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Developing Identity Among Third Culture Kids

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors in the College of Education

By

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Under the mentorship of
Dr. Meca Williams-Johnson

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore experiences that influence the identity development among Third Culture Kids (TCKs). TCKs in this study are individuals that spend part of their developmental years in a country other than the parents' home country requiring travel overseas. Participants in the research were adults ranging in age from 19-22 attending college in the United States. Data was collected through individual interviews. Themes emerged after developing codes and analyzing the transcripts with codes. Emerging themes reveal TCK's tremendous struggle within awareness of difference, struggle to fit in and struggle to belong. Teachers and peers assist TCKs in finding a place or level of comfort in the difference within their educational experiences. As well, teachers are helpful in dealing with the frequent transitions of TCKs. This study benefits instructors who work with students from transitory backgrounds and overseas experiences.

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To my participants, thank you for your time, openness, and interest in this project. I am so grateful for a group of people who understand these unique experiences, and to whom I can relate. Thank you for being willing to be honest about your experiences, and for sharing a part of who you are.

Finally, I want to thank the University Honors Program at Georgia Southern for all the unique challenges and opportunities given to me. I am so grateful for these years of challenge, learning, and opportunities.

Developing Identity Among Third Culture Kids

I am not Filipino, yet not fully American. Born in America, and a teenager in the Philippines, I was caught between the two countries in a nebulous third culture. This seemingly unique situation is not as rare as it appears. The isolation and identity crises that can come from being a Third Culture Kid (TCK) could give the impression that this situation is uncommon. The truth is that many people have a similar story to mine, especially those with parents in the military, overseas businesses, or missions. The TCK demographic is growing because of the increasing number of families moving from their homes to foreign countries for jobs, military, or education (Morales, 2015). A widely-accepted definition of a TCK is:

“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. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience” (as cited in Fail et al., 2004).

The concept of TCK is close to my heart since I spent much of my middle school and high school years overseas in the Philippines. My identity has been greatly formed through my experiences in different cultures. I want to learn more about how similar experiences have shaped other people. The struggles and growth gained through living in a different culture are intriguing, and understanding how these children learn and grow would be very helpful to both themselves and their teachers.

TCK research is grounded in identity and transition. These two subjects are dynamic and deep. For TCKs, the process of shaping identity can be very different from that of children from

a single culture. The formation of identity is impeded due to TCKs' varying sources of influences. "The issue of identity is critical because the identity of the TCK is challenged with every move" (as cited in Fail et al., 2004). The presence of several cultures instead of one home culture slows the process of identity formation.

As is obvious from the paragraph above, transition is also a large issue. TCKs' lives are often altered by moving, which greatly influences their developing identity. Some TCKs have experienced great upheaval in their lives, moving to different countries every few years and having to readjust. Adams & Fleer (2016) found that even those TCKs who seldom move are affected by transition through the fluid and inconstant nature of their community, which is often international schools. Transition is an integral part of every TCK's life.

Purpose of the Study

The demographic of TCKs is growing. As schools and educators seek to support and assist this unique group of students, it is essential to look at their experiences, seeking to understand their identity development and how these students can be helped to succeed. This study investigates how identity among TCKs is influenced by their educational experiences in schools overseas.

Rationale for the Study

With the influence of international schools, it is apparent that teachers play an essential role in aiding TCKs form their identity and deal with transitions. Education may be a type of haven in TCKs' life, allowing them to form connections to others of similar experiences. The

sort of “third cultural home” that many TCKs find in international schools can allow TCKs to form strong connections to their school, and as a result, teachers may play a larger role in shaping TCKs’ identity than their monocultural peers. However, it is not only international schools that can deal successfully with the challenges of TCKs. In transition back to passport countries, counselors can be a great asset, as Limberg & Lambie showed in their study of TCKs in professional school counseling (2011). Whatever the case, it is clear that any school serving TCKs does play a large role in their transition and identity development, and this study seeks to reveal factors that impact TCKs.

Research Question

1. How has TCKs’ education overseas influenced their identity development?

Literature Review

In my review of the literature on TCKs, the main issues discussed immediately revealed themselves to be identity and transition. The current literature points to the cruciality of the transition period for TCKs. It also reveals the struggle that formation of identity can be for TCKs. These two topics, while obviously very different, also appear to have a great deal of overlap. Transitions are significant to TCKs’ developing identity. During transition periods, school is one thing that most children are highly involved in, and thus are greatly affected by. The presence of transition programs in those schools, as well as individual teachers’ support, have a huge effect of TCKs.

Before examining these topics, it is important to have a clear definition of a Third Culture Kid. The meaning of a third culture is well-defined by Bennett (2016): “the combination of a

person's native culture (first culture) and new host culture (second culture)." Limberg & Lambie (2011) describe Third Culture Kids as "students raised in a culture different from that of their parents or primary caregivers." While this is a general description, a more specific definition was popularized by Pollock and Van Reken in their (1999) book on TCKs:

"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. Elements from each culture are incorporated into the life experience, but the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience" (as cited in Fail et al., 2004).

Summarized, this basically defines TCKs as people who have spent developmentally crucial years in cultures other than their parents', and have thus been influenced by more than one culture.

Transition

Transition has serious implications for TCKs. Traveling and moving are extremely common for TCKs, and putting down extensive roots in one location is rare for this demographic. Even those TCKs that are more stationary are generally surrounded by those who are not, which in turn gives them a sense of impermanence. This unique phenomenon leads to many questions regarding TCKs' identities.

Adams and Fleer (2016) performed a study on five children in Malaysia to examine transition into a classroom mid-semester. They discuss a unique concept called "Perezhivanie", which they use to better explain the complexities of transition for children, and to acknowledge the inextricable connection between cognition, emotions, and the environment, factors which had

previously been separated. This study recognizes that not only do the students who join the class need to transition, but also those who are already in the class. The transition, though not equal, is mutual. In the fluid international school environment, constant turnover of students forces not only the students moving to adjust and transition, but also those who stay in one place. Their culture is constantly shifting as peers arrive and leave.

Bennett (2016) also discusses the effect of transitions on TCKs, and especially the experiences of American TCKs moving back to their home country for college. She comes to several conclusions from her interviews of TCKs, most notably the idea that home is not defined as any one place. This discovery once again draws connections from a life of transition to the formation of identity.

This transience which every TCK experiences calls for attention. Several authors have tackled the task of discussing effective ways to help make transitions less problematic for TCKs. Morales (2015) investigated transition programs in international schools, emphasizing the importance of intentionality from the school environment to meet transitioning students. Professional development, orientation and departure programs, and the use of transition teams are all points of successful transitional programs he describes. Limberg and Lambie (2011) also address the issue of transition for TCKs, emphasizing how counselors can be effective in helping TCKs in their move. Fail et al (2004) cited Brislin (2000), in an insightful and striking comment: “The TCK identity is fostered in the school as it represents the third culture.” The school plays a huge role in TCK’s identity, though the extent and exact influence does not appear to have been researched.

Identity

An integral part of TCKs' lives closely related to transition is identity. Identity formation is a part of the development every student goes through, but for TCKs the process can be uniquely challenging. As Fail et al (2004) discussed, forming a concrete identity can be a struggle for TCKs, due to their often-shifting situations and the need to re-learn and adjust to new environments. This chameleon-like quality of learning to blend into new cultures and situations can affect their identity and carry over into adulthood.

Marginality is a subtopic of identity that Fail et al (2004) addresses. The sense of "not-belonging" can be intense for TCKs and will contribute to their formation of an identity. Within the Philippines I came to experience that sense of un-belonging. It was easy to see I didn't fit in among the sea of people with darker skin tone hues speaking Tagalog and Cebuano. Not only was it an obvious visual aspect, but that sense of not-belonging was also much deeper, as Filipinos connected in different ways than I did. Their distinct culture, identity, and experiences were worlds apart from mine, leaving me sometimes feeling very "on the outside".

An interesting point Bennett (2016) makes is that before she discovered the term "TCK," she "had always felt lost between identities and considered myself to be a mixture of many. I was relieved to discover that I was not alone and that I belonged to a unique subgroup of expatriates." This discovery of identity in the TCK community is not unique to Bennett. Sheard (2008) makes a similar point: for TCKs, having true peers with whom they can validate their experiences can be beneficial. As Walters (2009) revealed, a major step in identity development appears to be when TCKs form relationships with other TCKs and realize they are not alone in their experiences or worldview.

Another interesting point regarding identity is one which Fail et al (2004) made: “[TCKs’] identities tend to be founded upon their goals and aspirations rather than upon their backgrounds.” The fluctuation and transition TCKs go through keeps them from forming the roots and stable connections, which are important factors in identity. Thus, their identities tend to be formed around things other than the traditional relationships and locations, often instead centering on goals.

There are no hard and fast conclusions about identity and transition. The variability of every TCK’s personality and being, along with multiple other factors of immeasurable and fluid nature, all come together to conclude that the effect of transition on identity cannot be generalized to be either good or bad. As Fail et al (2004) say “Sadly qualitative, interpretative research data cannot provide facts and figures to parents of TCKs to reassure them that their children will grow up as well-balanced individuals with a deep sense of belonging and strong sense of identity.” There are too many variables and a wide range of recorded experiences to say with any certainty that any one outcome will hold true. However, a study of the effects that transition has on identity, and the necessity of easing transition, particularly through schools that work with TCKs, is beneficial.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were college-age adults who have had experiences in education overseas and are Third Culture Kids. All the participants hold American passports, and now reside in the U.S., though they have lived in a variety of different countries and some were born

overseas. Three participants were male and three were female. All participants were selected on a volunteer basis.

Design

This study used a phenomenological qualitative design, which Creswell (2006) explains “describes the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon...The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 57-58). The research was accomplished by interviewing six college-age TCKs. The participants agreed upon were emailed to set a time and place for meeting for individual interviews. The participants were informed that they would be participating in a study of the impact that education overseas has had on TCKs’ identities. During each interview, the volunteers were encouraged to describe specific experiences that contributed to their answer of each question. The researcher looked at the compilation of TCK interviews and experiences. The researcher explored the stories of the participants’ experiences in overseas schools, including their challenges with identity contributing to their sense of belonging. The time frame for the study was from February 2018 to June 2018.

Instrumentation

A set of open-ended questions were posed to the participants, encouraging the relaying of their experiences (see Appendix A). The questions, along with any prompts necessary, were used to discover the participants’ experiences, ranging from how their identities are shaped by their education overseas. The TCKs were asked to describe their schooling experience and how they

saw their identity influenced by their education, as well as expanding on times that they felt secure and insecure in their identity. The interview with the participants consisted of 12 questions. The questions were reviewed by a qualitative research professor to ensure clarity in the structure of the questions to elicit details in participants' stories.

Data Collection

Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed. The TCKs were emailed to set up a time for interviews. The interviews were held face-to-face in previously agreed-upon locations or over Skype, and one was collected in written form.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The interview transcriptions were then analyzed. The researcher coded each transcript, highlighting important quotes or phrases that stood out or related to the initial research questions. Frequently occurring key words were analyzed as well for context and meaning. Themes were created to capture the overall experience of TCK identity development.

Results

This study consisted of six undergraduate college participants, ranging in ages from 18-22, who have schooling experiences outside of their home countries. Each participant was interviewed about their schooling experiences overseas, and how their experiences influenced their developing identities. A high frequency of incidents described factors that modified their

identity and sense of belonging. Other cultural and personal differences that influenced their identities were mentioned that will be described later.

The focus of the interview questions was to acquire detailed stories about TCKs schooling experiences and how they saw themselves during these transitions within their lives. The questions were connected to the overarching research question leading this study, “How are TCKs’ identities influenced by their education overseas?” The interviewer asked not only all the questions listed in Appendix A, but also probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. The six TCKs bring a wealth of unique stories and varied experiences.

The chart below serves to give more details about the participants within the study.

Pseudonyms are used to protect the students’ actual identity.

<u>Name (Pseudonym)</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Country in which the TCK was educated</u>
Devin Thompson	20	M	Bulgaria
Anne Greene	22	F	Philippines
Matthias Shepherd	22	M	Malaysia
Sam Chris	22	M	Kazakhstan
Tara Roberts	22	F	Philippines
Jenny Yates	19	F	Philippines

The interviews were conducted individually with the researcher. The average interview time was 15 minutes. The interview was in a location the researcher and interviewee could agree to meet in a quiet location (i.e. the student center, library, etc.). All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher then analyzed the transcribed

interviews through coding and identification of key words and phrases. Themes were developed based on terms used by the participants to concisely answer the research questions. The meaning of the themes are described below.

TCK's Sense of Identity - The Awareness Struggle

Devin and Anne discussed their deeply secure identity as a result of their experiences, while Tara and Jenny talked about their struggle to find a place they belong which they attributed to their transition experiences. When TCKs were asked about how their identity was influenced by their unique educational experiences, a common theme was “awareness,” when TCKs develop an awareness of different cultures and an increase awareness of their unique situations. Tara discussed how she felt she was “more aware and accepting of people who are different than me,” due to her experiences overseas, while Anne said she was more “in tune to when someone is addressing something simply from a western mindset.” Matthias simply stated he was more “aware of the world.” These TCKs felt that their experiences had made them more connected to the world as a whole, as well as to different people.

Linked to this theme of awareness was the idea of how TCKs relate to the world and other cultures. Anne, Devin, and Matthias discussed how their identity has been affected by their wider view of the world. Anne talked about how her experiences taught her to “appreciate different cultures.” Devin said that through his experiences he has developed a “broad view of the world,” and that “[the world] is more approachable” as a result. Matthias discussed how he “felt more connected to the whole world.”

Devin and Jenny said that their experiences prepared them for college. Devin focused on how the pressure to fit in to a new culture during his primary education prepared him to

transition into college. In college, he explained “people are trying new things and seeing different things,” while he has already experienced new situations when he moved overseas. “It prepared me for college,” he said. Tara, Jenny, and Sam discussed the rigorous academics they were exposed to in their education overseas, and how this prepared them for the academic challenges of college. They described their education overseas as “difficult,” “pressured,” and even “superior,” and discussed how this has set them up to succeed in college.

One other major theme that several TCKs brought up was how their appearances affected people's' view of them, often leading to misconceptions about the TCKs' identity. Tara said, “they think I'm American, because I look American,” yet went on to explain that her sense of identity is not in America, but in a mixture of the cultures in which she has grown up. Jenny talked of similar struggles, explaining that her peers in the U.S. “just take me as what they see...they don't see that I have a different culture inside me.” However, Matthias actually talked about how he does not go out of his way to bring up his background. “I guess I don't really try to tell people that, just so they won't look at me different. Just see me for me I guess,” he said.

TCKs' Sense of Security

As students discussed feelings of security, five students brought up relationships. How they related to others and found themselves in others' eyes was a major factor in feelings of security. Tara talked about the constantly changing group of people, and how, as a young child, she was secure in this environment since it was all she had known. Jenny discussed the security she found in being around people like herself; people who had experienced similar situations. Anne talked about the security she found in others' opinions of her, and how she was viewed by peers. Matthias brought up the international school he was a part of, attributing his sense of

security to “having that base and being a part of that community.” Devin talked about how he found deep security in who he was because of his teachers. He talked about the influence teachers and mentors had on him, and how the relationships with older people gave him a wider perspective and he explained that “if people were doing stuff that I didn't want to do, I didn't feel any pressure to do it.” He had security in who he was, not pressured to fit in with peers, resulting in some measure from his teachers’ influence.

TCKs’ discussion of insecurity centered around transition. Five of the participants described experiences of transition as a point at which they felt insecure. Tara discussed the transition to the US during middle school, saying it was her “first time being unknown in a place.” This sense of displacement and not belonging was the most prominent time of insecurity for her. Devin talked about the challenges of “when I stepped out of being an American.” He struggled to find security in the new culture into which he was placed when he moved overseas and found that his greatest insecurity came from shedding his previous identity and trying to fit into the new culture. Matthias and Tara discussed the insecurity they developed upon returning to a country they had previously lived in before spending time in the U.S. Matthias talked about his struggle to fit back in. “Everything [had] kind of changed,” he said, as he discussed the challenges of having to re-discover or recreate his own place in that setting. Tara talked about wondering “where do I fit now?” when she returned to her family’s overseas location after a furlough in the U.S. Jenny stated that her time of greatest insecurity had been her transition back to the U.S. after high school graduation, “because of the transition.” Transition is a time of great insecurity, with changing relationships. The transition usually causes TCKs to end relationships with old friends, and start the process of developing new friendships, an often-exhausting task. Since much security for TCKs appeared to be found in relationships, as shown earlier, it is

unsurprising that transition, the catalyst for restarting relationships, is an intense time of insecurity.

TCKs' Sense of Belonging - Fitting In

TCKs' sense of belonging is a contributing factor to their sense of identity. When the participants were asked about their sense of belonging, the answers widely varied. One common theme was a sense of connection to people rather than place. Five TCKs discussed how they view belonging in light of relationships, rather than location. Anne said she felt "more linked to people and not to a specific place." Sam said that his time overseas had helped him "not to put my identity in things like home towns or schools." Devin said that "I have value to groups of people," and Matthias talked about how he "felt more connected to the people there, instead of locations." Tara talked about the sense of belonging she found in community with other TCKs, saying that it was "cool to grow up with people who also didn't fit in, and in that we fit in together." A sense of mutual unbelonging linked TCKs. Two TCKs brought up family as a link to belonging, stating that they found belonging and a sense of home wherever their family lived. "I'm home because they're there," said Anne, referring to her family.

Though five of the TCKs talked about situations in which they felt they did belong, two discussed feelings of unbelonging as well. Tara talked about her unsettled sense of belonging, saying "I don't fit in a lot of places," and "I really don't belong." She discussed the struggle of wanting to fit in, but not attaching it to her identity. As she said, it is "easy to want to try too hard to belong somewhere," and that it is a struggle because you "don't just want to change who you are." Jenny said, "I don't know where I belong." When asked about her sense of belonging, she stated that it was "all out of whack," meaning her struggle to find a "place" of acceptance with a particular group is still ongoing.

Others' Views of TCKs

Another component of identity that the participants were asked about was how they think others view them. Overwhelmingly, TCKs said that they believe their unique experiences distance them from others. Five of the TCKs brought up points about unrelatability. Tara said that people “don't know what to do with that,” when they hear she grew up outside of the U.S., and often people “don't want to talk about that.” As Devin said insightfully, “when someone's different than you, it's harder to understand them,” and he said that often when his unique upbringing comes to light, people “kind of dismiss it.” Anne voiced her disappointment when dismissal of her background happens. “Most of them just don't understand, and they don't really try to understand,” she said. “I wish people did ask more about it.”

Several other participants talked about the expectations they fail to meet for people because of their experiences. “They think I'm American, because I look American,” said Tara. Due to this misconception, she explains, “they have expectations that I can't fulfill.” Jenny said that she is “different than what people expect.” Matthias discussed how he deals with this phenomenon: “I guess I don't really try to tell people that, just so they won't look at me different. Just see me for me, I guess.” Matthias didn't want people to be influenced by his experiences, but to just “see me for me.”

Finally, three TCKs discussed positive reactions to their experiences. Several stated that when people asked questions about their experiences, this was a positive reaction. Questioning is a common trait for people who are interested in TCKs' experiences. Some people who are interested “ask lots of questions” said Tara, explaining that these people are “excited” about her

experiences. As Matthias said, “some people do actually find it really interesting.” These people ask lots of questions,” he said. “That's kind of a fun conversation to have.”

TCKs' Views of Teachers

One thing that all the TCKs' discussed was how their teachers influenced them. The word “teacher” was mentioned 33 times throughout the six interviews. When asked about what or who had the greatest influence on them in their educational experiences overseas, four students brought up their teachers. One major point that TCKs talked about was the way their teachers understood their situations. Three students shared stories about their teachers specifically. Anne described that her teachers were “used to students coming from very different backgrounds.” Matthias said that his teachers were “a little more aware of my situation,” while Jenny talked about how the teachers “knew what we were going through.” The teachers' understanding of their unique situations was an important quality for these TCKs.

Four TCKs also discussed the care that their teachers had for them, Tara explaining about the “genuine care” her teachers showed, while Devin and Sam talked about the approachability and availability of their teachers. “They would try to do anything to help you,” said Jenny, also mentioning that her teachers “spent a lot of time one-on-one with us.”

Devin also talked about the influence his relationships with his teachers had on him. He described how his teachers encouraged and guided him during challenging times of unbelonging and feeling insecure. He mentioned one teacher in particular was “really instrumental in kind of guiding me.” Teachers played a critical role in his life, as well as in many of the other participants' lives.

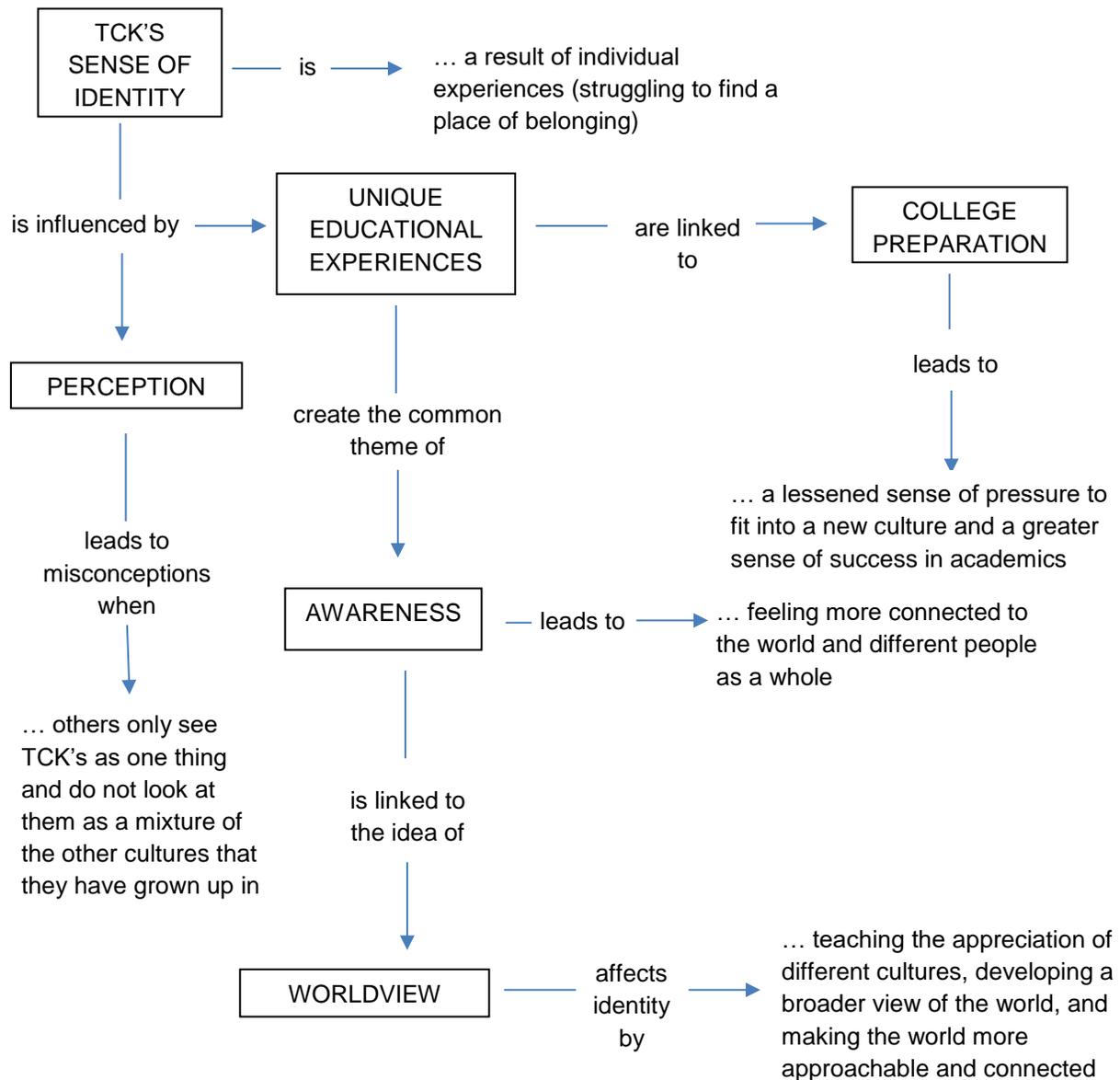


Figure 1. A concept map depicting the factors affecting TCKs' sense of identity.

Discussion

There is a strong relationship between the existing literature and this study of TCKs' identity. In previous studies, TCK identities were found to be clearly linked to their experiences in transition, as well as their relationships with peers of similar experiences. The findings of this

study are in strong agreement with the previous research. Bennett's (2016) study concludes that many TCKs' definition of home is not linked to one place, which agrees with this study's findings of TCKs' nebulous sense of home. As several participants in this study explained, their sense of belonging and home were more linked to people and not places.

Few studies previously looked at how TCK's identities were affected by their educational experiences. Fail et al (2004) discusses the importance of school on TCK's identity, which this study agreed with and expanded upon, going into more detail about specific positive influences. This study looked at how TCKs' identities have been influenced by their relationships with others of similar experiences, which Bennet (2016) also discusses. This study showed that often a positive community with similar experiences is found within TCKs' schools, both amidst students who had gone through similar experiences, and in teachers who could understand and validate their experiences.

This study also looked at sources of security and insecurity. As Fail et al (2004) discussed, forming a concrete identity can be a struggle for TCKs, due to their often-shifting situations and the need to re-learn and adjust to new environments. This study revealed that transitional experiences were often sources of insecurity. However, Fail et al (2004) found that often TCKs' identities were formed around goals and aspirations rather than relationships, while the participants in this study focused more on relationships as an important part of their security and identity.

Another source of insecurity for TCKs revealed in this study was experiences with people who did not understand their experiences. As Walters (2009) discussed, a major step in identity development appears when TCKs form relationships with other TCKs and realize they are not alone in their experiences. This study is in direct agreement with Walters' study, as it revealed

that TCKs' sense of security and belonging was strongly linked to relationships formed with others of similar experiences, and with teachers who related or simply showed effort and care toward them. Possibilities for future studies include interviewing teachers' views of ways to benefit TCKs' identity development, as well as parents of TCKs.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were the small sample size of participants, and their similar backgrounds. All the TCKs interviewed held American passports, and they were all overseas in some missions' related capacity. No TCKs from military or business backgrounds were part of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study was driven by the question: How are TCKs' identities influenced by their education overseas? TCKs have various experiences, and no single answer can be drawn from these experiences. However, the study revealed strong factors in the development of identity. Relationships with others of similar experiences was a powerful key to TCKs' sense of security. As the results illustrate, this sense of security could be shaken by transition, when those relationships were weakened or dissolved. Belonging, another subtopic of identity, was a widely varying subject for TCKs, with several claiming a settled sense of belonging, while others felt less rooted.

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Appendix A

TCK Interview Questions:

1. Where did you go to school?
2. What was one hard aspect of going to school there?
3. Did anyone or anything help you in that challenge?
4. How did your peers impact you in this setting?
5. How did your teachers impact you in this setting?
6. How has your time in an overseas school influenced who you are today?
7. What/who do you think had the greatest impact on you in school?
8. Tell me about a time you felt very secure about who you were.
9. Tell me about a time you felt insecure about who you were.
10. How do you see yourself differently from peers who did not grow up in international schools?
11. How do others see you differently?
12. How do you think your sense of belonging has been affected by your experiences in an overseas school?