A phenomenological study of third culture kids' perceptions of international school climate over time

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, the demand for international schools has increased worldwide, with expectations to sustain this momentum through the next decade. While these schools struggle with many of the same issues as others in the west, the different context in which they exist brings an additional layer that needs more understanding. This interpretative phenomenological study explored the experience of school climate over time through the lenses of third culture kids who attended the school at which they are now employed. Eight employees from one international school in Malaysia were selected and interviewed to explore school climate factors that impacted their lives as students, changes in school climate over time, and ways they now perpetuate that school climate as employees. Three themes emerged as influential factors of change to the school climate over time: (a) community through relationships, (b) school connectedness, and (c) diversity. The scope of the experiences of school climate development over time adds a unique perspective not found in previous literature and provides insight into aspects of school climate that leave a lasting impact on students. International school leaders can also gain insight into the importance of continually assessing school climate and the value of providing opportunities to build community through engaging experiences.

Keywords: Diversity, International schools, Leadership, School climate, School connectedness, Third culture kids.

Highlights of this paper
- International schools share the closeness of community through a unique third culture.
- A perceived positive school climate fosters a depth of commitment and connectedness.
- Planned student experiences cultivate positive school climate perception.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization in the 21st century has led to a "new era" of international schooling (Bunnell, 2019). In fact, what was once a small segment of schools developed from families' needs to provide a western-style education for their children is now a growing segment of schools catering to the Global Middle-Class (Bunnell, 2019). From 2002 to 2012, international students worldwide tripled from 1 million in 2002 to over 3 million in 2012 (Savva, 2013), and research from the International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) predicted the number to reach 6 million with the number of staff growing to over 500,000, and the annual income obtained from tuition and fees to reach almost $60 million (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2013). With this trajectory, Bunnell (2019) predicted the field would require an annual growth of 60,000 new teachers between 2022 and 2027.

While international schools struggle with many of the same issues as those in the west, the context of being in a different country with multicultural staff and students creates different needs. Researchers have highlighted that there is more to understand about teacher and administrative retention (Mancuso, Roberts, & White, 2010; Odland & Ruzicka, 2009; Tkachyk, 2017), teacher and student transitions (Bunnell, 2006; Morales, 2015), academic achievement (Bunnell, 2006), effective leadership (Bunnell, 2006), and student and staff care (Halicioglu, 2015). As international schools are established at a compounded growth rate across the world and are expected to sustain that growth into the 2030s, there is an urgent need to continue exploring the specific factors and needs of the education system particular to these schools (Bunnell, 2019).

Since the early 1970s, one way to understand a school's effectiveness has been to examine school climate (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991), commonly described as the school's personality. More formally, Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) described school climate as "the quality and character of school life . . . based on patterns of people's experiences of school life [reflecting] norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (p. 182). Research has indicated that a positive school climate could have a high impact on student achievement (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009), job satisfaction (Ghavifekr & Pillai, 2016), and self-efficacy for teachers and students (Imants & Zoelen, 1995), as well as teacher retention (Cohen et al., 2009). Influential school leaders understand the role of school climate and the importance of developing one that is healthy (Hamit, 2018; MacNeil et al., 2009); however, while this has been highly researched in the United States, little research exists on this phenomenon in international schools and particularly on students' perceptions.

Many students who attend international schools are referred to as third culture kids (TCKs). A TCK is a "person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture" (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). These students spend their childhoods in different cultures, creating a struggle for them to find a home. They are often rootless and struggle with belonging (Pascoe, 2006). For these students, a school can become a place of security, heightening the importance of school climate. Meyer (2015) research on the boundaries and restrictions of mobility within international schools recognized that international school communities develop an inclusivity that provides identity to the student that is more centered on the school culture than even the local culture. TCKs who return "home" to their international school for employment have a rare experience of school climate, so investigation of the phenomenon of returning TCKs as employees can provide insights into the value of the impact of school climate.

2. BACKGROUND

Pioneered by Halpin and Croft (1963) and their development of the *Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire* (OCDQ), school climate research began in the early 1960s. Their research determined that school climate consists of two main elements: the principals' leadership and teachers' interactions. They found the amalgamation of leadership and teacher behavior produces the organizational climate for the school. While a manageable instrument that has provided a plethora of research on school climate since its conception, Silver (1983) later noted that the OCDQ and the conceptual work behind it were in their developmental infancy when it was captured, leaving much room for its continual evolution in helping understand interpersonal behaviors in schools. Building on this, Silver (1983) contended that the key to understanding diverse school climates is understanding the reciprocal relationship between leadership and group dynamics. As the research of diverse school climates progressed, the following overlapping themes emerged in the literature as significant to monitoring school climate: (a) leadership, (b) order and safety, (c) social relationships and school connectedness, (d) commitment of staff, and (e) academic outcomes (Ramsey, Spira, Parisi, & Rebok, 2016; Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2018; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). These themes are essential drivers of positive perceptions of school climate and overall school satisfaction (Zullig et al., 2011).

2.1. Leadership

From the beginning of Halpin and Croft (1963) research, the connection between leadership style and school climate has been evident. Through both direct and indirect influence, the principal mediates the organizational climate derived from community pressure for academic achievement, the commitment of teachers, and resource support (Hoy & Hannum, 1997).

Multiple researchers (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Garcia, 2018; Guinta, 2020; McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016; Wang, Deng, Li, Dong, & Jiao, 2019) found transformational leadership to be connected to healthy organizational school climates. For example, McCarley et al. (2016) study of 399 teachers in five large schools in Texas found a statistically significant relationship between transformational leadership and several factors of school climate. For instance, they found idealized attributes of a leader ($\gamma_{10} = 0.056$, t = 15.20, $p < 0.001$) and a leader's inspirational motivation ($\gamma_{10} = 0.054$, t = 11.122, $p < 0.001$) to be strongly related to the school climate dimension of supportive behavior.

2.2. Order and Safety

Another theme of school climate is order and safety. For positive school culture, it is important that students and teachers feel safe. Teachers who provide clarity and predictable class routines help develop school satisfaction (Ingemarson, Rosendahl, Bodin, & Birgegård, 2020; Zullig, Koopman, & Huebner, 2009). Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) examined the connections between classroom behavioral strategies and school climate perceptions of 1902 elementary students, finding data that supported their hypothesis that proactive and positive systems lead to a positive perception of school climate. In contrast, exclusionary strategies for classroom management produced a more negative perception (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Overall, students' feelings of safety and security in the classroom were positively correlated with school climate factors.

2.3. Social Relationships and School Connectedness

Relationships provide an avenue for building commitment and overall connectedness to the school from all stakeholders (Angus & Hughes, 2017). In a long-term study of the effectiveness of mentoring programs for 214 high

school juniors, Angus and Hughes (2017) found that mentoring programs allowed for the development of relationships and created students who were significantly more optimistic about the school climate and felt more connected. The more teachers and students felt they belonged to the school and associated it with solid relationships, the more positive the school climate.

Similar to how school leadership affects teachers' perceptions of school climate, teachers' roles in leading the classroom and developing relationships with students are important to their perceptions of school climate. When students see that teachers have enthusiasm for school activities, commitment to helping students, and mutual respect among their peers, these attitudes become infectious, spreading to the student body (Silver, 1983).

Long and Eamoraphan (2015) discovered that teacher relationships and their perceived fairness with students were the best predictors for high student satisfaction with their school. To accomplish this, Koth et al. (2008) had previously proposed that interventions to improve school climate should raise mutual understanding and awareness of culturally aligned expectations in schools. In their research of students' perception of school climate, Read, Aldridge, Ala'i, Fraser, and Fozdar (2015) observed that one way to build relationships was to provide a more inclusive school climate through a whole-school intercultural approach where all students were treated equally.

2.4. Commitment of Staff

Another aspect of a healthy school climate is the commitment levels of teachers. In a school with a favorable climate, teachers like each other, are enthusiastic about work, are proud of their school, and are committed to teaching and learning (Hoy, 1990). In their study of 664 K-12 public school teachers to determine if school climate and social-emotional learning impacted teacher commitment, Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2011) observed that school climate played a significant role in predicting teacher commitment both to their profession and the organization. Additionally, in a multi-level analysis of 399 high school teachers from multiple schools using the leadership and organizational climate questionnaire, McCarley et al. (2016) highlighted that positive school climate and principal leadership served as indicators of teachers' engagement, while O'Donnell (2018) found that the school climate allows for the shaping of teachers' beliefs and attitudes that affect the implementation of programs and how teachers utilize and engage with those programs.

2.5. Academic Outcomes

The final theme of school climate is its relationship to academic outcomes. Hoy and Hannum (1997) study of 86 middle schools found that dimensions of school health were positively associated with student achievement. More recently, using cross-lagged panel autoregressive modeling to explore the causal link between school climate, school violence, and academic performance over time for approximately 85% of all public middle and high school districts in California, Benbenishty, Astor, Roziner, and Wrabel (2016) suggested that improving academic outcomes is an engine of change for school climate.

3. METHODOLOGY

Responding to the call from Tarc and Mishra Tarc (2015) to engage with the experiences of the constituents of the international school community and Bunnell (2019) call for more understanding of the images of reality in an under-reported and under-theorized field of education, three research questions arose from a review of the literature.

RQ[1]: What effect does school climate have on the career choices of TCK students who returned as adults to work for the school?

RQ[2]: What are the perceived changes in participants' school climate over time?

RQ³: How do TCKs who attended and are now employed by the same school describe the impact of being a student at this school in continuing the school's climate?

3.1. Research Design

To understand the lived experiences of school climate, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected, allowing for the development of a co-constructed understanding from multiple perspectives through open dialogue between the researcher and the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). With the aim of exploring the depths of a person's lived experience and depending on broad and open questioning, the researcher becomes the instrument as they consider how to outline the interview questions to provide descriptive, reflective, and focused accounts on the participant's personal experience.

In completing qualitative research, determining how to preserve validity is an ongoing debate. Vagle (2018) contended that one way to look at validity for phenomenological research is by examining the researcher's engagement with the phenomenon and the participants throughout the research process. Husserl (1970) bracketing approach is foundational and more recently, phenomenological researchers have wrestled with the need to maintain reduction, while allowing oneself to exist as part of the process. In this vein, Dahlberg (2006) proposed the technique of bridling, defined as a process "that not only takes care of the particular pre-understanding, but the understanding as a whole" (p. 16). This research took the reflective, open stance of bridling.

3.2. Setting and Participants

This study took place at one international school in Malaysia that is over 90 years old and was started by a mission organization to serve missionary families. The school grew from a student body of 3 in the 1920s to around 700 students in 2021. The school provides an accredited American-based college-prep curriculum for preschool through grade 12 and a boarding program for students in grade 6 through grade 12. From a self-study, the student body is diverse, with students representing over 23 countries, with the United States, Malaysia, and Korea making up the largest representation. Fifteen potential participants were identified who were employed by the same school they attended as students. They self-identified as TCKs, meaning they had lived a significant time away from their home country. To manage potential limitations, five participants were excluded either by not working at the school for more than one year or being under the researcher's direct supervision. The remaining 10 were sent emails with invitations to participate; eight responded affirmatively.

Spanning the school's history, two respondents attended the school in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, one in the 1990s, and three in the 2000s. Six of the respondents were male and two were female. As students, six of the respondents were part of the school's boarding program and two attended as traditional day students. The respondents' positions at the school varied with four staff members, two teachers, and two administrators. The respondents had all been employed at the school for at least five years, with two serving for more than 10 years.

3.3. Data Collection

Face-to-face semi-structured digitally recorded interviews were used as the primary data collection source followed by the recording of observations, notes, and reflections through the use of journaling. This journaling acted as an avenue for bridling, allowing the researcher to engage with the findings from the *emic* perspective.

3.4. Data Analysis

Vagle (2018) approach to a whole-part-whole analysis and the Dedoose qualitative software version 9.0.18 were selected to support the coding process and limit bias. Using this program, the respondents' demographics were recorded and used for segmenting the data and the interview transcripts were analyzed using open coding. Next, through axial coding, the open codes were grouped into categories. Finally, by connecting the open codes and categories, the themes emerged through selective coding to form relationships relating to the research questions. During the data analysis of the interview transcripts, the focus was on maintaining an *etic* viewpoint while reserving the research journal and memoing to allow for the *emic* viewpoint to exist.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical practices were interwoven throughout the entire research process. After appropriate approvals were obtained, informed consent from the voluntary participants was gathered. Throughout the research process, participants were assured confidentiality as names did not appear in the notes, nor was the school's name identified.

4. RESULTS

In comparing past and present experiences of school climate, the following three themes emerged: (a) community through relationships, (b) school connectedness, and (c) diversity.

4.1. Community through Relationships

The first theme that emerged in the analysis process was the value of community through relationships. Seven of the eight respondents highlighted community as part of the school's identity. When sharing essential characteristics of the school's past and present, Respondent 8 expressed, "the community was probably the key thing." Similarly, Respondent 3 shared that as a student, "the school is very close, like it was a very close-knit community." Respondent 2 experienced a "strong sense of community among the staff."

The community was also seen as an area that is presently changing. Respondent 3 said, "the community feel[s] that[what] they talk about now was more real [in the past] than what it is now" and Respondent 1 shared that due to the increase of the school population a "difference may be that there's just not as tight a community." Respondent 6 described the changing community that now "people have a life beyond the school …. Back in the day, there wasn't an opportunity to have a life outside the school. For us, we were it, the only people [besides the locals] that you could choose for community." Trying to hold on to the past community through their current actions, Respondent 7 expressed a desire to "walk with people, care for people as they minister to their classes, empower them, [and] equip them to do it well .… Maybe that promotes more of a family-style atmosphere."

Through descriptions of significant relationships, the respondents described the community. As students, the respondents valued the relationships developed with both teachers and classmates. As employees, they described ways in which they perpetuated this aspect of the school climate.

4.1.1. Student-Teacher Relationships

For all respondents, a common adjective used to describe their past experience with teachers was "caring." Respondent 1 shared that "one of the clearest things for me was the teachers . . . they were very caring, you can see that they cared about us." Respondent 6 recalled that.

I remember one of the teachers . . . . And we spent way too much time in his classroom after school, but he was hilarious; he was encouraging. He ended up buying all of these off-road mountain bikes and taking kids out into the field out by the school . . . . we had really pretty amazing teachers.

For respondents who attended the school with parents on staff, the insular nature of the school community created an environment where teachers were like family. As staff kids, they would spend holidays and summers with teachers. For example, Respondent 8 shared, "During a lot of the summers a lot of the staff kids would hang out and we would do vacations with other staff families … so they kind of became aunts and uncles and we called them that".

Showing the impact of such close connections, Respondent 2 shared that "some staff legitimately were like my family . . . . [and they further expressed,] It's one of the reasons I chose to become a teacher because I had such positive experiences with my teachers growing up." Similarly, Respondent 1 further recalled that "throughout my years with all the different teachers that I had, I always had really great teachers, and I felt like that helped me become the person I am today . . . from all their influence." Likewise, Respondent 4 described the impact of a specific teacher,

He was really phenomenal; he is why I'm here at [the school] at this time. His class was . . . confidence building for me. I think probably my greatest strength is being a critical thinker and that class really confirmed this is something you need to focus on in your life.

From the experiences shared, the caring and invested teachers did have an impact on the perception of school climate.

In understanding the respondents' roles in current school life as an employee, developing relationships with students was a common theme. Six of the eight respondents shared that they are in some form of mentoring relationship with students today. For example, Respondent 2 indicated that "mentoring relationships . . . has been a really meaningful way to connect with kids and just one of the reasons I wanted to be a teacher." And Respondent 3 explained,

The relationships that we built by pouring into those kids that are now adults with jobs and are missionaries in different countries now, we can see what effect we were able to have.

Similarly, Respondent 1 enjoyed the opportunities "to get to know students" and hoped to "be a teacher that they [students] appreciate like I appreciated my teachers" and Respondent 4 wanted to return to the school "to encourage students in the way that I was supported and encouraged."

Respondents 2, 3, 5, and 6 all expressed that in coaching sports they were part of as a student was a way of building relationships. Respondent 2 shared, "that team culture that I loved so much, I really want to see it replicated in the teams that I have coached . . . that was special to be a part of on the adult side." Likewise, Respondent 6 chose to coach to "do something outside of school . . . to make connections with [students] in the high school division. The value of relationships experienced as students impacted the respondents as adults in the types of relationships in which they invested.

4.1.2. Student-Student Relationships

The childhood experience of being TCKs or outsiders to the local culture, the school community was the primary source of social relationships. This was especially true during the earlier years of the school when it was mainly a boarding school. Respondent 5's description of student life was that it "wasn't very engaged with the outside community at all. It was pretty much we're here together at this place." From this, the experience for the respondents was that the friendships formed were deep and meaningful. Respondent 8 shared that the "majority of my lifelong friends were all from high school because we grew up together, did life together." There was also a deep level of relationships in the grade-level groups. The smaller class size influenced these relationships.

An environment conducive to building student relationships impacted the respondents' attitudes toward schools in general. Respondent 5 delineated the difference between coming from a public school, "the experience of being in a school where I didn't have a lot of close friends, I didn't care about school, then coming to a place and made friends really quickly … that was the stark contrast."

Currently, as adults working with students and watching their relationships, three respondents were concerned that the growth the school had experienced in recent years was a hindrance to student relationships. In Respondent 8's work as a class sponsor, they expressed, "to help classes gel together was not easy now that the classes have gotten pretty large, they have turn[ed] cliquey." Similarly, Respondent 1 noted, "I'm not sure how tight classes are since I am not a student …. I think it might be more separate groups rather than the class as a whole coming together."

4.1.3. National Staff Relationships

There are usually two groups of employees in international schools: the national or local staff and the expatriate staff. Most jobs for national staff are typically for the non-academic side of the school, whereas expatriate staff are generally hired for more of the academic side of the school, such as teachers and administrators. For several respondents, the dichotomy in the relationship between these two communities has widened from the past to the present.

For several respondents, the national staff was remembered as more integrated into the whole school staff community. Respondent 5 recalled, "The national staff was like family. They were people that had been working at the school for 20-30 years. Most of the staff knew the national staff by their first name." Some respondents remembered working alongside national staff to improve the campus in the summer, while others recalled national staff participating in events like afternoon tea. The relationships formed were more profound than just work relationships. An example of a favorite experience shared by Respondent 6 as a staff member's child was "going to a lot of weddings for the Indian staff and Chinese staff."

Respondent 6 reflected on differences from the past and noted that presently, "I don't think that they [national staff] may be respected as much as they were [in the past]. I feel like they were a little bit more part of what we did or a part of our lives." While navigating this divide is challenging, Respondent 5 noted that it results from the school's growth.

That's changed . . . . that comes with size. It comes with turnover. There's national staff right now that I didn't even know they worked at our school, but I don't know how . . . we could have avoided that with just the fact that we grew in size, and we hired more national staff.

Unlike Respondents 5 and 6, Respondent 7 commented that "how expatriate treat national staff" is an area of the school that hasn't changed from the past. The respondent went on to explain,

When I was attending, I would say colonialism . . . had been recent enough in [Malaysia's] history that there was still a lot of that influence. And I still see some of that influence today. I'd just like to see us be a little more proactive, breaking some of those barriers in international schools.

4.2. School Connectedness

The second theme, school connectedness, was seen through the value given to student activities and school traditions. In the past, these activities were fond memories that connected them to the school. Presently, the respondents contribute time to maintain many of the activities and are concerned about the demand for academic excellence overtaking these areas for both staff and students.

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The common thread of specific student activities was highlighted as valued experiences during their time as a student. Boarding program activities, sports, and the junior class were among the more commonly cited favorite memories (see Table 1).

Table 1. Favorite experiences.

Experience	Number of respondents
Boarding program activities	6
Sports	6
Junior class	5
Junior senior banquet (JSB)	3
Traveling for sports	3
Senior trip	3
Graduation traditions	3
Playing on campus	2
Student led worship/Spiritual emphasis week+	2
Student leadership (Ex-com)	2
Class parties/Events	2

The boarding program was a resonating experience that was connected to the overall school experience. There was a sense of freedom in being away from their parents and being part of the dorms. Respondent 3 compared the experience of living in the dorm to the book, *Lord of the Flies.* It was described by Respondent 7 as having a "summer camp vibe," noting that "school was sort of a necessary evil that interfered with dorm life." Respondent 7 also recalled,

My senior year, one of the teacher's sons . . . asked if he could live in the dorm for his senior year so that he wouldn't miss out on a lot of the school activity, because they [school life and boarding program] were so intertwined.

For six of the respondents, sports were a favorite memory. The smaller school size required them to participate in all the offered sports to be able to field a whole team. "We did all our practices together; it was basically the same group of guys on the volleyball, basketball, and soccer team," Respondent 7 stated. Likewise, Respondent 2 explained, "the school needed everybody to do everything, like play soccer and basketball." The team-building experience of playing together and traveling to tournaments was a highlight. Respondent 3 expressed, "sports were always a great thing. Everyone was really into sports and going to KL [Kuala Lumpur] to play in tournaments."

In many of the experiences mentioned, the value shared about events connected back to developing relationships. There was a level of team building that rooted them in the school. The junior class program requires students to fundraise and plan the end-of-year junior-senior banquet (JSB). Respondent 1 recalled,

I definitely remember . . . working together as a [junior] class and putting on a big event. The next year as a senior, it was great to attend JSB, but I think the more impactful thing was actually putting on a JSB.

Similarly, Respondent 8 stated, "I have a lot of great memories of putting them [school events] on and being part of different parts of planning them." Even working on campus painting and building retaining walls was impactful. Respondent 7 stated, "back then we had to work hours every semester; we would have to work for the school; it was enjoyable because you were doing that with your friends."

Other favored experiences mentioned were student-led worship and Spiritual Emphasis Week (SEW). Respondent 4 remarked, "the most impactful thing for me was the Wednesday night student-led worship time . . . . I was choosing to do something on my own for my spiritual life and that changed my whole outlook on life. Respondent 3 appreciated how "SEW would shake us all back into shape and get us back on track."

Present day, the respondents now help keep these activities and traditions alive as employees. They serve in roles above their job descriptions to coach sports teams, sponsor the junior class, plan graduation, and lead worship. Respondent 2 valued being able to invest: "it is so rewarding, especially because, like, my sponsors when I was in high

school, were so great and we love them so much, and you had such a good class culture." Respondent 8 expressed that they sponsored the junior class three times because "they [junior year] were great times that I remember as a student, and so it was to be part of that again."

The percentage of the student body participating in the boarding program has decreased over the past 50 years. Respondent 7 emphasized, "We [the school] are no longer a boarding school . . . . the type of school that I went to growing up." However, the school's administrators make financial decisions knowing the impact of certain aspects of student life. For example, from a business perspective, the boarding program could be seen as not worth the cost to subsidize. However, the administrators know the program's more profound value in positively impacting the school climate and choose to sustain the program financially. Respondent 5 described the importance of supporting a small boarding program when they stated, "even though it's quite . . . small . . . it sets the tone of the campus as a home."

However, with the growth of the school and the internal drive to be academically competitive, tension has developed in balancing traditional experiences with increasing options and higher academic expectations for students. The number of activities and courses students could be part of increased, while simultaneously, the level of excellence that these activities required also increased. The perception that school life is no longer as relaxed, but a more stressful academic setting, was concerning to many respondents. As Respondent 4 stated, "the climate of the school has changed from being a little loose and casual . . . to like now you're going to the school for academics." Respondent 7 noticed that the school changed from a "family atmosphere to more of an institutional atmosphere." Similarly, Respondent 4 wondered what was potentially lost in the increased academic rigor.

So, I think that kids who are more academically minded are less likely to see the value in the extracurricular things that made [the school] unique . . . . When I was a student, there was a lot of real funky teachers here who did real interesting, unique things . . . . That's not true now, because I think even teachers are under more pressure to get through this curriculum . . . with less room to exercise their quirks like when I was a student.

The respondents' perspectives reveal that balancing activities and academics is a source of continued tension as the school grows and evolves.

4.3. Diversity

In the 2000s, the school made the official structural change from being a missionary boarding school to an international Christian school. Two strategic turning points transpired: (a) in 2000, the school became independent from the mission organization to which it was attached; and (b) the government began allowing national students to attend. From the 1970s until now, the school has grown, with most of the growth happening since 2000, when it expanded from 200 to 700 students. With this growth, the third theme, diversity, emerged.

In its earlier years when the school was comprised mainly of students in its missionary boarding school, the community was described by Respondent 5 as being "ethnocentric, white evangelical Christian students and community." Respondent 3's description of the community was that "everybody was a Christian, everyone's a believer . . . their parents were missionaries, we had only one business kid in the dorm."

As a result of school growth, the current student and staff demographics changed dramatically, going from a homogeneous student and teacher population to a community with more cultural, religious, and social-economic diversity. Respondent 6 noted, "the student population has kind of changed; the needs have changed." This change was seen by respondents as a source of tension that the school is currently navigating. Respondent 8 commented, "There's definitely more people with different opinions [and] different worldviews, which makes it a little more difficult at times for some of the Christian students, as well as difficult for the non-Christian students." Similarly, Respondent 4 elaborated,

It's trying to attract a wider audience, in terms of the full spectrum of kids from anywhere . . . . It seems that it is really stretching its staff thin in terms of things we offer . . . . [The school] is offering a Swiss Army Knife of ways to attract different students . . . . I wonder if that casting a wide net strategy will end up diluting what previously gave [the school] its unique identity.

However, the changing demographics were also seen as healthy. Speaking to a more diverse religious makeup of the student body, Respondent 5 expressed that the "school is healthier because it isn't just everyone having the same worldview . . . . It does two things for us. It does allow us to look outside of ourselves . . . and talk about the fact that there are non-Christians on campus." Similarly, in comparing the religious views of staff from the past to the present, Respondent 7 contrasted,

Before everyone was pretty much on the same page. Now it's a broader spectrum theologically and spiritually . . . what are we [the school] willing to say is negotiable doctrinally, and what isn't?

Not only was religious diversity noted, but cultural diversity as well. Respondent 2 explained how the diverse cultural backgrounds of staff are better for the school.

I appreciate that our staff is becoming more diverse. I think having more Malaysian teachers is really awesome because we have so many Malaysian kids . . . . I think it's good that our staff is a better reflection of our student body, because I think that's really important for kids to be successful in school . . . to have role models that look like them.

Regarding tensions that arise as the school grows more diverse in staff and the future changes that this will bring to campus, Respondent 4 reflected,

As we hire more local staff, I'd be curious to know, how is it different because of being a local staff . . . versus someone who is here for two years and then leaves. . . . That's definitely a big change and will probably continue to require adjustments on the part of salary or benefits or just our approach to communication.

4.4. Response to Research Question 1: What Effect does School Climate have on the Career Choices of TCK Students who Returned as Adults to Work for the School?

The respondents' experience of school climate as a student directly impacted their decision to return to the same school for employment. Supporting Meyer (2015) research that international school communities provide identity to the student, six respondents expressed a desire or dream to return to work at the school they attended in their younger years. In fact, they experienced excitement when the opportunity to do so presented itself. Respondent 8 had to make sure it was the right move for their family, not just a desire to "relive the glory years." They each stated that the school helped make them who they were. For example, Respondent 2 shared, "the staff invested in me as a person. It's one of the reasons I chose to become a teacher. Because I had such positive experiences with my teachers as coaches and class sponsors." Another respondent said that their school experience changed the trajectory of their intended profession from the military to education. These are just two examples that perpetuate the notion that the positive environment and community experienced by the participants left them with a strong desire to return.

Becoming home for many of the respondents, the boarding program's family-like atmosphere allowed students to thrive, further supporting (Crossman, 2016). Building on Hayden and Thompson (2008), those who were children of school staff also felt a similar familial atmosphere. The school became a place where families connected through a shared culture. The school staff community did life together, from church to vacations. The home-like atmosphere was more strongly remarked upon by the respondents who attended during the school's previous mission organization years between the 1970s and the 2000s. At that time, the staff were coming from similar backgrounds with the same mission. The school became a second home, and the closeness of the community was something that

impacted some respondents' desire for the future. For example, one respondent knew they wanted to return to work at the school even before graduating.

4.5. Response to Research Question 2: What are the Perceived Changes in Participants' School Climate Over Time?

All eight respondents shared that the current school climate continues to be similar to what they experienced as students in many ways. They still see caring teachers and a strong community. Many of the extra-curricular activities and experiences are still present, and the school upholds Christian values and hires teachers and staff who are grounded in those values. All respondents expressed their past and recent experiences as a positive school climate.

The most common differences or changes in the climate were in the school's growth from a small missionary-boarding school to a larger international school. The tensions that arose from that growth are highlighted through increased academic rigor, busyness from more opportunities, and changes due to more diversity in both students and staff. The school changed from a small home-like campus to a larger and more institutional one.

The need to meet academic rigor for quality international schools created more structure for teachers and less laissez-faire teaching practices. To provide all the activities expected for a private school, the respondents shared that more demand is now added for both students and teachers and that such a wide array of activities was expressed as hard to maintain. Although respondents of all demographics mentioned this, these concerns were emphasized most by those who were students in the 2000s. These respondents experienced this increasing rigor in both roles: students and staff.

Lastly, moving from an ethnocentric student population of primarily evangelical mission students to an ethnically and religiously diverse population has changed the school climate. For most respondents, this was seen as a positive for the school because it better prepares students for the globally diverse world they will enter as adults. However, some respondents who attended the school in the earlier years were concerned about slowly losing the key values on which the school was built.

4.6. Response to Research Question 3: How do TCKs who Attended and are Now Employed by the Same School Describe the Impact of Being a Student at this School in Continuing the School's Climate?

All eight of the respondents see themselves playing a role in perpetuating the school climate. The nostalgia from their favorite past experiences has helped them keep those experiences and traditions alive. All respondents currently serve the school beyond their job description requirements in areas that were meaningful past experiences to them as a student. For example, Respondent 2 shared,

I choose to do things at the school often with the intent of creating those same experiences for kids . . . like sponsoring and coaching and mentoring those are all things that we as staff do on our own time, we're not paid for them.

It is interesting to note that having key administrators who were former students has influenced significant decisions like determining which programs to continue supporting, capping the school growth, and focusing on hiring practices to maintain components of the current positive school climate. From all eight respondents, there was a desire to serve the school with intentionality in their relationships with others shows a deep level of school connectedness and commitment.

5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Theme 1, *community through relationships*, was the most prevalent experience shared by the respondents. The sense of community was built around two primary relationships, student-to-student and student-to-teacher. As students, the respondents were able to form deep friendships that lasted beyond their school year and were mentored by caring

teachers, whose relationships had a lasting impact. As employees of the school, the respondents modeled those relationships they experienced and valued caring for their students and for each other. Intriguingly, however, the relationship between the international and local staff was noted as becoming less unified as the school grew. Some of the respondents remembered the national staff being more a part of the community, but now see that the school community is separated into different groups with separate communities.

Theme 2, *school connectedness*, was embodied through student activities and traditions. Interestingly, it was emphasized that the value of these experiences was from the opportunity to work with fellow classmates and teachers. For many, the school connectedness experienced as a student can be seen in their school commitment as employees. However, as the school progressed from a missionary boarding school to a competitive international school, the necessity for more academic rigor, alongside higher expectations for student activities, created a common experience of tension between a demanding and busy school life for students and teachers and a desire for connection.

Theme 3, *diversity*, is again a direct result of the changes in the school as it transitioned from a missionary boarding school to a competitive international school. The student body and teaching staff were formerly described by Respondent 5 as "ethnocentric, white evangelical Christian students and community." Through changes in the school structure and government laws allowing Malaysians to go to private schools, the school experienced a rapid change in student and staff demographics. The increase in diversity was seen as a positive for the school climate by many of the respondents, but there were some concerns of the school losing connections to its core mission of ministering to students.

5.1. Summary of Results

Supporting Bandura (1989) framework that "people are both products and producers of their environment" (p. 4), these participants were all a product of a specific school environment at different points in time. Many similarities were identified in their past experiences of school climate, and they play a strategic role in helping to produce that environment today. This current research summarizes key areas of school climate for international schools to prioritize based on the lived experiences of the eight participants.

As a key factor of a positive school climate, the deep relationships experienced by the respondents were projected through the data. This outlook supports the connection between healthy relationships between teachers and students as a leading factor in whether school climate perception is positive, like what was found in Long and Eamoraphan (2015). More specifically, the mentoring relationships experienced by teachers and coaches further support Angus and Hughes (2017) study on the impact of mentoring on school connectedness and optimism toward school climate. Intentional mentoring relationships are one area in which six of the eight participants mentioned how they now perpetuate a positive school climate.

The respondents felt that as students, they both formed deep relationships with teachers and made life-long relationships with other students. This depth of relationships experienced by the respondents aligns with Pollock and Van Reken (2009) description of TCKs and their high value on deep connections with friends. Also, supporting O'Donnell (2018), there was a deep level of school connectedness and commitment with the respondents' positive perspective of school climate. As a student, the activities and experiences in which they participated helped connect them to the school and each other, supporting Hayden and Thompson (1998) research on the impact of the informal aspects of international schools on connectedness.

Respondents 2 and 6 both described the current teachers and staff as "invested" in the school's success. Building on Wayne K Hoy (1990), connectedness and commitment resulted from the positive relationships and community described by the participants. However, the changing relationship with the national staff was an interesting finding,

as it was unexpected but arose in several interviews. There was a yearning for all staff to be fully part of the community. This was seen as an area that has degenerated over the years due to the school's rapid growth and having more staff in general. This is a potential area of focus for the school in the future.

The changes due to the growth are seen as good overall, but they come at a cost. The respondents' desire to keep the school's identity alive as products of the past environment provides an anchor. However, navigating the progression of the school climate will continue to heighten tensions. The challenge will be a continual reflection on what makes the school unique and maintaining the balance.

5.2. Implications

This research provides all stakeholders, not solely the leadership, of international schools' insight on some key aspects of school climate that are important for both students and staff. First, supporting Crossman (2016), the need to quickly build and maintain a community within the school is critical. For a healthy school climate, this research highlights the importance of the teacher-student relationship. The impact of deep relationships with teachers was life-changing for several participants. Teachers committed to caring for their students was a noted reason why some participants wanted to work in education as adults. International school communities should emphasize mentoring opportunities and leaders should hire teachers who value the connection with students beyond academics.

Second, school leaders should build school connectedness by identifying or creating meaningful experiences in which students can participate. For new international schools, this could be the creation of value-giving traditions. For developed international schools like the one in this study, it is recommended to define the valuable traditions and experiences that the school needs to maintain through engaging with teachers, students, and alumni for feedback. The activities that were highlighted in this research were those that challenged students and required them to work together. For example, it was not the *experience* of going to the banquet but the *process* of planning and putting it together that was viewed more favorably. Through activities that require collaboration, the deep relationships desired by the TCK students can be forged, further supporting Fail, Thompson, and Walker (2004) research that encouraged international schools to help students find a sense of belonging.

Finally, for international schools experiencing rapid growth, school leaders need to monitor the changes in demographics and how those affect the school climate. The school in this study opted to cap the school's growth at 700 students while maintaining a costly boarding program, even though both decisions may not make sense from a financial perspective. Still, the leadership saw that maintaining the boarding program and limiting the size of the school helped preserve the family-like community on campus. Along the same lines, the school is learning how to adapt to the changing diversity of the student and staff body with new school-wide initiatives like a cultural intelligence task force.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Replicating this study with similar participants focusing on specific demographics like teachers, staff, or administrators would improve transferability. The small sample size and the need to maintain confidentiality in this research limited the ability to connect the demographics with the data. It would also be interesting to see if there is a commonality of impactful factors of school climate at other international schools in different countries.

Second, one noteworthy aspect of the school climate that was an area of weakness for the school in this study was uniting nationals with expatriate staff. Several participants noted that these groups were not cohesive, and there was a desire to see more opportunities for connection. More research on how to unite national and expatriate staff would benefit international school communities.

Third, this research shows that the boarding program played a pivotal role in the school climate and is another potential area for further research. From the respondents who were part of the boarding program as students, there was a connection between the positive experiences of that program and their overall perception of the school climate. The data noted that the boarding program provided many experiences and relationships that gave the perception of the school being both home and family.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the phenomenon of TCKs coming back to the international school they attended as a student. Currently, the school in this study had over 10% of faculty in this category but the research is lacking to know whether this is common or not.

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