Cross-Cultural Kids

Ruth E. Van Reken
Co-Founder, Families in Global Transition, Indianapolis, IN

What is it?

Cross-cultural kids (CCKs) are children who grow up living in, or meaningfully interacting with, two or more distinctly different cultural worlds during their first eighteen years of life. This umbrella term includes a wide variety of subgroups such as traditional third culture kids (TCKs), children from mixed-racial heritage or bi/multicultural parents. Some are educational CCKs (attending school in a different cultural setting than their family culture), children of immigrants, minorities, refugees, or borderlanders. Depending on the situation, CCKs can be international adoptees, foster children, those raised in blended families, or countless ‘others.’ Many CCKs grow up in more than one of these categories, and deal with a complex sense of identity. Adults who grew up as CCKs are called ‘adult cross-cultural kids’ (ACCKs).

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Because all CCKs grow up in some sort of cross-cultural lifestyle or environment, many are multilingual. Often they are multiculturally or transnationally competent, flexible, adaptable, and resilient. CCKs can thus serve as cultural bridges and provide insight on how effective intercultural dialogues can happen in multicultural settings.

What work remains?

Research on specific CCK subgroups has been ongoing but with little effort to consider potential common themes emerging from these studies. Unifying the discussion is critical to understanding how children of all nationalities having culturally complex backgrounds can find their sense of identity and belonging in our globalizing world.

Who uses the concept?

Cross-cultural kids is a useful concept for psychologists and counselors working with CCK/ACCK clients to help them better understand, name, and normalize their sometimes complicated story. Education scholars have used it to discuss student experiences brought into the classroom. Sociologists and anthropologists can use it to study the growing ‘hidden diversity’ in our globalizing world compared with traditional approaches to ‘diversity.’ Political scientists, communication scholars, and economists can research this new demographic to see how the personal impact of globalization relates to each of their disciplines.

Resources

