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Boundaries and the Restriction of Mobility within International School Communities: A Case Study from Germany

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International schools are widely revered as institutions, which offer interstitial cultures of their own to accommodate “Third Culture Kids” of privileged migrant families. Originally established to ease transitions for internationally mobile families from one national context to the next, these schools can be viewed as cosmopolitan hubs for expatriate families – offering a standardized educational system and community, which is readily available across the globe. The term, “Third Culture Kid” is very often associated with children of expatriate families attending international schools – for the reason that these children are particularly mobile: oftentimes experiencing multiple international relocations during their formative years. The label suggests that the child stands in a “third space” between the culture of their passport country and that of the host country – whilst not necessarily feeling attached to either. In this way, TCKs have since been classified as a unique group of individuals who share a common upbringing as being “displaced and uprooted” (Malkki, 1992, p. 25). This communal “third culture” to which all TCKs are bound may be directly related to the international school global network – a space, which accepts and cultivates a culturally diverse population joined together through shared nomadic experiences.

These experiences are mutual in the sense that expatriate families network and transition through the international school system. They are often familiar with other international schools around the world, with which other families within the same community had been affiliated prior to their arrival in the new host country. Despite the fact that these families are often labelled as being “displaced” in terms of belonging to any single nation, they appear to be highly grounded and comfortable within the international school system itself.
While international school communities appear to share a global-orientation, which suggests notions of inclusivity, universality, flexibility and boundless mobility, tensions emerge through a degree of relatively exclusive practices, which take place in isolation to their host nations. Current literature pertaining to international schools rarely speaks of the role of the host country as a theme of focus. This is likely due to the fact that the vast majority of studies conducted through international schools are chiefly concerned with: the development and presence of the international education program in question, school operations and administrative activities within international school settings, teaching and learning within international school classrooms, and pedagogical realities of curricular delivery at international schools.

Allan (2002), Allen (2000, 2002), Jackson (2005) and Tamatea (2008) are among the few scholars who have identified and criticized the relative absence of the local within international schools, however, they focus primarily on curricular development for the educational practitioner. There is also a small degree of authorship (including former/present international school educators and administrators), which has focused on the role of the host country national within international school communities. Schwindt (2003) argues that host country nationals (with an emphasis on teachers) are marginalized within international schools; Canterford (2003) discusses the segmented labor markets within international schools (with a focus on host country nationals); and Bunnell (2005) explores the extent to which international schools formally pursue public relations with the local community. Poore (2005, p. 353) is strongly critical of the “superficial inclusion of the host culture in the curriculum” and advocates for stronger school cultures, which can benefit from their local surroundings. These studies are however still heavily centered on the educational institution itself and its official relationship with the host nation, and less on the social activities of its individual community members – particularly occurring after (or between) school hours.

This chapter aims to explore the role of the host nation for international school community members and the extent to which this membership allows for cross-cultural local mobility for both expatriate and host country nationals in attendance. It examines the notion of “Third Culture Kid” and additional rhetoric affiliated with the idea of “being international” within a school environment which uses such terminology officially and unofficially regularly for ideology and market-driven (Matthews, 1989) purposes, as well as a means for individual self-identification within both the school community and the surrounding host society. With a focus