Abstract
This study examines the experience of children who have recently migrated to a cultural and language different country. The focus is on the voice of the children regarding this experience. The children were developing a bi-cultural identity for both their country of origin and their new country. The experience is not a negative one as first thought. The students are not living on Mars but living in a new place of experiences and potential for the future.

A Child’s Life on Mars: Investigating the Experience of Newly Arriving Migrant Children
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Key words: children, education, migration, language learning, non-English speakers,

Abstract
This study examines the experience of children who have recently migrated to a cultural and language different country. The focus is on the voice of the children regarding this experience. The children were developing a bi-cultural identity for both their country of origin and their new country. The experience is not a negative one as first thought. The students are not living on Mars but living in a new place of experiences and potential for the future.

Grade 2 need minding one afternoon so I read them a story, followed by a discussion and then set a writing task. Then one of the students points to A (from Thailand) and says ‘she doesn’t speak any English’. I am flabbergasted that all my efforts over the past 20 minutes had been passively tolerated without any understanding. This gets me thinking that such an experience of coming to a strange land without any understanding of the language or the culture must be a totally incomprehensible even frightening event for the student.

This view is shared by my colleagues who, at a staff meeting, respond to the question “What is it like for a first phase new arrival (non English Speaking student) when they first come to our school” with comments such as – ‘Overwhelming, exhausting, frustrating, tiring, unfamiliar, scary, friendless, isolated’, ‘Confronting-disorienting, feel a bit lost’, ‘You have no idea what is happening or what you are supposed to do.’, ‘Want to switch off, feel dumb, confused.’ ‘Bewildering, stressed, felt lost, angry?’, ‘Feel completely alien’, ‘Blank- too much to take in’, ‘Worried at the inability to communicate’, ‘Feeling singled out/different, anxiety producing due to sensory overload - too many new experiences to process without the means to communicate and express needs’, ‘Being on Mars, socially isolating’. All responses highlighted the perception of significant challenge experienced by the student particularly negative emotions.

Informal observation poses a puzzle regarding this view in that most of these students seemingly make a good adjustment to school within a relatively short space of time. Previous studies, although painting a
mixed picture of the child migrant experience, illustrate a similar relatively positive view of adjustment.

Katz (2007) investigated the questions ‘Do migrant children succeed in Australia and, if so, why?’ and ‘What does this tell us about resilience in populations?’

He concluded: that as a group, migrants and their children generally do well in Australian society. However he notes ‘some specific migrant groups (, , and possibly Horn of Africa) are disadvantaged’. Their health, education, income, labour market participation and general well being are similar to native Australians. This contrasts with other similar countries where many migrant and minority children consistently fare less well than the native population. However, the individual subjective experiences of migrants mirror those of migrants to other countries (racism, discrimination, dislocation, identity issues and difficulties adjusting to new culture). This is possibly borne out by the distress levels of their parents. Migrant children can be seen as a resilient group. He comments; ‘we know (quite) a lot about resilience on an individual level but very little about the factors which promote resilience across populations.’ Analysis of the literature seems to indicate very complex relationships, including cohort effects, cultural context and physical environment as being important factors.

Alerby and Brown (2008) asked migrant, refugee and indigenous students to talk about their school experiences. For some children their experiences are positive ones in which systems and teachers work together to meet their needs. For others their experiences are of racism, isolation, inadequately and poorly funded schools, unsympathetic teachers and education systems designed to cater for majority children. Despite all these differences all the children remain enthusiastic about school. They are in the words of a boy from Afghanistan ‘thirsty to learn’. The children and the researchers all argue for education as a means to redress, rather than perpetuate, disadvantage. A vital first step is to hear what is being said by those most affected by current practices.

Selvamanickam, Zgryza & Gorman (2001) investigated the experiences, resilience and needs of young people aged 16 to 24 in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia from culturally and linguistically different (CALD) backgrounds in relation to their social, emotional and mental well being. Generally they concluded that CALD young people were found to be ‘remarkably resilient’. They identified the experience of caring (family), feeling of connectedness and cultural identity as protective factors.

Based on this research Lemerle and Prasad-Ildes (2004) developed the BRiTA -Building Resilience in Transcultural Futures Programs for Adolescents and Primary School Aged Children to support resiliency for CALD students in Queensland schools. The program aims to promote, resilience, well being and self esteem and to recognise and celebrate cultural and personal strengths as well as differences. The program is delivered through small group discussion sessions which focus on culturally determined elements of resiliency. These sessions include

- Resilience in the Multicultural Classroom
- Cultural Identity and Life Experience: Making Me Who I Am
- Building Social Competencies: Understanding Cross-Cultural Communication
- Family and Friends: Staying Strong with Positive Relationships

In evaluating the program the authors suggest that

‘these results clearly suggest that addressing specific issues related to acculturation is significantly more relevant than general stress management interventions and that culturally relevant resilience protective skills rather than universal life skills are clearly more effective for CALD young people.’

‘Settling In’ (2002) published by the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) provides a similar though more skills specific program.

In January, 2009 the Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend magazine published short stories of 20 children ‘who have left their homelands in search of a better life in the ‘Lucky Country’ in an article titled ‘Coming to Australia’. Despite the cultural differences and missing their homelands these children generally appreciated
the perceived life opportunities that Australia provided whilst preserving elements of their own cultures. *100 Faces, 100 Stories* published by the Australian Business and Community Network (2008) illustrate similar stories with accompanying artworks.

This suggests that many children who migrate to Australia ultimately see migration as positive despite the initial challenges presented. A complex range of factors will impact on their experience. School, in particular, plays an important role. What the initial experience of migration is like is the subject of this study.

To answer this question I go directly to a source currently immersed in this experience, a group of 6 newly arrived students from Korea and China aged 9-12 in English as a Second Language (ESL) withdrawal lessons. All students have migrated to Australia within the last year. A unit of work ‘Our Stories’33http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/timetoteach was used in which the students told their story of coming to Australia. The sessions were conducted in the timetabled ESL withdrawal lesson (Monday and Wednesday) as 12-40 minute team teaching sessions with the ESL teacher over a 6 week period.

The themes for the lessons were –

- My Life in . . . (Country of Origin)
- Getting Ready and Travelling to Australia
- First Impressions
- My Life in Australia Now

Lessons consisted of discussion, artefacts, illustrations and brief text. An open ended approach was used to enable the students to express themselves regarding a range of related issues.

The students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to tell their stories when I first meet with them. One student has already brought in a book from her country of origin, a book about a famous Korean. Another student comments that this person’s message of the three most important things in life was ‘Freedom, Freedom, Freedom.’ The five Korean students in the group all held this person with great respect. Two students brought in essays they have written over night of their own accord. The passion is obvious; ‘Korea has indepent (independent) events with Japen. I just want to talk about this!. . . Korean people is angry and frustration.’

My co-teacher commented afterwards that they showed knowledge of their political history which children from the dominant Aussie culture do not seem to have. There was a communal love and passion for figures and events from the past.

Over the next few lessons each of the students brought in something from their country of origin. These items included a book about a girl who made a Korean flag but was killed by the Japanese when she was 16, a knucklebones game, a puzzle that made a mountain scene ‘which made people happy’, a chess like game called ‘Encirclement’ which was also played in China, a book about the Korean Royal Palace where some robbers got over the wall, photos of playing in the snow and frogs which are ‘not Chinese just cute’.

I am struck by how much these items mean to the students. They mean more than just memories but are integral to their soul. As Ball (2005) notes-

‘Where children spend their childhood, and the culture of that childhood, plays an important part in the creation of identity and sense of self, and in creating a reference point for the interpretation of the world. The cultural and physical place of their homelands is a deeply rooted and intimate component of the identities of migrant children.’

The students discussed the respect and love they have for their grandparents. They seem to miss their grandparents much more than their friends who are only occasionally mentioned in discussion. We talked about going to their grandparent’s house on special days to eat. My co-teacher commented how this reflected a contrasting view of ageing to mainstream Australian society.

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When it came to writing ‘My life in . . . . (Country of origin)’ the lessons became more formal and less dynamic. Students concentrated on their titles, pictures and factual information such as writing about historical monuments, calendar events or food rather than personal recounts. However when we discussed what the students had written themes of personal attachment returned focussing on the shared experiences of eating the ‘Rice Cake Soup or getting presents on ‘Children’s Day’ or understanding the symbolism of the flag (bravery, independence, love, yin and yang). The lesson somehow ended with the Korean students all singing the Korean National Anthem with great gusto and pride.

The lessons then focussed on leaving to come to Australia. The students became an interviewer and interviewee for each other in pairs. The questions asked were-

When did you find out that you will be coming to Australia to live? Who told you?

What did you think about this? What did your family think about this?

What did you tell your friends? What things did you do before you left?

Who did you say goodbye to?

All the students had been told by their parents that they would be coming to Australia to live (in one case via the internet). Their individual reactions to this news was mixed (‘excited’, ‘in the middle’, ‘boo-it was a very, very bad thing’, ‘not good’, ‘I think it’s a good idea’, ‘very sad’, ‘bad-now it is good, I wanted to be class captain-so sad, now better for all-I like Australia’.)

Their family generally thought it a good idea because it would be better in Australia and they would learn English. For one student the family didn’t talk about it. For another her grandmother didn’t want her to go because ‘I can’t see you-I will die’. The decision was made for them. Their parents built coming to Australia as an improvement on their life in providing opportunities.

Prior to their departure all the students led a fairly routine life playing, studying, visiting relatives, holidaying, packing, telling their friends that they were going to Australia. They were worried about practical things such as the challenge of learning English and fitting into their new culture.

The students enjoyed a simulated exercise in which we set up an airline seating configuration, boarded the ‘plane’ and flew to Sydney complete with my co-teacher serving refreshments as the air hostess. We then discussed each student’s actual fight to Australia. They all were excited and nervous about flying (most for the first time). Some remembered that the flight was ‘shaky’. One student was hungry because they didn’t like the food (on Qantas). None of the students got much sleep.

Their first impressions of Australia included surprise at the multicultural throng at Sydney airport when they thought that there were only ‘Australians’ in Australia. (‘I saw many country’s people’, ‘there were Chinese all around me’), the heat, the ‘shaky’ smoke (heat haze), having to change out of winter clothes, lots of trees and parks, the taxi driver sitting on the opposite side to what they were used to, the big scary rat (possum) at the new home. Their observations were very personal and immediate.

The students brainstormed ‘when you first came to Australia what was different from the country you came from?’ They drew from all their senses- ‘the carpet in apartments, coins not notes for $1, the sound of cicadas, the many cockroaches, the smell of fresh air not polluted (allergy went away), the taste of food (not as yummy but in Australia the hamburgers are better).’

Finally the students wrote about ‘My life in Australia (now)’ as an email to a friend or family member. This flowed more smoothly than the earlier story about ‘My Life in . . . (country of origin)’. The students were less concerned with producing pictures and factual content (i.e. school assignment style) using a more direct conversational style.

The students are positive about their life in Australia. One student writes;
“Hi ___. I want to tell you about ‘My Life in Australia’. You knew, but my father take family in Australia. Firstly I’m came out airport. Then I see the many people. They looks happy. I don’t know why but I thought they was kind people. My school is (name). I love my school because (name) has Funny and handsome or beautiful teachers and we has nice friends. I think you like this school too! First I’m hard for English but teachers and nice friends help me. I can do now, not all but many thank you to the school (name). I like Australia, school, people, friend.

I wish you like Australia.

Australia and KOREA

From __________

Reflections: On the 3 Ps (Psychology, Pedagogy and Phenomenology,)

Reflections on Psychology

Although migrating to Australia may be, in our eyes, a significant life experience it is not viewed by the students as particularly traumatic. They all had mixed feelings about leaving their country of origin but these feelings related to individual issues such as sadness to be leaving grandparents and friends, worrying about learning English or excitement about the adventure and opportunities ahead of them. As one student noted; how each person felt about the experience depended a lot on the individual. Family played an important role in preparing the student. Their parents built up coming to Australia as an opportunity to improve their life. Coming to Australia with their immediate family provided a support network.

Werner (1995) identified three contexts for protective factors for good adjustment-

- Personal attributes, including ongoing, bright, and positive self concepts.
- Family characteristics, such as having close bonds with at least one family member or an emotionally stable parent
- Aspects of the wider social context, for example teachers who recognised the children’s capabilities and who encouraged and supported their educational strivings or a good network of supportive friends.

‘This triarchic set of factors can be understood as psychosocial resources that support or promote adaptive development. Individuals who can draw on many, or high levels of personal and social resources are more effective in coping with adversity than individuals with fewer (or lower level) resources… Individuals are not passively exposed to experiential factors, but can become producers of their own development in that they affect the context that affects them.’ (Schoon, 2006 p15, 24)

The unit differed in structure to the BRiTA Futures Programs (see above) in that it was not specifically designed to address resilience but to develop an appreciation of the students’ experience. However as an opportunity to provide a ‘voice’ for the students through an open ended approach many of the same objectives were achieved as similar themes emerged (particularly the importance of Cultural Identity and Life Experience: Making Me Who I Am). The lessons reaffirmed that the students’ cultural identity was valuable a view that may have been under attack when being confronted by the sudden immersion in the new and strange culture.

Although not necessarily at a conscious level, the students brought with them a solid sense of their country of origin (social/collective unconscious, Carl Jung, 2001 p151). Interestingly my co-teacher commented prior to the ‘Our Stories’ lessons that when she initially discussed the unit with the students, Korea seemed only a very distance memory for them. However, when given the opportunity to explore their connections to their country of origin through artefacts and discussion, the influence and passion was obvious. The social/archetypal collective unconscious was never really very far from the surface. The opportunity to draw from their social/archetypal collective unconscious and maintain this identity is integral to their sense of self.

Pascal (1992, p130) notes;
'Minority children in the newer cultures of the globe, where many ethnicities thrive side by side, may sadly try to erase ethnic traits that have been unofficially but clearly declared unworthy of love or expression by the majority. The erased ethnic qualities may include collective characteristics of typology that could be a wonderful contribution to the new mosaic culture at large. These suppressed typological characteristics get turned into shadowy sub personalities that are lost on many levels to the child and to the new society as well. For the minority child this process is a loss of identity and creative energy.'

Phinney (2000) argues that the development of identity in individuals from minority cultures requires the negotiation of identification and non-identification with both cultures. An individual can have – Bi-cultural identity (high identification with both cultures), Separated identity (high identification with own culture and low identification with majority culture), Assimilated identity (low identification with own culture and high identification with majority culture) and Marginalised identity (low identification with both cultures).

The large Australia & KOREA! in the email about My Life in Australia (above) demonstrates an emerging Bi-Cultural identity.

Phinney (1993)11Cited in Germain (2004) proposes three ego-identity stages in developing bi-cultural identity (a) diffused stage (ethnicity is not an issue and is therefore unexplored), (b) fused stage (the individual is increasing aware of his/her ethnicity), (c) moratorium stage (coming to terms with cultural and ethnic issues eventually leading to achieved bi-cultural identity). Our students are probably somewhere between moving from the diffused stage into the fused stage at this point of time.

A sense of place is an important factor in adjustment. As students wrote in their emails, ‘My life in Australia is good’ and ‘Australia is a very good country’.

Ball (2005) notes

‘When that sense of place is upturned through migration to Australia, children appear to adjust fairly readily. Children learn English quickly, adopt the local accent and seem to slide into being one of the crowd.’

Schoon (2006) noted that the characteristics of the school environment played a significant role in fostering adaptive development. The school is generally a safe place for the child to develop. With its opportunities to interact and play with other children and a range of support from caring staff the school becomes the place of soul for the child to be ‘one of the crowd’. The school becomes their own place of identity relatively independent of the challenges facing other family members to whom the wider society may appear much more strange, hostile and overwhelming.

Our ESL lessons created a special sense of place where the students could express themselves within a safe ‘container’. ‘It’s really fun (more than normal class).’

Stewart (1989) drawing from the work of Hillman, states generally that ‘multiculturalism succeeds because it has become the cultural scape in which the soul of the community wanders… there is an ecological value in James Hillman’s idea of soul as not an elevated idea but rather one ‘down to earth’: soul in this sense is about place, finding and taking root in a new place.’

Reflections on Pedagogy

In an observational ESL lesson prior to starting the unit the students were discussing hydroelectricity. Whilst relevant to their home class curriculum the topic had little relevance to the students themselves.

By contrast the lessons for the ‘Our Stories’ unit were dynamic. Students embraced the opportunity to talk about things that they were very familiar with and to express their ‘voice’. My co-teacher and I came to the conclusion that as teachers we generally ignore what the students bring with them (the known) and bombard them with the unknown (curriculum which focuses on our culture).

In evaluating the lessons the students liked answering questions ‘like an interview’ and talking about their country of origin. They enjoyed listening to each other’s stories ‘very interesting’ and learning about each
others’ experiences. They wanted to know more about life in other countries. They appreciated the similarities and differences in the discussions. They felt that the discussions had helped them in ‘learning to talk’ (English). The lessons were more interesting than learning about spelling and dictionary meanings or hydro-electricity.

Similarly my co-teacher evaluated the unit highly. She noted that language as culture is really important. By looking into the student’s culture at an early stage, the risk of the student shutting down while they are bombarded with our culture is reduced. The students bring with them a bag of tools which can be utilised to allow real learning to occur. The two way exchange between the teachers and the students facilitated this learning. Although teachers may think they address multicultural needs the demands of time, staffing and the curriculum together with unacknowledged cultural bias often form a barrier to address these issues.

So what does this tell us about teaching students English as a Second Language? Small group withdrawal groups give the opportunity for the students to get individual attention and to express themselves. There is a risk in the regular classroom with up to 30 students that the student will become a passive observer reluctant to contribute because of English language deficits. By basing the lessons on a topic which the students had a personal and cultural knowledge of and interest in, student engagement is greatly enhanced. This reflects the Quality Teaching11NSW Dept of Education (2003) Quality Teaching (see 3.1, 3.2, 3.4) framework particularly the dimension of Significance in which ‘lessons regularly incorporate student’s background knowledge (and)… cultural knowledge of diverse social groupings.’

It is the process not the product that is important. When the students were asked to write a story about ‘My Life in … (country of origin) they got bogged down in structure – heading, pictures, grammar etc. So we abandoned producing a published report (that could be used as an assessment task) and used the pictures and the small amount of writing as a stimulus for discussion. When the students wrote My Life in Australia as an email to a friend or family member the writing flowed quickly (even if grammatically interesting).

The students could have been ‘kept busy’ with pen and paper (or computer) formal tasks such as writing reports or completing worksheets on English grammar but would this teach them much English? There were many opportunities during the lessons to develop aspects of English language, for example the mini lesson on interviewer/ interviewee which discussed the meaning of these words.

Reflections on Phenomenology (the Experience)

Phenomenology’s ‘aim is to uncover the essence of human experience. Essences of anything are ethereal and difficult to pin down. Phenomenology, quite simply, has its goal to understand some else’s world as if you were standing in their own shoes.’ Minicheliello and Kotter, (2010 p25)

Relatively small sensory events formed the basis of experience. In the country of origin- playing in the snow, being hit by their mum, breaking a cup, and eating rice soup at their grandparents place. In Australia- the heat, the carpet in apartments, the sound of cicadas, the trees, the air and the different tastes of the food. The individual responses were expressed through their senses. The events leading up to and then migrating to Australia were sensory experiences rather than a conscious cognitive or emotional experience. Sensory experiences provide grounding. Routine plays a part. Life just is.

The passion for the political historical background of the students’ country of origin had a significant effect on me. When the students spontaneously sang the Korean national anthem I shared in their pride (although unable to join in). I repeated this exercise at the whole school assembly with all our Korean students (much to the embarrassment of one class member). The power of Jung’s social/collective unconscious in action was a revelation.

I shared their excitement of the plane trip in the simulation. I felt positive about coming to Australia through the tone of the lessons which were enthusiastically embraced. The experience is not a negative one as first thought. The students are not living on Mars but living in a new place of experiences and potential for the future.
I thank the students and my co-teacher for sharing this journey.

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