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Book Reviews

Third Culture Kids – The Children of Educators in International Schools

by E. Zilber
Woodbridge: John Catt Educational, 2009
ISBN 9781904724759

Reviewed by: Mary Langford, Deputy Executive Director, European Council of International Schools (ECIS)

During the second half of the 20th century interest in Third Culture Kids (TCKs) was first noted by Dr Ruth Hill Useem of Michigan State University. Her definition was later expanded by David Pollock and Ruth van Reken, who described a TCK as 'a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background' (Pollock and van Reken, 2001).

Later Useem, with Anne Baker Cottrell, extended her research to Adult TCKs. In the 1990s authorities such as Pollock, van Reken and McCaig became known through work based largely on anecdotal evidence, while quantitative and qualitative academic TCK studies began to take place largely through masters and doctoral research at US and UK universities. These researchers have looked at various constituencies of TCKs including the children of diplomats (Diplobrats), business executives (BizzKids), military (Military Brats), missionaries (MKs) and the students who populate international schools. Dr Ettie Zilber now has focused her work on the children of international school educators.

Zilber brings the perspective of both teacher and parent of TCKs (her children have accompanied her around the globe as she has pursued a career in international education), and of international school administrator (she has been a school director in Europe, Central America and now China) who employs and manages international educators with dependent children. She defines 'EdKids' as a sub-set of the TCK population – the children of international school educators.

Her doctoral research underpins this book, which merits comment. Her question is 'How does the career choice of international educators impact their children?' She asserts that this group has not been the subject of previous research, and most authorities on the subject would probably concur. Her justification for this subject and her methodology is set out in the Introduction. She chose a qualitative approach to enable her to probe more deeply into the views of her subjects – participants who met her criteria, which were purposefully narrow. The subjects were aged 18–26: old enough to be 'independent' and living out of the family home, but young enough to have recent recollections of growing up abroad; starting, midway through or having just completed university; children of North American cohabitating parents both working in one or more international school(s)

for three or more years. Siblings were excluded. She also interviewed teachers and, in contrast to the students, here she did not apply any strict selection criteria. She used educational conferences and other professional gatherings and blogs to seek the views of parent and non-parent educators, which enabled her to compare their different perceptions about the experiences of international school students. She drew on the views of international school counsellors, in her words 'knowledgeable about educator-family dynamics', to triangulate her conclusions.

Zilber's goal in publishing this book was twofold:

(1) To help interested parties better understand the educator-family unit.
(2) To 'demystify' global nomadic childrearing, to attract more quality educators into the growing number of international schools worldwide, and also to posit to schools (employers) the advantages of recruiting parent educators.

Adapting Hofstede's model on 'human institutions', Zilber created a TCK paradigm to demonstrate how, through the extensive overlap and inter-twining of the parent's job and the school, social circle, support network, community and family, EdKids have even muddier waters to negotiate than their TCK peers whose parents are not working in the school. Though there is an assumption that EdKids are unique, Zilber notes the similarities experienced by children raised in a village or small town where parent educators form part of the local community and social network.

Zilber's literature survey is comprehensive and based on a fairly broad range of English language research and publications, including research done in a variety of settings and contexts, drawing from business management experts, international educationalists and inter-culturalists. This survey should be extremely useful for future researchers seeking an overview of recent work in this field. Analysis of the survey is given extensive coverage in the first six chapters, which address the influence of the sponsoring group (employers) on expatriates and the role of international schools as the sponsoring organization; the impact of the international school and educators on TCKs, the profile of international school educators and the characteristics of TCKs.

Much of the book is devoted to the way that students and educator-parents perceive their roles and relationships within the international school community. Zilber identifies four themes highlighted by the students including: (1) exceptionally tight bonds and relationships within educator families; (2) ambivalent feelings about their life experiences; (3) awareness and sensitivity to multiple and intersecting roles of international school communities; and (4) positive reflections about attitudes, adjustment and achievement, with a common denominator the parent involvement in the lives and education of the children.

The lives of the students in Zilber's study were characterized by warm welcomes and a notion of security and well-being, advantage, and 'being special' within the international school community. They had positive relationships with other educators, and were aware of their parents' 'good salaries and benefits' which made for a comfortable lifestyle. However, membership in this tight-knit community also meant awkward incidents of awareness of the circumstances of other educators' contractual, disciplinary or professional disputes, and being in the spot-light in terms of their own behavioural and academic expectations. Zilber describes her subjects as high achievers, although this is understandable given that her subjects were all university students. (Useem and Cottrell [2002] drew the same conclusions from their research.)

Educator parents spoke positively of the attractive salaries and other benefits such as insurance, trips home, free tuition and school holidays offered by international school employers. Parent educators also cited the advantage of heightened understanding of the academic environment in which their children operate, close social integration and the strong sense of community. But they also

acknowledged the challenges arising from awkward situations where roles of parent and educator overlap, a socio-economic disparity between their families and many more highly-paid expatriate families who attend international schools, balancing the roles of educator and parent, the challenges arising from their children's upbringing in a 'goldfish bowl' and occasional conflict of interest.

Counsellors identified the potential barriers created by the socio-economic disparity between EdKids and other international school students, complications and conflicts of interest arising from the close relationships within the community of educator families, but acknowledged that EdKids have the advantage of an independent school education that is probably superior to the state school options they would experience in the home country. They also describe the advantages that EdKids have with parents who are more informed about their children's education and school environment in general.

Zilber devotes one chapter to educator-parents who are in leadership administrative positions. Such a situation seems to contribute to more stressors, because of the high profile role of the parent – 'the boss' – and a perceived potential for negative impact on career progression if their own children do not measure up academically or behaviourally. There are also the pressures put on families when the educator parent discusses at home in the presence of their children confidential matters relating to other educators, staff, students, parents in the school, board members or other stakeholders, or controversial decisions or events.

In Chapter 3, Zilber suggests that international schools, as employers of parent-educators, could model themselves more as 'sponsoring organizations'. This is the term used to describe embassies, corporations, NGOs and so on – employers of expatriates – who have an acknowledged corporate responsibility towards dependent children. Generous human resources policies and benefits for their expatriate employees are offered to help ensure family stability and contentment that leads to more productive employees who can better focus on their professional responsibilities. Zilber urges schools to consider their responsibility as employers with salary and benefits, work conditions, academic and orientation programmes to accommodate not merely the educator, but also the educator-parent with dependent children. This may lead to easier adaptation to the host country, to the life of the school and to their teaching/administrative responsibilities and to happier employees who may stay longer (high teacher turnover is a problem for some international schools). Contented educators with more positive predispositions towards the school (their employers) may directly or indirectly influence the attitudes of other parents (customers) in the school. Zilber's statistics, corroborated by Useem and Cottrell (2002), indicate that 33 per cent of EdKids later pursue careers in international education, and may well be the next generation of international school employees in an era where numbers of international schools are growing rapidly. The appendices provide some useful tools including a modified 'PMI' index that recruiters or educator parents might use when considering a job offer, and a model for training and orientation for parents-educators used at the United Nations International School (UNIS) Hanoi.

Zilber's work is highly original and addresses some key considerations concerning the EdKids used in her research, but the narrow criteria used to identify her subjects makes it difficult to draw substantive conclusions applicable to the overall experience of EdKids and their families, particularly those who do not match her criteria. While she has a rich body of anecdotal data from both the EdKids and parent educators, whether the experiences and advantages they describe concerning salary and, more so, the benefits of international school employment are typical of that experienced by those who did not fit Zilber's criteria would merit further research. It could also be suggested that, in some other contexts (for example in Europe or North America, or where one of the parents is a host country national), international school educators and EdKids may experience greater integration into the local community and culture, lessening the 'close-knit community' characteristics described by Zilber's subjects.

Zilber recommends this book to a wide range of stakeholders in the international schools world. It is certainly a resource for boards, school directors and heads in schools that hire parent educators, and for business managers or Human Resources professionals who develop remuneration packages. Recruiters of international educators would also find it helpful with their services in the placement of educators with children. Counsellors and teachers of EdKids may find it enlightening in working with their own children or the children of colleagues. The literature review in particular makes this an invaluable tool for researchers in this important area of academic study.

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Education Without Borders: Forty Years of the International Baccalaureate: 1970–2010

by Nigel Bagnall
Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010
ISBN 978–3-639–24313–0

Reviewed by: George Walker, Director General of the International Baccalaureate 1999–2006

'Always start by looking at the references' was the wise advice given to me by an experienced external examiner as we planned a doctoral viva together, and a study of Nigel Bagnall's references (well over 200) quickly reveals that this book is not what it seems nor what its title claims. About 80 per cent of the references are dated earlier than 1994 and only one of the dozens of International Baccalaureate (IB) documents that he lists was published in the 21st century. So much for 'forty years of the International Baccalaureate'.

The plot thickens as we are told (p. 32) that Dr Roger Peel is 'the present Director General of the IBO' (in fact there have been three DGs since Dr Peel retired) and (pp. 31–32) we are presented with a list of 'ten core publications' of the IBO, which bears no relation to current reality. Along the way, it seems to have escaped the notice of the author ('a world expert on the International Baccalaureate', insists the blurb) that the IBO no longer exists; it was re-branded as the IB several years ago.

All is revealed towards the end (p. 127) where we read 'How do these teachers working in international schools differ from the teachers who have been trained and taught in the sort of schools studied in this thesis?' So: what we are reading are extracts from Bagnall's PhD thesis completed in 1994 and, before we draw any wider conclusions about this book, let us see what he had to tell us all those years ago.

His research focused on four IB schools, two in Canada and two in Australia. At the time there were just 13 authorized IB schools in Australia (132 in December 2010) and 47 in Canada (300 in December 2010). Bagnall was inspired by the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who developed the theory that different forms of capital – social, symbolic and cultural – confer power and status in society just as effectively as economic capital. Cultural capital includes educational advantages which promote social mobility beyond a person's economic means (one rationale, for example, of the selective grammar school). Bagnall suggested that globalization was producing a global version of cultural capital and it was access to this global cultural capital that motivated