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## Asian International Student Transition to High School in Canada

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## Asian International Student Transition to High School in Canada

### Abstract

There is a paucity of studies conducted with unaccompanied adolescent international students. In this qualitative inquiry, I present a thematic analysis of the critical incidents that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean participants reported as either facilitating or hindering to their transition to Canada. Using the Critical Incident Technique, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 participants aged 15 to 18 years who were attending three public secondary schools in Vancouver, Canada. I present the findings of seven thematic categories: making decisions, experiencing dilemmas, receiving advice, receiving help, impressed with environment, experiencing local annoyances, and participation in activities. Finally, I address the implications for school counsellors who work with these students, the limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

### Keywords

Adolescent International Students, Unaccompanied Minors, Asian Students, Sojourners, High School Students, Cross-Cultural Counselling, Cultural Transition Adjustment, Qualitative Research, Critical Incident Technique

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## **Asian International Student Transition to High School in Canada**

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### **Introduction**

Many secondary school counsellors wonder how to best support international students from Asian countries. Unfortunately, there is a lack of academic literature that addresses unaccompanied minors studying in Canada and the United States (Leung, 2001), despite the fact that these youth have unique concerns given their younger age and more vulnerable status (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006). One reason for the paucity of research may be the complexity associated with research ethics and youth, laws on minor children and abuse, and multiple ethical review procedures (Schulz, Sheppard, Lehr, & Shepard, 2006). Given that adolescent international students often live alone or with unrelated homestay families, researchers may be required to obtain consent of parents or guardians, as well as consent/assent from the adolescents themselves. If parental consent is required, questions arise about how to achieve truly informed consent with parents who live overseas, may not fully understand the risks and benefits of the research, and who likely speak another language. Another concern may be that there is a higher likelihood of receiving a disclosure of abuse or neglect from a younger population, which would then legally obligate the researcher to make reports to the school, social service agency, parents, and perhaps the police depending on the circumstances (Truscott & Crook, 2004). Finally, research projects with adolescents or specifically identified organizations, like school districts, often require lengthy ethics approvals from both the university and the organization. Since these issues are complex, time consuming, and costly, I believe that many researchers focus on post-secondary international students as a way of

streamlining the process. Unfortunately, this means that younger, more vulnerable international students are rarely the focus of research inquiries.

The little research that does exist shows that adolescent international students attending secondary schools in Canada and the United States often experience more difficulties than other students. One quantitative study examined three cohort groups of Chinese youth in Eastern Canada – early immigrants, late immigrants, and unaccompanied international students (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). Using questionnaires, these researchers found between-group differences in that international sojourners had higher acculturative stress levels and lower acculturation levels than the two immigrant groups. They also found that international students showed similar experiences and profiles to recent immigrants, which is not surprising given the similarity of geographic dislocation and recent arrival in the new country. In another quantitative study, these same researchers examined the adaptation of 201 unaccompanied sojourners from Taiwan by using a survey methodology. They found that adolescent international students were a vulnerable group who were often not prepared in advance of their sojourn and who had difficulties adapting to the new country (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006). The students reported that they suffered from a lack of information about the host culture, as well as having little sense about the purpose of their sojourn, which added to the already difficult task of adjusting to a new cultural reality.

Similarly, in another study, Ying (2001) used a series of questionnaires with 230 overseas-born Chinese undergraduate students. Her research found that unaccompanied international students held more tightly to their past and to traditional values by maintaining close ties to their home culture, speaking their own language, and affiliating more with other people from their home country. Contrary to what might be expected, the researcher found that the transition process was actually facilitated when unaccompanied students held onto their traditions and language as demonstrated by their strong American orientation within a few years after their arrival. Ying hypothesized that in maintaining a strong connection to their past, unaccompanied sojourners use a strategy to psychologically remain connected to family, friends, important others, and even significant childhood memories. This sense of psychological safety and a secure base could be seen as the stability that allowed students to venture out in their new surroundings with more confidence and emotional stamina.

In contrast to these studies, Chiang-Hom (2004) conducted a qualitative study in which she interviewed three groups – Chinese international students, Chinese immigrant adolescents who lived with their parents, and American-born Chinese youth. She compared the different roles that members of their social support network held and how these roles impacted the students' adjustment. She found that Chinese-born adolescents who decided to travel abroad as international students had a positive transition and adjustment experience when they maintained strong support networks, prosocial relationships, and a sense of belonging. These results focused on the importance of positive relationships, a finding which was validated by another qualitative study exploring the positive transition experiences of international students through in-depth interviews (Moore & Popadiuk, in press). In particular, strong interpersonal connections were identified as highly facilitating to adjustment. Additionally, a subset of the findings from this current research published elsewhere (Popadiuk, 2009) that focused on the overriding theme of relationality showed how mutually empathic, meaningful

connections with others led to an overall sense of wellness during the sojourn. On the other hand, disconnections from others and ruptures in relationships significantly upset students and often led to feelings of depression, anxiety, and a sense of alienation. The latter qualitative studies appear to provide a new direction for the kinds of questions that need to be asked, the critical importance of relationality in international student transitions, and a focus on the nuances, meanings, and contexts of their everyday experiences as sojourners.

Such challenges and hopes suggest that school counsellors could play a pivotal role supporting the growing number of international students attending secondary schools in North America. Unfortunately, there are three issues that may come together to create the perfect storm. First, international students from Asia often hold negative perspectives of mental health problems, believe that family and close friends are in the best position to offer help, and generally do not understand the largely Western view of counselling services. Given that many cultures do not understand the role counsellors play in supporting a wide variety of concerns (Pedersen, 1991), international students tend to underutilize counselling services offered to them (Mori, 2000). Instead, many people from around the world hold a perspective that solving problems belongs within the family context and that outside intervention indicates that there is a serious, and shameful, problem. Although utilizing family and friends is highly appropriate, additional supports in the new cultural context may be warranted. Secondly, school counsellors often do not possess the level of cultural competency needed to work effectively with international students from Asia (Zhang & Dixon, 2003), they have little time to deal with special population groups even if they are interested and motivated to do so, and there is very little research to support their work in providing cost-effective and meaningful services. Thirdly, the literature primarily portrays these students as a burden to the system, which may create a psychological obstacle to counsellors who want to provide culturally relevant services (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Taken together, these three issues create a context in which international students may be inadequately or ineffectively supported.

In light of this, it stands to reason that if we knew more specific information about the actual experiences of adolescent international students from their own perspective, adults may be in a better position to provide more effective support within the constraints of limited resources. In her research examining rural high school students and their yearbooks, for example, Hoffman (2005) asserts that learning from student perspectives and their experiences has largely been missing from the literature and policies, while adult discussions and viewpoints dominate the field. She further highlights the importance of learning about what is happening to students in their passage to adulthood, how they construct their experiences of school as much more than an academic place of learning, and where we can actively look for what is working well in shaping youth today. Relevant to my study, Hoffman discusses how the students' lives were busy, stress-filled, and committed to many activities outside of their academic focus. In conducting my research with adolescent international students, I wanted to go beyond the usual focus on academic life to learn about the complexity of the students' life roles and experiences, inside and outside of school. Foremost in my mind was to learn more about how critical events from any life role shaped their adjustment as they navigated a stress-filled cross-cultural transition. Such issues include the developmental transitions, language challenges, living arrangements, relational issues, and familial expectations.

Given the multiple layers of transition that these students face, school counsellors may be in a unique position to understand, facilitate, and support these youth in their schools. This study continues the development of knowledge of unaccompanied international students, especially from Asian countries. By better understanding more about the nuances of international student transitions, school counsellors will be in a better position to assist these unaccompanied youth, and hopefully ease the transition challenges. My research, therefore, fills a gap in the literature on adolescent international students studying in Canada. By using a qualitative methodology, I hoped to bring the students' perspectives to the foreground and to allow readers to better understand the stories that students themselves deem important. The research question that drove this inquiry sought to answer the specific question of what facilitated and hindered international student transition and adjustment in Vancouver, BC, secondary schools. In this paper, I provide detailed information from students themselves so that adults can better learn how to mitigate psychological and physical distress, avert expected, normative transition crises, and increase the students' ability to participate more fully and joyfully in their lives, schools, and new communities. One of the key purposes of this research is to provide school counsellors who work with international students relevant information based on empirical research that they can implement in their schools. A second key purpose is that international students themselves will be able to use this research as a road map to help them negotiate their own transition and adjustment experiences.

### **Researcher Perspective**

My research interest with international students initially grew out of my work as the coordinator of an international student peer matching program at The University of British Columbia as a Master's student in Counselling Psychology. Meeting people from so many different cultures and backgrounds engaged my curiosity to learn more about all aspects of their lives – who were these people before they came here as students; what were their family situations like; were they married or dating; how did they manage to get themselves half-way around the world with so little information about what they were coming to? I often felt amazed and shocked – and sometimes both at the same time – by the stories shared in the context of mutual cultural learning and intercultural connections. The threads of international student connections have continued to be strongly interwoven into my own life narrative both personally and professionally since that time.

Initially when I studied the literature about international students for my Master's thesis, I found that the questions asked, the perspectives taken, and the methods used did not adequately capture the lives of the people I had known. Instead, most of the studies seemed to separate the person from the issue and the life from its context. Being troubled by this, I have since chosen to use qualitative research methodologies that have provided more integrated, holistic accounts of people's lived experiences through the stories they shared. Through these methods, I learned about the nuances and contours of the actual lives lived – Maria's desperation of living with a physically and emotionally abusive spouse and how that impacted her transition to Canada; Dario's relief and liberation of having left a country and culture that persecuted him as a bisexual teen; and fifteen year old Jenny's fear as she kept her homestay father and his friend from sexually molesting

her until she was finally allowed to move out after a year of their continual harassment. What I hope to bring to the field are the real-life stories of international students so that we can have a better sense of what they are up against, how they overcome challenges, and how we might provide real support that matters. I am interested in portraying these students as they present themselves with all their mistakes, their disappointments, their joys, and their victories. We are all of these things and we learn to negotiate life with whatever tools we have at our disposal at that time. I hope my research begins to illuminate the areas of darkness in the field so that we can more fully appreciate the troubles and the triumphs of international students in the light of day.

### **Method**

Flanagan (1954) originally developed the Critical Incident Method to identify effective pilot performance. In his study, participants articulated a descriptive account of key components (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or interactions) that facilitated or hindered their mission. Two activities that he investigated included combat leadership and disorientation in pilots. He analyzed the data by extracting the “critical incidents” or most important aspects or moments that stood out to the pilots as critical and important in either facilitating or hindering the achievement of their aim. Flanagan grouped these critical incidents into categories and compiled a list of the factors found to be critical for task performance according to the pilots’ perspectives. When the war ended, Flanagan refined the critical incident technique, and utilized it extensively in industry. The five major steps of the methodology include (a) determining the general aim of an activity which outlines the objectives to which most experts in the field would agree, (b) developing plans and specifications for data collection, (c) collecting the data by means of an interview with the observer, (d) analyzing the data in order to summarize and describe the data efficiently enough to allow it to be effectively utilized, and (e) interpreting and reporting the findings.

Although some researchers have criticized the use of the critical incident method for being too behaviourally focused, it has grown and developed through the decades and has been widely and effectively used as an exploratory strategy (Chell, 1998). The critical incident technique has been especially used in industry and organizational psychology, but also in a wide-range of academic fields such as nursing, education, counselling, and medicine (see Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005 for a full history of the Critical Incident Technique).

This method, then, can be defined as an inductive research strategy, in which the researcher asks questions to elicit responses from an individual regarding specific events that helped or hindered a particular aim. Participants engage in interviews with the researcher, and are asked a series of questions which are intended to elicit an elaboration of events. Woolsey (1986) states that to be considered as a critical incident, the activity or event is sufficiently complete in and of itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made. Specifically, the interviewer asks participants to provide a detailed account of a critical incident that includes the source of the incident (e.g., self, teacher, parent), the incident itself (e.g., what happened and how was it facilitating or hindering?), and the outcome (e.g., how did this incident impact the person?). This method has been used successfully in other counseling-related research projects, such as the critical incidents of

the positive aspects of international student transitions (Moores & Popadiuk, in press); cross-cultural transitions of Canadian students and faculty travelling overseas (Arthur, 2001); the dynamics of pastoral counseling practices of Catholic priests in Northern Ireland (O’Kane & Millar, 2002), critical incidents in the lives of gifted female Finnish scientists (Tirri & Koro-Ljungber, 2002); and healing for First Nations people (McCormick, 1997). In choosing the Critical Incident Technique, I was interested in how it could generate detailed and specific data through concrete descriptions of the phenomenon. This method allowed me to focus on important events, either positive or negative, that the participant could identify during the time of their sojourn as having a significant and meaningful impact on their lives.

## **Participants**

The Vancouver School District was selected because the researcher had previously worked there as a secondary school teacher and was familiar with the international student program. The district’s program is well-known internationally, especially in Asia, due to its location on the Pacific Rim and high quality public education. Before the research commenced, ethical approval was received by both The University of British Columbia’s ethical review board and the school district committee on research ethics. The ethics boards required parental consent from all participants regardless of their age; in other words, all participants under the age of consent, which is 19 years of age in the Province of British Columbia, required parental consent and participant assent. Consent from homestay families or guardians who checked in on students periodically were not allowed; the review boards did not consider students to be “mature minors, which would mean that they could provide their own consent based on their age, maturity, and level of understanding of what they were being asked to do (Truscott & Crook, 2004). Therefore, parental consent forms were translated by culturally-appropriate volunteers (e.g., international graduate students or recent immigrants who were involved in the International House activities at the University of British Columbia from the targeted cultural and language groups). These volunteers translated the forms from English into the first languages of the parents (i.e., Chinese, Korean, and Japanese). When possible, I asked a second volunteer from the same culture and language group to proofread, edit, and revise the original translation to help ensure that it was as close as possible to the original meaning. After sending the forms to the home countries for signature, parents faxed the signed consent form directly to the school, the university, or to their sons or daughters, who then brought the form to the teacher or counsellor at the school. Student participants then provided verbal and written assent at the beginning of each interview.

Three secondary schools in the school district were targeted because they represented a variety of socioeconomic neighborhoods with ethnically diverse student-body populations. After I received ethics approval, a school contact person, either a school counsellor or teacher in charge of international students, contacted me and made an appointment to discuss the research. Once the counsellors understood and agreed to invite their students to participate, they discussed the study with students, provided an information sheet about the research, and gave them a copy of the interview questions. The involved school personnel arranged interview times with students during the school



day, located an appropriate room in the school for the interviews, and facilitated the introductions between the students and the researcher. The preparation of the students for the interview and the introductions by a respected individual in the school were invaluable aspects for developing the rapport and trust required to carry-out the interviews.

The criteria for selecting the participants were broad and flexible in order to allow for a diverse range of participants. An attempt was made to select students from a range of different ethnicities, countries of origin, ages, grade levels, and genders, but no attempt was made to select students of any particular adjustment level. Such variety adds to the quality of this methodology because the researcher can expect to achieve a fuller coverage of the content domain (Woolsey, 1986). However, one factor common to all of the participants was that students were required to be classified as international students, rather than permanent residents or landed immigrants, who were attending a public Vancouver secondary school and paying full tuition to attend. These students were living in pre-arranged homestay situations with Canadian host-families, with unknown distant friends or relatives, or by themselves with occasional adult supervision.

Twenty-one adolescent international students, 13 females and eight males participated in this research. The participants, who either self-selected or were invited by a teacher/counsellor at their schools to participate, identified themselves as Chinese (14), Korean (5), and Japanese (2), hailing from the following countries: Hong Kong (10), Korea (5), Taiwan (3), Japan (2), and Ecuador (1). Participants' primary languages included Cantonese (11), Korean (5), Mandarin (3), and Japanese (2). Their ages ranged between 15 and 18 years and they were enrolled in Grades 9 to 12. Participants had been studying as international students from one to five years with an average of a two-year stay.

## Procedures

The semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit the facilitating and hindering events that participants experienced as important to their transition and adjustment (Chell, 1998; McCormick, 1997). Their narratives were collected in English in a private room at the school they attended, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and each was completed within 50 minutes. Because students were provided a copy of the interview questions in advance, they understood the nature of the interview and had time to think about the incidents that stood out for them. Participants were debriefed at the end of the interview and were offered information about international student transitions, or alternatively, were given school and community counselling or other referrals.

Two parts of the interview were conducted. First, the participants were *oriented* to the research by asking them to reflect upon their arrival and time spent in the country. They were asked to imagine specific and detailed events that impacted their adjustment either positively or negatively. The second part of the interview was where the data was *elicited*. Four specific questions were asked: (a) What happened before the event? (b) What was the event? (c) What was the outcome of the event? (d) Is there anything else that you would like to add? Participants were prompted to recall as many events as they

could during the interview and were asked the four questions about each incident. This process was repeated until participants were finished sharing their stories.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedure based on Flanagan's Critical Incident Method provided a comprehensive and detailed description of student transitions (Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). By providing a description of my data analysis and coding procedures, I intend to provide an audit trail of my work as a way of increasing credibility and confidence in the findings Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans, and Oost (2008) base the quality of an audit on three generic criteria including "visibility (are decisions explicated and communicated?), comprehensibility (are these decisions substantiated?), and acceptability (are the substantiated decisions acceptable according to the standards, values, and norms in the particular research domain?)" (p. 270). In my research, interview transcripts were read several times and then data were organized to reflect the following structure based on Critical Incident Technique guidelines for data collection (Butterfield et al., 2005; McCormick, 1997): (a) the source of the incident, (b) the event, and (c) the outcome of why it was facilitating or hindering. During the second reading of the transcripts, I discarded by crossing out on the page any incomplete or unclear events, such as when a student talked about how his friend went back to their home country and, when asked, stated that made no impact on his own transition one way or the other. Given that I carefully followed the protocol for critical incident interviewing, I was able to capture 352 complete incidents, out of a total of 362 possible incidents. I then wrote each of these 352 incidents onto 4" x 6" index cards (one incident on one card) in the following way:

Facilitating Event:

SOURCE: I talked to my English teacher about my progress.

EVENT: She told me that I had to write in my journal everyday because my writing skills were below average. She was trying to encourage me, but she was also very straightforward about my English.

OUTCOMES: My reading and writing improved with practice  
I felt that my teacher cared about my progress

Once I completed writing out the incidents, I began to develop preliminary categories based on an inductive, thematic analysis process, which is simply a form of pattern analysis or grouping similar concepts together.

During the next stage of the analysis, I met with a senior researcher familiar with the Critical Incident Methodology in order to learn the correct procedure to conduct a thematic analysis. Together, we randomly selected critical incident cards from the 352 cards available, read the incident together, and then discussed what we thought was the main focus of the incident and to create a new category that captured the main idea,

which became the preliminary name of the category. For example, we initially created a category called Family Support for the incident that read: “My mom calmed me down by talking to me for a long time, and telling me not to get so panicked because it was still so early. She told me to stop worrying so much and that things would be okay.” As we went through the cards, we made decisions about whether the particular incident fit into one of the existing categories, or whether a new category needed to be added. Then I continued to place the incidents in this way without the senior researcher’s guidance, until we both felt confident that I was proceeding in a consistent and reliable way.

During the analysis, I renamed some categories to allow for a crisper definition of the category. I continued sorting and progressively refining the categories, until stabilization occurred, which meant that I believed that all incidents were placed in the most relevant category and that nothing needed to be changed. Paradigm cases of each category were specifically studied, since these events represented cases that best exemplified the category due to having the greatest number of defining characteristics for each of the categories in question. Ambiguous or borderline events were held aside until the categories were further refined. At the end of the process, most of the borderline cases easily fell into the clearly defined themes. Although I conducted the majority of the analysis, discussing the categories with another researcher to develop clarity around the definitions and as a validation strategy was very helpful. We agreed on most of the analysis, although in some instances, we needed to discuss slight differences in opinion until we reached consensus. In the end, each theme was found to be appropriate and contained only those events that were relevant.

Additionally, trustworthiness was developed by holding back 10% of the total number of events, or 36 out of 352 events, until the end of the sorting and categorization process (McCormick, 1997). I met with the other researcher for a second meeting and together we checked the coding to ensure that there was consistency both within and across the categories. The 10% or 36 remaining events were categorized into the existing framework without any concerns or changes. Once we both felt satisfied about the analysis, I moved to examine the findings in order to see what the data said about the facilitating and hindering events of unaccompanied minors in Vancouver secondary schools.

## **Findings**

Altogether 17 themes were developed from examining the 352 events which attempted to answer the main research question about what facilitates and hinders adolescent international student transition and adjustment in Vancouver high schools. In this paper, I highlight seven of the themes that I developed from the critical incidents with each theme containing both positive/facilitating events and negative/hindering events. The seven themes presented here represent a subset of the 17 themes found in the original data set and focus on the overriding category of general transition experiences. The second data subset, published elsewhere, focuses on the overriding category of relationality and includes the following five themes: (a) receiving encouragement, (b) appreciating others, (c) being accepted, (d) making friends, and (e) having fun with others (Popadiuk, 2009). The third unpublished data subset focuses on language and academics, specifically exploring: (a) learning English, (b) communicating effectively, (c) speaking

own language, (d) performing well academically, and (e) experiencing less demand at school. Given the substantial amount of data collected for this study, the need to include participant quotations to substantiate the findings, and the desire to focus specifically on the three overriding categories, I made the decision to write three papers so that more in-depth information about each category and the corresponding themes could be included.

### **Theme 1: Making Decisions (9 events)**

Being satisfied with decisions the student has made, making a decision, or having others make decisions for the student are all part of this category. Decisions ranged from deciding to come to Canada to study against parental wishes, to changing schools to be in a semester system, to realizing that one had made a good decision, to not attending classes due to peer pressure. Generally, when the student had some perceived control over the decision making process, gave the decision considerable thought, and the behavior was prosocial in nature, the outcome was facilitating, whereas when other people made the decision or the student made a decision based on negative peer pressure, the outcomes were negative. Positive outcomes of the facilitating critical incidents, included feeling proud, responsible, happy, stronger, independent, and focused. Participant descriptions of facilitating incidents included the following:

I really wanted to study English in Canada. I was the one who made the decision to come to Canada to study. I made this decision by myself without my parents' influence. I had a plan for my future. Now that I am here I know that I made the right decision. I feel independent and focused because of my decision and I want to do my best.

I was taking too many ESL classes at my school. I looked into the different types of schools and then I decided to go to a semester system instead of a year-long system. This allowed me to take regular classes where I could relate to native English speakers instead of taking ESL transition courses. This decision allowed me to start earning credits toward graduation right away. I felt very happy with my decision.

When I started school, I knew that I had made a good decision all by myself. This made me feel proud and responsible for myself.

These participants' quotations emphasize the autonomous nature of the decision-making process, which allowed them to feel in control of the situation and ease the transition stresses. The quotes, furthermore, support Ying's (2001) work that young people from Asian cultures (e.g., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong) also strive toward independence and autonomy, but that the expression of that individuation often looks different than what we may typically see in industrialized, Western, individually-oriented societies (Ying).

On the other end of the continuum, other people made the decision for the student, such as a parent or teacher, and students sometimes made poor decisions based on inadequate information or peer pressure. The outcomes were generally negative and included blaming others, not accepting full responsibility for one's own decisions, being

pressured to make poor decisions by others, or having others take control of the decision-making process. As this participant recounted:

I met some friends who were a bad influence on me. One day I decided to skip out with my new friends and we just hung around at someone's house. We didn't even get into trouble when we went back to school. I thought that there weren't enough rules in Canada. Then I kept skipping out more and more.

This participant recognized at one level that he has actively engaged in poor decision-making when he states, "one day I decided to skip out," but does not fully embrace his own responsibility. Instead, the participant then goes on to blame the new friends, the school, and host country for not having a better system to "catch" and "enforce" students from skipping out.

Assisting students with making good decisions, a task typically taken up by parents, may need to be targeted by school staff as a developmental issue in order to ensure growth and skill develop in this area.

## **Theme 2: Experiencing Dilemmas (18 events)**

This theme dealt with dilemmas in which the student was either directly involved or observed an interaction in which they felt torn or ambivalent about the experience. Participants often tried to decide on a course of action about a dilemma, which created internal confusion. Hindering events dominated this theme; out of 18 discrete events, only two were facilitating. Some of the events included wanting to leave the home-stay, but being afraid to upset parents; watching a school counsellor call in Caucasian students first, although the Chinese students had been waiting longer; seeing an aunt make a mistake while driving, and witnessing other drivers swear at her; working with a group of friends in class who rejected another student who was friendly. In all of the hindering cases, there was often an opportunity for the student to take the initiative and actively address the issue. For example, one participant stated:

My parents had done all the chores and practical stuff for me when I was living at home with them. Then my aunt [homestay] went away for a week and I didn't know what to do. I had to cook my own dinner so I got everything I needed and made myself something. It wasn't very fancy and not as good as my mom cooks, but I felt proud. I felt independent and responsible for myself.

In this instance, the participant faced a dilemma about what to do and how to take care of herself. She initially agonized about whether she should stay with a friend's family, buy fast food every day, or tell her mom that she didn't know what to do; on the other hand, she wondered if she could learn to take care of herself as best as she could during the week her aunt was away without telling anyone. After much deliberation and uncertainty over what may seem like a small issue, she took the initiative and ended up feeling an increased sense of confidence and self-worth.

Typically, however, participants who faced a dilemma chose not to do anything out of fear, uncertainty, or lack of an appropriate role model. In many cases, the dilemmas were created by moral or value conflicts and participants felt uncertain as to what was happening in the moment or how it could be best approached. One person stated:

My aunt and I were driving down the street. My aunt made a mistake while she was driving. I looked around at the other drivers. I saw some of them swearing at my aunt and making rude gestures at her. I felt angry and shocked and scared. I thought that they were very unforgiving toward my aunt.

This student went on to say that the dilemma for her was two-fold: she did not know whether to say something to her aunt about this negative interaction that she felt was based on a racist intention. Internally, she felt stressed about the situation, but she could not bring herself to say anything “nice” to her aunt and she felt silenced into not talking about the meaning of this incident. Secondly, she felt distressed about the event itself and wondered if she would be the recipient of overt racism or discrimination based on her ethnicity. Again, she decided to silence herself about this issue, even though she yearned to talk to her aunt about her feelings. This participant found that these dilemmas significantly set her back in her ability to adjust to the new country and to know which Canadians she could trust. Based on these types of events, teachers and counsellors may want to broach difficult or taboo subjects, such as racism, rather than waiting for the student to take initiative in these kinds of situations.

Many participants shared their dilemmas about their negative homestay situations and how the outcomes of the incidents resulted in feelings of anxiety, depression, fear, loneliness, uncertainty, and homesickness. One participant stated:

I didn’t like my home-stay family. I came home on the bus from school and saw the light on in the house. I just stood outside on the sidewalk for a long time. I didn’t want to go in. I felt very scared and wanted to live somewhere else.

Similarly, another young woman wanted to leave the homestay house because she felt that she was treated worse than all the other children, but was afraid to say anything stating: “My parents have sacrificed so much for me to be here. I don’t want to shame them by making a fuss, but I don’t know how much more stress I can take.” A third participant recalled how her dark and dirty homestay bedroom in the basement made her feel depressed and withdrawn. Although she wanted to make a decision to move out, she said that she “felt trapped and angry” and that she “didn’t know what to do.” Similarly, another participant shared that unexpectedly her homestay mother had come home and stated, “we’re moving to [another municipality], so you’re going to have to take the bus to school.” She felt betrayed and wanted to move to a different homestay, but she felt “uncertain about what to do.” In all of these situations, the student experienced a dilemma about whether to stay in a homestay situation that she felt was negative and creating chronic stress and hardship or to take action by asking the teacher/counsellor at

the school to change his/her living situation. In all cases, participants were afraid to create the perception that they were a “problem student” or to shame their family if they moved. Based on this theme, school districts should have policies regarding homestay situations and school personnel need to find ways of checking in, monitoring the homestays, and providing support to those who are reluctant to talk about what is happening.

### **Theme 3: Receiving Advice or Information (28 events)**

In this theme, another person informed or advised the participant on an issue. Sometimes the information was solicited and sometimes it was not, but the student often learned a new piece of information regardless. This theme did not include encouragement, verbal support, or tangible help. Rather, the focus of the facilitating events lay in a significant other telling the student how to overcome a problem, how to improve their English, what should or should not be done, or what may happen in the future. Outcomes such as feeling confident, proud, relieved, motivated, and guided were common and the participant appreciated and liked the person who shared the information even more after receiving it. One participant shared her story:

My English teacher told me to practice English by watching television, listening to the radio, and reading the newspaper. He really helped me understand how doing these things would benefit me and add to what I was already learning in class. I felt encouraged by this teacher's advice and I started doing what he had told me to do. My English improved a lot.

While explaining how much she appreciated the teacher's advice, she smiled and came alive as she remembered how much this advice had helped her. We can see by this story that the teacher, in one way, fulfilled the role of a caring parent who provides guidance with the intention of enhancing the young person's learning opportunity. Indeed, this advice increased the student's confidence in herself, as well as her trust in her teacher – she felt that he cared about her and what happened to her.

Another participant shared how he wanted to receive advice from his cousins who were already living and studying in Canada. He asked them about the structure and expectations in school here and learned how to navigate the differences:

I was wondering what school was like here so I asked my cousins. They told me that I didn't have to stand up and answer questions in class like back home. They explained how students and teachers interacted and what it was like to be in class here. I felt relieved and less stressed knowing the expectations ahead of time.

Knowing what to expect in advance helped ease the transition of this student, because he no longer had to worry and wonder about what the school system was really like. On the other hand, hindering events included being told they were not allowed to be in certain classes, could not change home-stay situations, were told about stories regarding international students' misfortunes, and learned that they were going to fail if they did not

work harder. Anger, frustration, disappointment, as well as a dislike for the purveyor of information, were likely outcomes, as expressed in this incident:

I wanted to attend university in Canada after I graduated from high school. I asked my teacher if I could work part-time while I was going to university in order to finance it. He told me that I wasn't allowed to work because I am an international student and not a permanent resident or Canadian citizen. I was very shocked and thought it was unfair. I felt uncertain about the future.

Another participant shared information about his own motivation level and how he received unsolicited advice from one of his teachers:

I had been lazy and not doing my homework. My teacher told me that the course was for credit and I'd have to do more work in order to pass. I was surprised and shocked and stressed. I suddenly felt that I had a lot of work to do.

Unfortunately, this participant did not listen to the teacher, and therefore, did not end up with a good grade at the end of the course. Even in the interview, the participant continued to blame the teacher for saying this to him, instead of learning how to take responsibility for his own actions and the subsequent outcomes.

It appears that when participants received timely and accurate information that helped alleviate real or imagined concerns before they came to Canada or during their sojourn, the transition around that particular aspect of their stay was less stressful. This theme highlights how managing student expectations by matching their perceptions to the reality of the situation before they arrived, helped them prepare for and navigate the transition process better. Improved predeparture, ongoing orientation sessions, and mentorship may address some of the concerns brought forth by participants in this theme.

#### **Theme 4: Receiving Help (21 events)**

This theme highlighted events in which the participant was given tangible help that assisted him/her in some way. Most of the events were facilitating in nature and included: a teacher explaining and then helping the student to learn something that he or she did not understand; a friend giving him/her money to go shopping when he/she had nothing to spend; university students tutoring international high school students after school; another student helping with vocabulary and lab work; and being allowed to rewrite a test and ask questions during the test. Feelings of relief, happiness, acceptance, and confidence were common outcomes, and the international students often liked the person who helped them. Three participants fondly retold their stories:

Before I met with my tutor, I expected that he would rush through the work the same way they do back home. When we got together, my tutor helped me to figure out my English homework and he explained it to me very carefully until I understood it. He helped me a lot and I became more



successful in school. I was surprised at all the attention and how much he was able to help. I also felt very pleased with myself.

I was struggling with my work in Chemistry. A Caucasian Canadian girl came over and helped me do the lab by teaching me the vocabulary and working with me until I knew how to do it myself. I felt happy that she was so nice and helpful, and I learned how to do my Chemistry.

I had just arrived in Canada and didn't really know my relatives very well. Then one day I had a very bad pain in my body. The family took me to the doctor right away and then they took me home again. They were asking me all kinds of questions and wanted to help me. I felt happy that they were taking care of me and lucky that I belonged to this family.

The bulk of the events in this theme highlighted the voluntary nature of the assistance or an unexpected helping hand. Participants appreciated these gestures of kindness, patience, and connection, which they reported helped facilitate their transition. The few hindering events occurred when students would like to have received help, but there was no one to help them. This included the desire to have their parents there when they were sick with the flu, or when an explanation in the first language was sought:

I was struggling with learning English and I wanted a translation. I asked my teacher if another teacher or adult in the school could speak Mandarin. I wanted my test explained in my own language so I could understand exactly what I had done wrong. There was no one in the school who could help me with this. I felt very frustrated and thought that each school should have a translator to help the foreign students.

This example was echoed by other students who sometimes required practical assistance from an adult in the school system, such as a translator or cultural worker. Many participants mentioned that having access to at least one teacher in the school who was from their culture and spoke their language would have been very helpful, especially for the initial year given that most reported that the majority of teaching staff was comprised of monolingual Caucasian teachers.

### **Theme 5: Impressed with Environment (9 events)**

This theme captured how the environment, including the city, weather, buildings, or nature affected the international student's adjustment. Eight of the nine events in this theme were facilitating including the beauty of the city parks, mountains and trees, the fresh clean air and bright sunshine, and the grandeur of the public buildings. The outcomes for the facilitating events included feeling proud and lucky to live in the city, feeling happier and healthier than back home, being uplifted and wanting to stay longer, and being impressed. Two participants talked about how the environment impacted them and their sense of well-being:

I was staying with my relatives. When I first arrived on my first day here, they took me out for the day to see special locations. I saw the ocean and forest and even the totem poles in the middle of the park. I thought that Vancouver was absolutely beautiful and I felt lucky to be living here.

I went for a walk in my neighbourhood. I noticed that the air was so fresh here and I kept taking deep breaths. The air felt so good on my face, so clean. Back home, the air is so dirty that it actually makes your face sticky and black. I felt great enjoyment from living here. I knew that I enjoyed a healthier and cleaner lifestyle than at home.

The only negative event that arose in this theme was the cold, dark, and rainy weather that Vancouver is subjected to through much of the winter. Many participants talked with intensity about how much they hated the winter months here. One participant adamantly exclaimed:

I expected that the weather would be warm, but it was always so cold and rainy during the winter. One morning I looked out my window and saw how rainy and dark it was outside. I stayed in bed and didn't want to go to school at all. I felt very sad and just wanted to go home.

Many participants in this study spoke of these issues and how they impacted their transition and adjustment: the beauty and cleanliness of the city and the rainy days of winter. Given that many international students come from warmer climates than found in Canada and the United States, this theme highlights the importance of preparing students in advance about the weather during all seasons and how they can best prepare themselves for rainy winters in temperate or coastal regions. These environmental and geographic factors (sense of place) seem to be common discussion points for international students, but are rarely found in the literature. This theme provides evidence that further research to learn more about how the geography, the physical aspects of the place, and the weather may impact international student adjustment may be relevant.

### **Theme 6: Experiencing Local Annoyances (15 events)**

This theme only contained hindering events focused on the difficulties encountered due to local customs or cultural differences. Most of the items were tangible in nature such as having bags stolen from a public place, experiencing poor service with the transit system, disliking the food and gaining weight because of it, paying 14% taxes at the stores, and experiencing different hygiene practices. Typical outcomes included feeling homesick, disappointed, shocked, angry, bored, and unmotivated, and these events made many of the participants want to go home or yearn for things from home, as suggested by these participants:

I had to take public transit to get around the city. I took the bus from Vancouver to a nearby suburb to visit some friends. It took me 1½ hours

each way. I kept wondering why it was taking so long and why the public transit system was so bad. I felt angry about the wasted time and I never took the bus there again. I wanted a transit system like we had at home.

In Japan, we soap up and shower first, and then take a long, hot bath. The first time I took a shower here, I didn't feel very clean because it was so different than home. I still wanted to soak in water after the shower. I felt homesick and disappointed.

I thought that I'd like to eat Canadian food. My home-stay mother cooked a typical Canadian meal. I started eating the pork chops with gravy, but everything was so oily and it tasted awful. There weren't any vegetables or salad so I asked them to make me a salad. I missed Korean food so much and I thought that Canadian food was oily and awful.

When these participants compared transit, hygiene rituals, and food, they found all three to be lacking in the new cultural context. For example, the first participant complained about Vancouver's transit system and rightfully felt frustrated by the different levels of service, especially for outlying suburban areas. Unfortunately, this problem caused her to limit her contact with friends whom she enjoyed seeing, which in turn, created difficulty in building a strong social support system, a vital component for positive transitions.

Another common issue in this theme arose because many participants were from large, urban cities where there were ample activities all day and well into the evening hours every night of the week. For example, one participant from Hong Kong stated:

I wanted to do some exciting things at night like I did at home, so I went shopping at the mall one night, but there wasn't enough variety in the stores, and nothing exciting to do. I felt bored and disappointed.

Aspects of daily life that seems so simple and taken-for-granted by many Canadians became a point of disappointment and homesickness for these participants. Even things as seemingly simple as shopping or finding activities to do in the evening became major sources of boredom for many students. This theme revolved around the negative impact of different cultural practices that may be more difficult to anticipate or mitigate, and may depend on what kind of services were available to them in their home countries. It is clear that many of the critical incidents are systemic and structural, and thus, may mean that participants may need support in preparing themselves for aspects of the culture that they cannot change (i.e., the transit system).

### **Theme 7: Participating in Activities (21 events)**

This theme dealt with the participants' involvement in extracurricular activities at school or in the community that were regularly scheduled and ongoing. Some of the activities discussed included attending church, conducting volunteer work at school, playing basketball at the community centre, joining school sports teams, including a Dragon Boat team. Participants talked about their sense of belonging and their subjective

sense of well-being associated with particular activities. One participant excitedly recounted, “My teacher introduced me to the basketball team. I joined the school team, went to practices, and played in the games. I really enjoyed playing this sport. I felt involved in school activities and met two new friends.” This student was excited when he talked to me about this personal introduction to this new sport, and perhaps more importantly, a sense of belonging to a team. He related that his involvement over the last year made his transition easier, solidified his sense of identity, made him feel accepted by others, and alleviated most of his homesickness and loneliness that he had experienced during his first year.

Other participants spoke with great enthusiasm about their participation in activities:

I wanted to help other people while I was here. I started doing volunteer work at the neighbourhood house on a regular basis. I felt like I was contributing and had a sense of belonging.

I was finally able to join the school band. We got to go on a field trip to Victoria for a few days and I played my trombone with the other students at Market Square. I felt proud of myself as well as excited and happy.

Again, these participants provide further evidence that becoming involved in extracurricular activities, joining clubs, and becoming involved in the community in which they live was extremely beneficial in their transition and adjustment process. Even though the activity itself was important and prosocial in orientation, the participants spoke most passionately about the people they met, the sense of belonging and acceptance, and a satisfaction in helping others.

Hindering events occurred when participants felt forced to do an activity in which they had no interest or desire, when someone or something else restricted or forbade them from participating, or when they stopped themselves from becoming involved due to fear or lack of time. Asking adults for permission to do something and being denied, having restricted access due to hours or type of entertainment, being told to come straight home and not join extracurricular activities, and not becoming involved in school activities because of too much school work were included in the range of hindering events. One participant said: “I wanted to go out with my friends on the weekends. I asked my uncle every weekend if I could go out to play sports with my friends, but he wouldn’t let me. I felt lonely, sad, and trapped.” Another stated that she “hated going to physical education class” and “would try anything to get out of it.” Two participants shared an almost identical story about their regret in not joining any teams or extracurricular activities:

I made a decision not to join any teams or clubs at school or take part in any extracurricular activities. I regretted my decision later on because I was too focused on school work and was not involved in anything else.

I wanted to study all the time so I could get high marks. I didn’t join any teams or clubs at school or take part in any extracurricular activities at all.

I regretted not becoming involved in other activities because I was too focussed on school work.

In retrospect, both of these participants were able to see that they had not thoroughly considered the implications of their lack of involvement in other activities. At the time when they decided not to join anything, they believed that they did not have time, nor should they take the time away from their language learning and studies. It was only later, after being immersed in the culture that they could speak so openly about missed opportunities in not becoming involved in something outside of academics. Participants who reported involvement in voluntary extracurricular activities found that the transition to Canada was easier and more enjoyable overall; they connected more quickly and easily with diverse people, and reported far fewer problems in adjusting. Some participants shared that they would have been discouraged from or not allowed to be involved in extracurricular activities in their schools back home, due to lack of possibilities, cultural differences about such activities, or a stronger focus on academic work alone. This previous experience negatively impacted their initial openness to becoming involved in Canada.

### **Discussion**

One of the main purposes of this study is to provide school counsellors with empirical data about the transition experience of unaccompanied international students so that they may be better prepared to support them while attending high school in Canada. The results provide a balanced and holistic perspective of the phenomenon of cross-cultural transition and adjustment with a particular focus on the adolescent population. The findings suggest that unaccompanied adolescent international students undergo a complex, multi-layered transition experience. Even seemingly innocuous aspects of the transition, such as weather and geography or the types of activities available, appear to create a positive or negative impact that often has lasting results. This research also points to the fact that the impact of daily life and the ongoing needs of these international students goes far beyond their roles as students and learners. They can be seen as active agents who seek to build connections with intimate partners (Popadiuk, 2008) and new friends, as well as trusted adults who can become mentors. Similar to research on adolescent transition to adulthood (Young, Marshall, Domene, Graham, Logan, Zaidman-Zait, et al., 2008), participants in this research learn to renegotiate their family relationships back home, often shifting from dependent children to young adults learning to take care of themselves. This process of figuring out daily chores, transportation systems, banking, laundry, and the like become an added dimension of responsibility of their sojourn that many domestic students either already know or do not need to learn. Expectations of the adolescent international students' new life, whether realistic or not, sets them up for success or failure. Through this research, we see how international students begin to learn how to make decisions, face dilemmas, seek information, and realize consequences. Developmentally, this is no small task, especially when coupled with living with strangers or alone, learning a foreign language in a completely different school structure, and coming to terms with the extra struggles associated with crossing cultures, such as loneliness, homesickness, anxiety, or depression.

The data from this research also highlights the strengths of these students. There is ample evidence to suggest that these young sojourners face multiple, significant challenges head-on when they become determined to make the best of a situation. When they are not sure about which direction to turn, many of them seek out information and support from a trusted source. They make an active choice towards helping themselves, rather than giving up or bowing to negative influences. Given their younger age, fewer coping strategies, and more vulnerable status, these unaccompanied minors appear to develop and grow in response to their context and relationships, in ways that may have been impossible had they remained in their home countries. Despite their resiliency, it is nonetheless incumbent upon schools to provide adequate support to assist these students during their sojourn. The importance of knowledgeable, skilled, and culturally responsive school counsellors with a positive attitude toward culturally diverse students cannot be underestimated when working with this segment of the school population.

### **Implications for School Counsellors**

The key purpose of this paper is to share the findings of this research with school counsellors who work with international students. The reason for this focus is to highlight the key role that school counsellors play in creating a welcoming, supportive, and relevant host environment for international students. Although others may find this research helpful, such as school administrators, the students' parents and homestay parents, or international students themselves, the intention of this paper is to focus on school counsellors who are in the unique position of assisting international students emotionally, socially, and academically. The following outlines three major areas that school counsellors may consider for their practice.

### **Assess the Multiple Layers of Transition**

This research highlights how adolescent international students experience multiple, complex layers of transition over time. School counsellors are encouraged to consider the major overlapping aspects of crossing cultures including the students' developmental changes, language acquisition challenges, the context of their living arrangements, relational connections and disconnections, and academic functioning. According to Wadsworth and his colleagues (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), identity is a multilayered concept including four integrated frames: (a) personal identity – classic notions of self-concept inside the person, (b) enacted identity – communication with others, (c) relational identity – co-created with another person through roles and social interaction, and (d) communal identity – ascribed by society. These authors discuss how international students may experience identity gaps when in an unfamiliar context. For example, international students may prefer lecture to discussion in classes, which may force them to express themselves in unfamiliar ways others may hold stereotypes of how they should or should not act. In both cases, international students may suddenly become aware that previous ways of being themselves and interacting with others are less valued or less relevant in the current context. Bumping up against other people's expectations can be surprising and disconcerting, and often has the outcome of forcing the person to reflect upon the new roles, identity, and interactions in which he or she is cast.

Therefore, school counsellors who recognize the complexity associated with cross-cultural transitions and the changing nature of multiple identities will be more likely to approach these students from a more holistic, compassionate, and understanding perspective. Participants in this research noted that when school counsellors primarily responded to them as any other student in an academic setting, they missed a significant part of what was happening behind the scenes. Specifically, students were constantly negotiating multiple transition realities, many of which domestic students were not experiencing, including significant changes in academic systems and expectations; major changes in friendships and family support; new expectations around living conditions and level of autonomy; and a change in diet and physical environment that often impacted the person's physical health. At the same time, their sense of identity in this new context was often undergoing considerable flux, which put students at higher risk for falling in with the wrong crowd, failing to perform academically, or experiencing mental health concerns. School counsellors who were knowledgeable and demonstrated caring about international student experiences created a stronger bond with students, a finding that is supported in the literature (Popadiuk, 2009). Participants in this research spoke of a greater willingness to access support from school counsellors when they were connected with them from the beginning and had the sense that the counsellor really cared about them and knew them as people, and not just as international students.

School counsellors with a deep conceptualization of the multiplicity of issues and the idea of identity as fluid and contextual will be able to bring a deeper understanding and sense of compassion toward student issues and concerns. Counsellors who are able to empathize with the common and unique concerns of the international students from a more holistic perspective will be perceived to be more genuine and authentic people who care about their students. Furthermore, envisioning transition as a multilayered and complex phenomenon may provide school counsellors with a more realistic vision when developing and implementing strategies to facilitate the many changes facing these students.

### **Develop a Proactive Multilevel Approach**

By creating an ongoing, multilevel proactive approach to supporting unaccompanied international students, school counsellors will be supporting both individual students and creating more positive school communities overall. When school counsellors make it a priority to implement strong programs such as those based on prevention and a focus on positive psychology (Akin-Little, Little, & Delligatti, 2004; Jenson, Olympia, Farley, & Clark, 2004), a more positive school climate is possible for all students. Research supports the finding in this research of developing a comprehensive, developmental school counselling program (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). These researchers found that a successful program often hinged more upon the school counsellor's vision than the counsellor's role and function. In this research, there was evidence to support counsellors in developing a comprehensive school counselling program that includes a specific focus on international students. Part of the success seems to be that such a program demonstrates the importance of accepting and supporting people from diverse contexts, integration of those who may be different than the

mainstream school community and a commitment to supporting students who may initially be at higher risk for failure or mental health concerns.

Participants in this research who attended different schools reported varying levels of organized support. Those who attended schools where there was one primary international student teacher-advisor or school counsellor actively engaged with students on a regular basis reported higher levels of satisfaction with the school and their experience. These findings point to the importance of the school counsellor's commitment to take political leadership. More specifically, school counsellors must be ready to advocate for improved counselling policies at the school and board levels for the benefit of all students, but especially for international students who may not fall under traditional policies or may be restricted by policies that are not supported by empirical data. Rather than maintaining outdated or irrelevant mandates, school counsellors can work to change the status quo so they can use their specialized training to create strong comprehensive school counselling programs that give them more direct time working with students, especially those who may be potentially marginalized.

The participants in this research reported that when the school counsellor became involved and engaged in their lives and set-up regular meetings and activities, they felt more connected, satisfied, and were more willing to talk to the counsellor about personal issues throughout their stay. Participants who spoke about developing successful connections with teachers, counsellors, and other students were usually engaged in regular meetings where they came together to share stories of their transition, played games and had fun getting to know each other, and went on field trips in the surrounding community. Those students who reported that they would talk to the school counsellor about personal issues specified that the counsellor was actively involved in the international student program. This close connection allowed students the opportunity to trust the counsellor; this trust allowed the student to approach the counsellor for personal challenges as issues arose throughout their sojourn, rather than suffering in silence, as many students reported in this and other studies (Moores & Popadiuk, in press; Popadiuk, 2009). The idea that trusted adults in the school community may take on more of a parental role – advising, supporting, encouraging, caring about, knowing – was evident in this research.

### **Develop Multicultural Counselling Competencies**

This research provides evidence that professional school counsellors who are culturally aware, knowledgeable, and skilled in working with adolescent international students can become important adult resources. This finding is consistent with other research that showed that counsellors with high levels of multicultural self-efficacy were more likely to believe that they had the ability to understand culturally diverse concepts, to challenge barriers that could impede student achievement, and to be satisfied working with students from different cultures (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Edston, 2008). Other researchers argue that counsellors must be trained in the multicultural competencies if they want to be practicing ethically (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004). The mandate in the field of multicultural counseling is clear: school counsellors need to be aware of and skilled in working with the wide range of diversity issues, such as gender,



ethnicity, ability levels, social class, and sexual orientation (Arthur & Popadiuk, in press; Popadiuk, 2004).

The current research highlights the importance of school counsellors who have a specific, detailed, and concrete understanding about the unique concerns of adolescent international students and their multifaceted experiences. From the perspective of the participants, school counsellors who were culturally knowledgeable, especially those with a particular foundation in international student issues were highly valued. Additionally, counsellors who were engaged and actively involved with the students became well respected adults, sought-after mentors, and trusted allies. Participants often mentioned the importance of adults who were interested in their cultural backgrounds and country of origin and found that when counsellors could relate in an appropriate, respectful, and personal manner to students about crossing cultures, transition issues, and the challenges they must be facing at times, the students usually eagerly listened to their words and felt validated and supported in their struggles. From these findings, school counsellors who are well-versed in the major issues associated with adolescent international students went far in the eyes of participants toward building connections and providing support.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are limitations to this study. First, my role as an adult English speaking third generation Canadian with Northern and Eastern European ancestry may have affected the participants' openness to share certain kinds of sensitive information. They may have perceived me as an authority figure, like a teacher, which may have hampered their disclosures, despite the care to address the power differential and to clarify my role and intentions. Alternatively, they may have also seen me as a "white woman" who was an outsider to their Asian cultures, languages, and experiences. Future researchers may decide to interview outside of the school setting for added comfort and distance from appearing to be a school authority. An interrelated limitation was the exclusion criteria that required participants to speak enough English in order to participate. The reason for this was that participants needed enough language capabilities to share their stories with an English speaking researcher. It would be important to discern what differences, if any, might appear in research conducted by future researchers of the same cultural, ethnic, and language background when they interview international students. Although students appeared to be forthcoming in this research, a commentary on the relational aspect of research, future interviews in their preferred, primary language may provide additional information that captures the fullest account of their experiences because the research may be perceived as an "insider" by being of the same ethnic and cultural background who can better distinguish the subtle nuances associated within the culture. A third limitation is that this study does not use a critical lens to explore diversity issues, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class. Future researchers in this area may choose a feminist perspective in order to capture the subtleties of power, privilege, and discrimination with this population group. This lens would add a valuable contribution to the body of existing international student literature given the paucity of feminist perspectives. Finally, participants primarily self-selected or agreed based on an open invitation by a trusted teacher/counsellor. Thus, other student voices, for example, those who were

particularly shy or averse to authority figures or who did not perceive their English to be good enough were not part of the data set. For example, students who had withdrawn from the international student program were not included.

### Conclusion

This research with 21 unaccompanied Asian international students allows counsellors and researchers to learn directly from the students' own experiences. These adolescent participants learned how to become more independent in their roles as student, international sojourner, friend, and homestay family member, and they shared invaluable lessons about their resiliency and perseverance, despite multiple transitional issues. The strength of the individual mind and spirit in overcoming obstacles and difficulties was evident in their persistent attempts to negotiate a culture and language so different from their own. This research provides specific, concrete details about many aspects of life that both facilitated and hindered international student transition and adjustment. Using the findings from this research may assist school counselors to more effectively assess the multiple layers of the transition experience, develop a multilayered proactive approach to school programming, and become more culturally competent in working with adolescent international students.

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