

Book Review—Tales of TCK Life

My son switched schools this year. Just a few neighborhoods away. He seems fine with it; in fact, I think he likes it, most simply for the fact that it's *new*. Sounds a lot like his mama.

When I was his age, a new school meant: a new city; a new country. A new continent. If you're an international educator reading this, you know who I am. Yup, I'm a Third Culture Kid.

I went from a free-roaming baby in Kampala, Uganda, to elementary school in Rabat, Morocco, to middle school in Antwerp, Belgium, to high school in Bangkok, Thailand. When it came to switching schools, my educator parents didn't mess around. Like most Third Culture Kids (TCKs), I didn't question how I grew up. Moving schools meant moving countries. This was how we lived. This was how my friends and my brother's friends lived. This is how our parents' friends lived. This was normal.

Then... college. (Insert sound of mental, cultural and emotional brakes squealing here).

The transition was jarring to say the least. From 18 years of mobile, international life—where I felt completely normal—to life in my “home” culture with my U.S. “peers”—where I realized I was anything but the norm.

More than twenty years after the most jarring move I've ever made—from “global” to U.S. “local”—I must admit: somewhere deep down, I am still reeling, still grasping to understand just exactly where I fit into my *home* culture, when I did not grow up with a *home base*.

If someone had handed me Pollock and van Reken's book *The Third Culture Kid Experience* along with my freshman college reading list, I would have known that my angst about belonging and identity is one of the most common traits for TCKs. As it was, I did not hear of the concept of Third Culture Kids until more than 10 years later when I was in my 30s. A family friend from our years in Morocco, also a parent-educator, mentioned it in a passing conversation. With an introductory read on the TCK topic, it blew my mind to know that how I

By Sarah J. Stoner

grew up, overseas, was an identifiable, collective experience. I was not alone.

Now, 10 years after that monumental “discovery” about my identity, my childhood, my experiences—Dr. Ettie Zilber publishes a book that further distills my experience: *Third Culture Kids—The Children of Educators in International Schools*.

I was “The Headmaster's Daughter” in every school I attended. My father, Milton Jones, headed the Rabat American School (1973-78), the Antwerp International School (1978-83), and the International School Bangkok (1983-88). My mother, Eleanor Jones, also a steadfast presence on campus, was a vibrant elementary school teacher (and after my graduation, also a head of school).

Zilber's book is written for international educator-parents, their student children (whom she terms EdKids), and international educators currently in schools or considering moving their families overseas. Her intention is that “the findings [in her book] will help... better understand the educator-family unit” (p. 9), the specific EdKid experience and its complexities above and beyond the baseline TCK experience—and, therefore, understand how to best support the students, parents and staff who make up an international school system.

In just over 200 pages, Zilber examines “how their parents felt about raising and teaching their children under the same roof, how their co-workers interacted with them as well as the children of their colleagues, how the administrators and counselors... dealt with the issues that arose, and, finally, how the EdKids themselves perceived their life experience” (p. 12). According to her introduction, this book is the first of its kind. There have been studies on specific sub-

groups of TCKs including Military Kids, Missionary Kids, and Bizz Kids—with one niche yet to be addressed: EdKids.

I have to admit—as I held the book unopened in my hand—I questioned how viable a topic “the children of educators in international schools” could be. After all I was one. And, come on, how significant a topic could this be to merit a *whole* book? However, after a close reading I see it as a critically significant work: to EdKids like me, to international educator parents who

raise their children overseas, and to all international educators and EdKids in schools right now.

BOOK REVIEW:

Third Culture Kids—The Children of Educators in International Schools.

by Ettie Zilber (2009).

Woodbridge, U.K.:

John Catt Educational Ltd.

As Zilber points out, a healthy expatriate experience determines the success of overseas personnel; and the overall repatriation experience affects the whole international school system. While only 22% of EdKids

are enrolled in the same schools as their educator-parents, nearly 100% of the school staff and student body interacts with them and are impacted by the existing dynamic.

Third Culture Kids—The Children of Educators in International Schools is divided into four sections. The first section establishes a foundational structure for the discussion of EdKids. In the second section, we hear directly from the EdKids themselves, in a mixed format of their voices and the author's study summations. The third section offers the staff perspective on EdKids—from counselors to administrators—both with or without kids in the same school. The fourth and final section offers specific recommendations, activities, and discussion approaches to open the EdKid discussion—designed for educator families, for student-children, and school staff.

Several appendices follow, including a training workshop outline from a fellow educator, detailing the nuts-and-bolts of “Teaching Your Colleagues' Children” and “Dealing with Colleagues Who Teach Your Children.”

From a Memoir Not Written

Zilber opens with a personal introduction and an outline of her research study, conducted mainly through email interviews due to the geographic spread of her subjects. It is clear from her passion and experience in the international education domain, as well as the 20-page bibliography, that Zilber knows her subject well.

Part I takes a look at the family unit of international school educators and their children, the EdKids. She explains that “it was not the purpose of this book to analyze or research the characteristics of TCKs in general. Nevertheless, in order to familiarize the uninitiated reader to the subject, I offered a review of the current literature about TCKS... and a review of the literature about international schools, educators and expatriate communities...” (p.197).

Zilber uses these first chapters to define the various terms and “alphabet soup” of the TCK world, and to present various theories and explorations already established in previous research. She establishes the concept of “the sponsoring group” (ie. the U.S. military, an NGO, a private corporation) and its influence on the expatriate. Then she further distills the influence of the “international school” as a sponsoring group—and discusses its influence on the expatriate: the TCK student, the parent(s) as employees, and the family unit as a whole.

These pages are a melting pot of overlapping theories, models, and foundational studies on international education. At times, to the non-educator reader, various overlapping information blurs to the point of redundancy and overload. Mostly, I walk away from this first section realizing what a vast amount of intriguing studies and angles there are on a fascinating, multifaceted subject.

Zilber normally employs the academic voice, with occasional and welcome personal interjections. She uses quotes and a confluence of research findings, both from her own work and other experts in the field. One of Zilber’s longer chapters in this first section profiles the international school educator. Zilber establishes the factors that motivate educators to teach and stay overseas. She identifies their defining

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Sarah Stoner: From a Memoir not written, Anecdote 1 of x⁹⁹

“Are you going to turn yourself in or do I have to?”

My father, the headmaster, is asking me this question at the dinner table. I skipped part of school today. Of course I got busted. What was I thinking? Both my parents work at my school for goodness sakes. They know all my teachers, chat with them daily in passing. Heck, we all *drove* to school together this morning—my headmaster dad, my first grade teacher mom, and me—a high school sophomore.

I didn’t get caught because of the forged note about a dentist’s appointment. Pretty gutsy, I thought, to forge my dad’s signature when it circulates regularly on staff memos. I didn’t get caught when I sauntered—very, very quickly—by my father’s office, which faces the one gate that lets you in and out of school grounds. Darn it, I got caught when my mother happened to run into my math teacher who happened to ask off-handedly if I was okay since I wasn’t in class today.

I am staring at my dad, saying nothing. My teenager brain blares with disbelief. *Oh my gawd. I can’t believe he would turn me in. I can’t believe he wants me to turn myself in.* My mind nearly short-circuits when I imagine either option.

From a Memoir not written, Anecdote 2 of x⁹⁹

I make sure never to hang around after the bell rings between classes. Other students mill about, asking questions after the class, or quickly chatting with a teacher they like. I don’t want to chat with teachers, be seen palling about with them, even if they might have been over at my house last night for dinner with my parents. Even if I might have heard them all the way in my room howling with wild laughter after one too many drinks. At school I am there to do my job—get good grades and come by them honestly. They are there to do their job. I am nothing but professional when it comes to being an EdKid student—I do my job, you do yours.

It has taken me a good many years post-high school to undo rigid boundaries around cultivating my own personal relationships with teachers outside of the classroom. As an EdKid, I saw hobnobbing with teachers in front of my peers as loaded with potential accusation of brown-nosing and favoritism—more than already existed on its own, anyhow.

From a Memoir not written, Anecdote 3 of x⁹⁹

“Misssss Jones?” My chemistry teacher draws out my name in a long hiss. During roll call. During his lectures. This might be just fine if he did it to everyone else in the class. But he does not. Every other student in the class he addresses by first name. No hiss included.

But I am the headmaster’s daughter. He is telling me, by tacking a title and mock patronizing tone onto my name, that he knows this fact—and has an opinion about it. His opinion likely has to do with my presumed entitlement to a good grade or special treatment in his class. What he does not know is that I don’t like presumptions about me. I especially do not like mock patronizing tones. I say nothing, and reveal nothing of my distaste for his flesh-toned shirts and public shaming. I simply memorize every chemistry formula he teaches, learn the Table of Elements backwards and forwards, and set my chin to *Think twice before you mess with me* mode. In his class filled with pop quizzes and monthly tests, I manage to maintain a 100%. Not 99%. An unquestionable, unsubjective 100%. This is a man who delights in handing out those pink “you are failing my class” slips each quarter. Nearly half the class receives them the first quarter. He calls me to his desk, hands me a yellow slip. A commendation report. Grade: 100%. “Sarah is cool, calm, and collected,” he writes. Yes, that’s me in my *Think twice before you mess with me* mode. He may as well have waved a white flag. ■

REVIEW: EDKIDS,

continued from page 49 ►

characteristics and presents profile-related information on parent-educator couples as employees.

Wisely, Zilber takes the time to cover TCKs in general. It's a useful way to establish a baseline for this distinct cultural group and a handy launching pad to then examine the distinct experience of TCK EdKids in the section that follows.

In the final chapter of the first section, she presents to the reader the 10 factors that she identified in her research which summarize the experience of being an EdKid. This reader is unclear, however, as to why the author examines factors one through four in this chapter, then continues the discussion of the remainder of her findings in Part II. Possibly, it is because she sees the first four findings as “the essence and backbone of the book” (p. 68).

Part II takes the Adult TCK (ATCK) perspective, the now-adult EdKid looking back on growing up as a child of international school educators. Here, the reader encounters the greater part of Zilber's research findings on EdKids. To add to the alphabet soup, we are talking about ATCK EdKids. Me. This is where my attention really perked up. This section is an extremely valuable read for any EdKid going through the experience, or just coming out of the experience.

Zilber explains why we should take notice: “A description into the role plurality and institution intersection could help EdKids understand why they may feel frustrated by certain parent or educator behaviors. An understanding of why their parents put so much emphasis on their achievements and behavior could reduce angst...” (p. 175). At a distance of 20 years, I gleaned many an insight on how my specific upbringing shaped me.

Many “aha” moments ensued as I read the stories of other EdKids, and as I read the study summations on my upbringing as an EdKid. Describing these personal epiphanies after reading *Third Culture Kids—The Children of Educators in International Schools* would possibly take another article. Suffice

common positive experiences for EdKids: from tight family bonds to positive relationships with educators to organized welcomes to a strong sense of wellbeing that comes from knowing family is nearby and available. Other voices indicate the negatives, the murky zones that Zilber refers to as “ambivalent”: the impact of EdKids' behavior on the parent; the impact of the parent's reputation on the EdKid; high family visibility (that according to some studies shows similar dynamics to growing up in a preacher's family); special treatment from staff, both positive and negative; parent over-involvement; and entanglement of school, work, social, home life. The term



Right: The author as an EdKid in Bangkok, Thailand, with her EdKid brother, headmaster/father and teacher/mother, 1987. Above: The author today with her family in Washington state, with the addition of her husband and son, 2008.



it to say that each of us as EdKids will glean different insights about themselves and their families from reading this book. It would be a useful endeavor at any stage of life.

Many of Zilber's interview subjects explained that “this was the first opportunity they had had to address the challenges of this unique status... Judging from the length and intensity of the written responses from the ATCK participants, it seems like there was great enthusiasm and a need to tell their story. Hopefully, this book will harness that enthusiasm and become a catalyst to open the discussion around the conference table, as well as the dinner table” (p. 198).

The second section is entitled, “Listening to the Voices: The ACTKs' Perspective on Their Life Experience.” Chapters cover

‘ambivalent’ confused me, as I viewed the descriptions and summations as ‘both/and experiences’—not ambivalent, but a mix of the positive and negative.

Where Zilber loses me as a reader is in the length of some her chapter titles; they can read like a scientific journal. And, as I read that chapter, I find myself thinking the content covers something entirely more interesting than how it was packaged. If EdKids of past and present should read this book—and they *should*—then I'd wish for the book to have less of a textbook tone in places (like the chapter headings and occasional “academe” voice).

Throughout the book, Zilber makes an important call to recognize “the greater need for arrival orientation, pre-departure, and on-site repatriation support” (p. 40). Where

Zilber's book becomes a bit muddled in separating the baseline TCK experience from the TCK EdKid-specific experience. As she mentions throughout the book, they are difficult to separate. The two experiences certainly go hand in hand. So sometimes, the book addresses the experiences of TCKs in general; other times, it is EdKid-specific.

Zilber makes it clear that the book is about EdKids, and yet sometimes makes general recommendations for all TCKs such as a call for more arrival orientation and transition programs. She does make an eloquent summation in her last few chapters. Prior to the recommended activities, she explains: a "major theme throughout this book has been the impossibility of separation between... entities—[with respect to recommended activities], the three [entities—schools, families, sponsoring group] have been combined in one... it would not be practical to try to separate them surgically..." As with EdKids and their experience of the blurring of boundaries, so it is with writing on the subject itself—the topic boundaries run in and out of each other as Zilber analyzes the subject.

The end result of growing up an EdKid, according to both EdKids themselves and the counselor and administrative input quoted in the book, is overwhelmingly positive. As I reflect on my own experience as an EdKid, I'd have to agree. However, as I read the counselors' and kids' descriptions, part of me wants to hear more reflection on the negative impacts—not just the negative political and social challenges in real-time of EdKid status, but overarching reflections on personality outcome. That "EdKids learn how to view a situation from many points of view" and "develop highly effective skills in dealing with both adults and their peers" (p. 148) is valid, but what about the darker side of personal development?

I wonder if it's possible that this missing "darker side" is a reflection of being an EdKid... forever protecting your parents and

their choices, for to support them is to support yourself and the system within which you, as an EdKid, operate day to day.

While Zilber offers the book for general readership—students, parents, educa-

While only 22% of EdKids are enrolled in the same schools as their educator-parents, nearly 100% of the school staff and student body interacts with them and are impacted by the existing dynamic.

tors—it ultimately speaks most directly to educators and educator-parents. As a non-educator, I found the first two sections most relevant in understanding my own experiences as an EdKid. As "school, staff, or educator family," I might find the latter sections relevant, since the third and fourth sections quote and directly address these entities, in addition to building upon the voices of the EdKids and the foundational information in the first half.

While the latter half of the book speaks more to educators rather than EdKids, and some of the information is redundant—what the EdKids describe in Part II is what the counselors describe in Part III—the latter half of the book also introduces useful new information and insights interspersed within already-established information. The book's usefulness for EdKids might be better off with fewer redundancies in this last section, so that the new information—relevant to both EdKids and the educators of EdKids—in the latter half is more easily accessible.

One of the biggest gifts Zilber's book of-

fers is in creating safe space for a topic that is often relegated to the counselor's office, and "placing it squarely on the kitchen or conference table" (p. 171). Her intention is to address the realities of raising or teaching EdKids and to make that experience as positive as possible for all those involved.

Zilber advocates for opening up this topic for discussion, as well as the TCK topic in general, starting with sixth grade curriculum (p. 181) and I could not agree more. I wonder what a difference this might have made in my life, and the floating angst I still carry quietly with me even into my 40s.

The topic is a delicate one and Zilber makes realistic recommendations in light of its sensitivity. How may one discuss the children of a supervisor or school head in a professional setting? May we expect children to openly discuss their educator-parents in the very school to which they are so strongly linked? Not easy. One of my favorite recommendations listed is the use of a discussion on "the role of sponsoring groups in the lives of the TCKs" (p. 183). "This would be a natural entrée into the topic of the international school as a sponsoring group, without singling out the children of educators by giving them an opportunity to offer their own twist on the subject" (p. 183). This is an excellent idea. I would have loved to have had such an opportunity, to discuss whose parents did what, and how it impacted our individual families and our interactions as a student system.

As it is, thanks to the information and voices collected in Zilber's book, I have the opportunity now to compare my experience as an EdKid with the collective experience. Let's use her book in today's international schools to further the discussion. ■

Sarah Stoner is a writer in Seattle, Washington, who ponders the benefits and challenges of raising her own two children overseas. For now, they remain on U.S. soil, close to her retired educator parents. Contact Sarah at sarah.stoner@earthlink.net

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