later life (Halme, 2019), this does not always come through (Devens, 2005; Fail et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2010). An online survey by Halme (2019) shows that 73% of the TCKs respondents did not receive any exclusive academic support when they were under 7 years of age. A staggering 100% find it important to support TCKs in early childhood education and care (Halme, 2019). More than half say they needed support in later life as well (Halme, 2019). This echoes my opinion that it is necessary to give TCKs help and support from early childhood education level in order to try and mitigate the later problems faced by TCKs.

2. What are the effects of Classical Literature during childhood on the growth and development of Third Culture Kids?

As mentioned above, Classical Literature is described as the bedrock for modern scholarly interpretation of more recent literature, both poetry and prose. Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* are prime examples. Writers over the years have attempted to replicate the form, structure and tone found in these texts to varying degrees of success. However, one of the main reasons these works are taken to be the Classics is that even through the grand scale of the events within these texts, full of mythology, magic, gods and demons, the central ideology and theme for each of these texts tend to resonate to readers even today (Chakraborty et al., 2023). Homer's *Iliad* talks of the ramifications of anger (Chakraborty et al., 2023), Virgil's *Aeneid* depicts the feelings of loss of control (Chakraborty et al., 2022) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* describes the follies of unchecked pride and ambition (Chakraborty et al., 2023).

Although the settings may be grandiose in nature, at the core of each of these lies a moral or a tale which warns the readers of dangerous emotions while encouraging positive growth in them. Tales like Dicken's *Hard Times*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Osbourne's *Look Back in Anger* bring to light the struggles and toils of the past while Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or Pope's *Rape of the Lock* talk of the norms of a beautiful society not too long in our past. This brings a grounded reality, a sense of belonging and presents as a point of reference to TCKs. Classical Literature provides a window into the soul of different cultures for people in general, but in TCKs in particular as they become a source of stability and comparison. It provides a stable basis from which they are able to integrate different facets of new cultures.

Conclusion

Constantly changing educational systems leads to initial difficulties with performance within the new academic system and makes TCKs feel marginalized by their own peers – that they don't fit-in, and are 'Othered' (Beauvoir, 1972), in both their home and host countries (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996). Although Martinez (2019) and Dunsmore (2019) claim that an initial 'cultural shock' is important for an individual to adapt and survive in the ever-changing surroundings of the 21st Century world, Rafika et al. (2018) argue that it has adverse and lasting impacts on young minds, especially on TCKs who have been torn from their own home culture at an early stage of their childhood. Even when returning to their passport countries, they face 'reverse cultural shock' (Walters et al., 2009; Pollock et al., 2010). Useem et al. (1996) furthers that this leads to TCKs becoming "out of sync" with their own age group throughout their lifetimes.

Indeed, it becomes a more harrowing experience for the TCKs to constantly change schools. This is so as most countries follow their own Board of Education, which are mostly different – IB (International Baccalaureate), AP (Advanced Placement), CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) etc. As each of these Boards brings with it its own set syllabus and teaching methods, it becomes difficult for the nomadic TCK to adjust into or fully comprehend the components of any.

Coming in from different education systems and cultures causes TCKs to retain more than just knowledge from their earlier schools/colleges – they also absorb the cultures and practices of their previous host countries (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996). They are

also seen to develop added interest in international affairs (Kwon, 2019), choose subjects that are obviously more ‘international’ in content or majors that allow international travel (Useem et al., 1996). For many TCKs, including myself, future growth and career choices are born out of their overseas experiences (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem et al., 1996). However, there is a dearth of options for such courses in High School or Higher Secondary Levels of Education.

Adult TCKs (ATCKs) realize that receiving early support, at a younger age, would have helped them settle into later adult life better (Halme, 2019). TCKs who have had to immerse themselves into strange and new surroundings are seen to develop conditions such as depression, feelings of isolation and loss of identity as they grow older (Fail et al., 2004; Devens, 2005). They have feelings of rootlessness and not belonging to any one culture or nation as there is not much to tether or ground them to one place (Pollock et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2010). It is required to give such TCKs support in early childhood education in order to try and mitigate any later problems faced by them (Morales, 2015).

Due to their nomadic lifestyles, TCKs not only experience a number of cultures and traditions during their childhood, but often find themselves becoming rootless in the process. Classical Literature, although centuries old in origin, often describe fundamental principles and central ideologies that resonate with readers even today. Within the tomes of verbose and obscure writing lie some of the most informative morals that are relevant even today.

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