



# Impact of International Family Transitions: A Systematic Literature Review of International Research

LITERATURE REVIEW

CATHERINE M. KOINI

DIVYA JINDAL-SNAPE

ANNA J. ROBB

\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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## ABSTRACT

A systematic literature review of international empirical research was conducted to understand the impact of international family transitions on families' experiences, wellbeing and facilitating/inhibiting factors of successful international transitions. The review covered the period 2000–2021. Using the EPPI-Centre approach, authors included 26 studies in the review that met the inclusion criteria. Synthesis of the findings suggested that, children and parents experienced international transitions differently. While children were primarily concerned with social issues, parents worried about managing family and work commitments. The findings relating to wellbeing outcomes were mixed, and we cannot say with confidence whether family wellbeing was impacted by international transitions. There was a dearth of literature examining what constitutes a successful international transition experience. The review demonstrated the challenge of viewing international transitions in a linear manner and suggests international transitions should be conceptualised as complex, multi-dimensional, dynamic and ongoing in nature. This review is the first to bring together children and parents' experiences, wellbeing outcomes and facilitating/inhibiting factors using the Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory. As a result, it provides some unique insights and makes an original contribution.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Catherine M. Koini**

School of Humanities,  
Social Sciences and Law,  
Transformative Change:  
Educational and Life Transitions  
(TCELT) Research Centre,  
University of Dundee, UK  
[ckoini001@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:ckoini001@dundee.ac.uk)

## KEYWORDS:

International schools; family wellbeing; resilience; third culture kids; identity; MMT theory

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The vast majority of literature on international family transitions has long been characterised by the challenges faced by internationally mobile families when moving to a new country. As such, research has frequently presented a negative discourse of international transitions and employed words such as ‘grief’ and ‘loss’ (Limberg & Lambie, 2011) to describe the sadness associated with leaving friends, family and home behind. Alongside the tendency to present transition challenges, the literature has primarily focused on the transition experiences of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) (see Ezra, 2003; Tan, Wang & Cottrell, 2021), thus excluding the important and interrelated perspectives of significant others (parents, siblings and professionals). In doing so, a conflicting account of the impact of international transitions on family wellbeing has ensued, with limited discussion of the potential factors which might facilitate successful transitions. The field of international family transition appears to lack common and agreed terminology, hence resulting in general assumptions and interpretations regarding the transition experiences of globally mobile families. To date, the term ‘international transition’ has been poorly defined in the literature and those who have attempted to define international transitions have tended to describe the chronological stages of emotional adaptation to international or cultural movement (Heyward, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). However, previous models are limited as they capture only one part of the globally mobile experience (Bates, 2013), hence disregarding the important role significant others play in the transition process. The term TCK is used to refer to children of Internationally Mobile (IM) families and originated from the work of Useem, Useem & Donoghue (1963), who explored the experiences of American expatriate families posted to India and reported that children formed a ‘third culture’ or ‘interstitial culture’ derived from parts of their first home culture and the second host culture.

Transition is defined ‘as an ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptation, due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity which can be both exciting and worrying at the same time, requiring ongoing support’ (Jindal-Snape, 2018, p. 283). For the purpose of this literature review, the term ‘international transitions’ will be used to describe this adaptation process experienced by professionally mobile families who move abroad with their children due to expatriate assignments. We argue that international transition is a complex, multi-layered and ongoing process. Furthermore, due to the imbricated nature of family relationships, transition should not be viewed in isolation but from a holistic perspective.

To identify key terms and databases to use and address gaps in the field of international family transitions, we first carried out a review of existing literature reviews (including systematic literature reviews) published over the period 2000–2021 (see Table 1). We found a lack of

**Table 1** Review of reviews.

\*Using criteria: clear and concise questions; systematic and explicit methods to identify, select and critically evaluate relevant research; use of primary source data about a study (e.g. peer-reviewed papers); either narrative synthesis or meta-analysis; commitment to reproducibility and replication of methods in selecting and excluding source documents (Garrard, 2016).

AUTHOR (S)	DATE	TITLE	JOURNAL	FOCUS/AIM/RESEARCH QUESTION	INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA	PERIOD COVERED BY REVIEW	SLR* YES/NO
Ezra	2003	Culture, language and personality in the context of the internationally mobile child	Journal of Research in International Education	Focus on the transition process of internationally mobile child and examines effect of culture, language difference and personality	No mention of types of study; where published; or language	Not delineated	No
Sterle, Fontaine, De Mol & Verhofstadt	2018	Expatriate family adjustment: an overview of empirical evidence	Frontiers in Psychology	Focus on empirical research which looks at what happens with expatriates when living abroad: challenges of expatriation and resources available to families	Empirical studies published in English peer reviewed journals	1988–2018	No
Tan, Wang, Baker Cottrell	2021	A systematic review of third culture kids empirical research	International Journal of Intercultural Relations	Focus on psychosocial issues of TCKs	Inclusion: peer reviewed journals from only one database (EBSCO PsychINFO)  Exclusion: international students, families, papers with no focus on psychosocial issues	2000–2018	No (no research questions & no reference to method of critical evaluation of retrieved studies)

literature reviews undertaken in the context of international family transitions, apart from those conducted by Ezra (2003), Sterle et al. (2018), and Tan, Wang & Cottrell (2021). Two of the three reviews focused only on the experiences of ‘Third Culture Kids’ (TCKs) and excluded the voice of significant others (Ezra, 2003 and Tan, Wang & Baker Cottrell, 2021). One review claimed to be a systematic literature review (SLR) (Tan, Wang & Cottrell, 2021), although it did not fit Garrard’s (2016) SLR assessment criteria (see Table 1). None of the reviews addressed specific research questions or provided a methodological framework to interpret their results. There was therefore scope for a SLR to be undertaken (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

The following research questions were addressed. What does international literature conclude about the:

1. transition experiences of children and parents moving to a new country, taking into account both home and international school contexts?
2. the impact of international transitions on the wellbeing of internationally mobile families?
3. the key facilitating and inhibiting factors of internationally mobile families’ successful transition experiences?

## METHODS

### SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW PROTOCOL

This review is based on the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre’s (EPPI-Centre, 2010) approach for undertaking systematic literature reviews. The steps undertaken are outlined in Table 2. A summary of the specific inclusion and exclusion criteria that were applied to refine the search is listed in Table 3.

Systematic approach	Inclusion and exclusion criteria
	Searching the studies and literature
	Screening studies and literature for relevance to inclusion criteria
	Link to review questions
	Quality and relevance
	Synthesising the findings
	Conclusion and recommendations

**Table 2** Systematic steps undertaken.

**Table 3** Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature review.

INCLUSION CRITERIA	RATIONALE
Geographical spread	Literature should have an international scope to reflect the experiences of globally mobile families.
Research base	Literature must be based on empirical research (either qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods).
Age-range	Literature should relate to all international school-age pupils (6–18) including adult ‘TCKs’ in order to capture their international childhood experiences.
Date of publication: all relevant from 2000–2021	A longer-term timescale was appropriate for the nature of the study.
Transparency	The methodology of the research upon which the literature is based must be made explicit (e.g. sample size, methods of data collection, analysis).
Topic	Literature must relate directly to one of the review questions (parent and children’s transition experiences, impact on their wellbeing, facilitating factors, and inhibiting factors of successful transition).
Reliability/validity	As far as can be determined, the findings upon which the literature is based must be valid and reliable, taking into account the type of study.
EXCLUSION CRITERIA	RATIONALE
Literature not written in English	Difficulties in translation and professional context.
Not peer reviewed literature (Books and reviews)	To ensure the robustness of the research underpinning the literature.
Broad based migration studies (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants and broader spectrum of TCKs)	This field is too broad and such groups have diverse and unique experiences to the globally mobile professional families.

## SOURCES USED

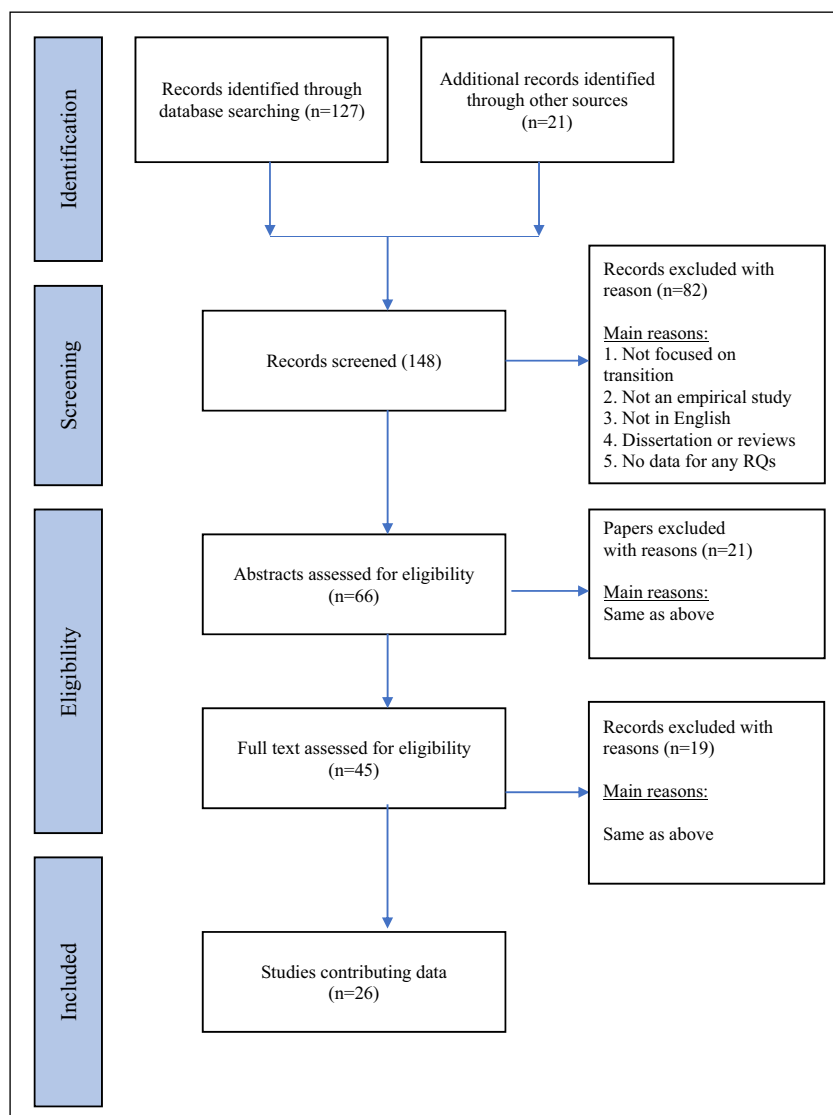
A number of most relevant databases were searched including: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Web of Knowledge (Web of Science and ISI proceedings), SCOPUS and International Education Research database. Based on previous literature, key terms were identified and subsequently refined using 'Boolean operators' (Table 4).

KEYWORD 1	KEYWORD 2	KEYWORD 3	KEYWORD 4
International school Elementary school Primary school Secondary school High school	Third Culture Kids Expat* Globally mobile children Internationally mobile children Global nomads International school students Adolescence Adult TCK Families	Trans* Move Chang* Adjust* Migrat*	Wellbeing Well-being
Combined all terms with <b>OR</b>	Combined all terms with <b>OR</b>	Combined all terms with <b>OR</b>	Combined all terms with <b>OR</b>
<b>AND</b>		<b>AND</b>	<b>AND</b>

**Table 4** The combination of keywords and wild card prefixes to search databases.

## SCREENING, EVALUATION AND APPROACH TO SYNTHESIS

Once the search for studies was completed, the following systematic steps were undertaken (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1** PRISMA flow diagram of study selection.

1. Screening studies: As illustrated in Figure 1, 148 records were included for initial screening. Each study was screened against the inclusion criteria (Table 3). Of the 148 records, only 26 studies were considered relevant for this review.
2. Describing and mapping: We outlined the methodology and findings from each study (e.g. study design, population and location focus). These were used to design a 'descriptive map' providing a description of each study and how it related to each review question. A cross-check on a random sample of studies included in the literature review was carried out by the second author.
3. Quality and relevance appraisal (Jindal-Snape et al., 2013): Each study was evaluated in the descriptive map in relation to:
  - The trustworthiness of the results assessed by the quality of the study within the typical standards for conducting the particular type of research design used in the study (methodological quality).
  - The appropriateness of the study design for addressing its particular review question (methodological relevance).
  - The appropriateness of the research focus for answering the review question (topic relevance).
  - Judgement of overall weight of evidence (WoE) (Gough, 2007) based on the assessments made for each of the above criteria (see Table 5). As can be seen from Table 6, WoE was low with no studies found to be excellent across all three criteria. Given the paucity of literature that was excellent across all criteria, we decided to include all 26 studies and take account of this in the synthesis stage of the process.
  - Synthesising findings: *Narrative Empirical Synthesis* (EPPI-Centre, 2010) was used to inform the synthesis process. This involved combining the summaries of research methodology, findings and weight of evidence from the mapping exercise under thematic headings, summarising the key messages and their relative evidence bases.
  - Conclusions/recommendations: We drew up a set of recommendations closely linked to the findings of the synthesis in order to highlight the basis upon which each recommendation was made. Perceived limitations of studies included in the review were reported. We have also suggested recommendations for future research in the field of international family transition.

**Table 5** Criteria for judging 'weight of evidence' (Jindal-Snape et al., 2013).

LEVEL/ CRITERION	METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY	METHODOLOGICAL RELEVANCE	TOPIC RELEVANCE
1: Excellent	Excellent research design with clear justification of all decisions: e.g. sample, instruments, analysis. Clear evidence of measures taken to maximise internal and external validity and reliability and reduce sources of bias.	Research questions (RQ) clearly stated. Methodology is highly relevant to their RQs and answers them in detail.	Study is very closely aligned to one of the key review objectives and provides very strong evidence upon which to base future policy/action.
2: Good	Research design clearly stated with evidence of sensible decisions taken to provide valid and reliable findings.	RQ are explicit or can be deduced from text. Findings address RQs.	Study is broadly in line with one of the key review objectives and provides useful evidence.
3: Satisfactory	Research design may be implicit but appears sensible and likely to yield useful data.	RQs implicit but appear to be broadly matched by research design and findings.	At least part of the study findings is relevant to one of the key review objectives.
4: Inadequate	Research design not stated or contains flaws.	RQs not stated or not matched by design.	Study does not address any key research objective.

WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE*			
	METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY	METHODOLOGICAL RELEVANCE	TOPIC RELEVANCE
Excellent	n = 0	n = 0	n = 0
Good	n = 14	n = 7	n = 12
Satisfactory	n = 11	n = 17	n = 11
Inadequate	n = 1	n = 2	n = 3
<b>Overall WoE Excellent in each category</b>		<b>n = 0%</b>	

**Table 6** Frequency of papers with Weight of Evidence Rating.

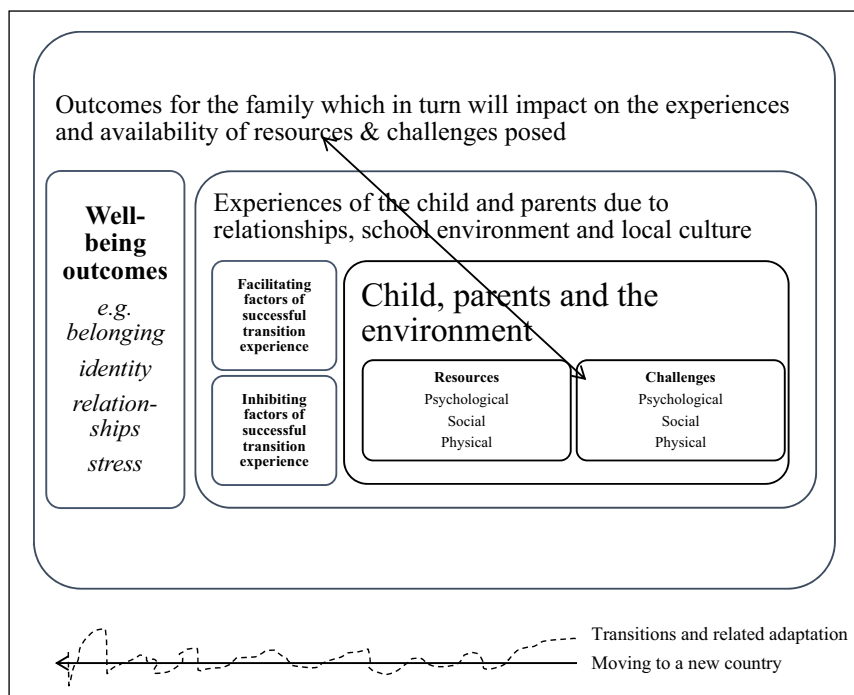
\* Not all papers had the same rating for each criteria.

## THEORETICAL LENS

Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape, 2012, 2016) was adopted as the underpinning theoretical framework. The MMT theory emphasises that individuals experience multiple transitions at the same time, in multiple domains (e.g. social, psychological) and multiple contexts (e.g. school, home). These multiple transitions impact each other and can trigger transitions for other people (e.g. friends, parents, teachers) and vice versa, meaning that transition overall is a multi-dimensional process (Jindal-Snape, 2012, 2016). Therefore, parents and children will experience a range of transitions some of which have been triggered by the transitions experienced by others (Jindal-Snape, 2016). While the ecosystems of the child and parents might be slightly different, an interaction between them will occur.

Instead of conceptualising international transitions as a 5-stage process as in the well-known Pollock and Van Reken (2009) TCK transition model, the MMT theory does not view transitions in a linear or chronological manner, as transitions are considered to be dynamic, ongoing and subject to change. Indeed, the starting point of one internationally mobile family will be different from that of another family, as transitions are considered unique and complex in nature, and are situated in a dynamic environment. Irrespective of the transition support available, complex factors such as prior international experiences, pre departure feelings, and protective and risk factors, will lead to a different experience and outcome for each child and family member. Therefore, for this literature review, we have outlined the reported multiple transitions by exploring both positive and negative experiences, as well as the emergent wellbeing outcomes. The multi-dimensional aspect of the theory is presented through the account of children and parents' transition experiences and the environment, as facilitating and inhibiting factors.

Using MMT Theory, Figure 2 illustrates how the research questions linked together, with one leading to the other. The straight line is used to show that the move might be linear; however the wavy line highlights that international *transitions* and *related adaptation* are non-linear processes.



**Figure 2** MMT model of international school transitions.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDIES

The inclusion of a wide variety of studies ensured that the review did not fall into the trap of being reductionist in scope (MacLure, 2005). As can be seen from Table 7 included studies used a range of research designs and data collection methods. There were seven case studies, involving the collection of qualitative data such as interviews and observations; six large-scale studies, primarily involving questionnaires and surveys; 13 small-scale studies that were not case studies, mainly involving interviews. Of these only three studies used experimental designs, eight involved longitudinal designs (six of these were case studies), and there were

**Table 7** Overview of included studies.

\*same dataset.

REFERENCE	RESEARCH DESIGN	COUNTRY	SETTING	SAMPLE	DATA COLLECTION METHOD
Adams (2014) *	Case study, Longitudinal	Malaysia	School, home, playground	3 principals 7 teachers, 5 families and 13 siblings (3–8y)	Video recording, field notes, photographic images
Adams (2016) *	Case study, Longitudinal	Malaysia	School, playground home	1 family with 2 children (age 8 and 6)	Video recording, field notes, photographic images
Adams & Flear (2015) *	Case study, Longitudinal	Malaysia	School, home, playground	1 family with 2 children (age 8 and 6)	Video recording, field notes, photographic images
Adams & Flear (2016) *	Case study, Longitudinal	Malaysia	School, playground home	1 family with 2 children (age 8 and 6)	Video recording, field notes, photographic images
Bagnall (2012)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	Brazil	School	n = 9 (age 15–19)	Interviews
Brown (2008)	Experimental	Belgium	Online	n = 152	survey
Dixon & Hayden (2008)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	Thailand	School	n = 30 (age 10–11)	Online questionnaire
Ebbeck & Reus (2005)	Mixed methods, longitudinal	Singapore	School	n = 11 (age 8)	Interviews
Fail, Thompson, Walker (2004)	Case study cross-sectional	England	not known	n = 11 (age 45–65)	Postal questionnaires and in-depth interviews
Gilbert (2008)	Qualitative naturalistic, cross-sectional	USA	Various	n = 43 ATCK (mean age 37)	In-depth face to face & telephone interviews or via email
Hannaford & Beavis (2018)	Case study, Longitudinal	Europe	School and home	n = 20 (age 8–13)	Journals, interviews, observation
Korpela (2016)	Ethnographic longitudinal	India	School & different locations	n = nk (age 3–12)	Interviews, field diaries, observation, survey
Kwon (2019)	Narrative inquiry cross-sectional	USA	Not known	n = 6 (age 23–26)	Semi- structured interviews
Lazarova, McNulty, Semeniuk (2015)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	Canada	Online	n = 656	Survey
Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk (2014)	Autobiographical, cross-sectional	China	Private setting	n = 10 (age 18–23)	Collage story & interviews
Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk (2018)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	China	Online	n = 33 (age 18 +)	Focus groups, online discussion boards
McLachlan** (2007)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	England	School	n = 45 families (age 13–14)	Semi-structured, face to face interviews
McLachlan** (2008)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	England	School	n = 45 families (age 13–14)	Semi-structured, face to face interviews
Nette & Hayden (2007)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	Botswana	4 schools	n = 120 (age 9–11)	Questionnaire & Interviews
Rosenbusch & Cseh (2012)	Experimental	USA	Online	n = 111 expatriates n = 15 spouses n = 7 adolescents	Survey
Sears (2011)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	France	School	n = 76 participants: 48 students (8–17 years), 12 parents (including 2 fathers), 16 teachers	Interviews
Tannenbaum & Tseng (2015)	Mixed method, cross-sectional	Israel	Not known	n = 54 (age 18–30)	Web based survey & semi-structured interviews
Van der Zee, Ali & Haaksma (2007)	Experimental	Netherlands	Online	n = 104 (age 8–18)	Questionnaire
Velliaris & Willis (2014)	Qualitative study	Japan	Various	n = 9 parents	Open-ended interview
Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller (2009)	Qualitative, cross-sectional	China	School	n = 18 (age 14–19)	Semi- structured interviews
Zittoun, Levitan, Cangia (2018)	Case study, Mixed methods, longitudinal	Switzerland	Various	n = 56 for questionnaire, n = 5973 large scale survey, n = 29 family interviews	Online questionnaire, survey & interviews



three mixed method designs. One mixed method study was longitudinal and employed a case study design. Overall, 12 of the empirical studies collected data from school pupils (seven from primary), while eight studies were related to parents and six to Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs). Eight studies used a multi-informant perspective. It is important to note that of these, four papers came from one study conducted in Malaysia (Adams, 2014; Adams & Fleer, 2015; Adams, 2016; Adams & Fleer, 2016). Similarly, two papers came from one study conducted in England (McLachlan, 2007; 2008). Therefore, the total number of actual studies is reduced to just 22, further highlighting the dearth of literature available. Only nine of the 26 papers collected data from school children and their families; of these four were based on Adams and colleague's dataset and two on McLachlan's dataset. Two of the nine also collected data from school professionals. The vast majority of literature involved cross-sectional designs adopting a single stakeholder approach, hence highlighting the paucity of longitudinal studies employing a multi-informant perspective. Three papers were included from England, five from mainland Europe, 11 from the Asia Pacific, three from the USA and one each from Canada, Israel, Botswana, Brazil. The vast majority of studies collected data in only one setting (e.g. school, home or online), with over half of the papers reporting data collected in school settings.

Seventeen studies provided data for Research Question 1, 17 for Research Question 2 and 11 for Research Question 3. None of the studies included in this review related to all three research questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1 – WHAT ARE CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF MOVING TO A NEW COUNTRY, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT BOTH HOME AND INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL CONTEXTS?

Evidence from Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia's (2018) research suggests that the experiences of parents and children differ when moving abroad and consequently it was decided to split the following section according to children's and parents' experiences of international transitions. Seventeen studies relating to the experiences of children in transition addressed Research Question 1 and were categorised under three broad themes: opportunity for growth, feelings of loss and anxiety, and anger, frustration and potential strategies. The transition experiences of parents from 6 papers addressing Research Question 1 falls into three broad themes: social and emotional advantages, guilt and uncertainty, stress and loneliness.

#### Children's experiences

##### *Opportunity for growth*

It is acknowledged that earlier literature on globally mobile children has a tendency to overemphasise the problematic and negative aspects of an international childhood, understating the developmental opportunities of an international childhood (Adams, 2014, Adams, 2016; Korpela, 2016). Three studies noted the advantages of such an upbringing (Ebbeck & Reus, 2005; Dixon & Hayden, 2008; Bagnall, 2012). For example, Dixon & Hayden's (2008) study at an international school in Thailand of 30 newly arrived children (ages 10–11) observed that while children grieved the loss of friends and extended family, they also demonstrated strong feelings of excitement when joining a new international school in Thailand, hence supporting MMT theory that individuals can experience positive and negative transition experiences simultaneously across multiple domains and contexts. Developing new friendships, meeting their teachers, and learning about the local culture were all identified as positive aspects of the international experience. Similarly, Ebbeck & Reus (2005) interviewed children (n = 11, age 8) about their experiences of joining a new international school in Singapore. They found that after eight weeks, all children reported positive feelings about the school, suggesting the immediate emotional challenges subsided after a short period. However, both the aforementioned studies used data collection methods (online questionnaire and interviews respectively) rather than creative methods which could be more suited to children (e.g. drama, sketches, boardgames). In another study, Bagnall (2012) found that participants (ages 15–19) at an international school in Brazil either missed their previous local community life or relished the international opportunity of different languages and customs, hence highlighting the personal nature of transitions (MMT theory). Caution, however, must be taken when interpreting the results as



the School Principal purposively selected the students in this study. When analysing studies on school pupils, it is also worth noting that children and adolescents are likely to have distinct transition experiences due to their different stages of development (Jindal-Snape, 2016).

Korpela (2016) carried out a 10-month ethnographical study of the experiences of mobile children (ages 3–12) living in Goa, India. She found that the children were comfortable living in multiple cultures and did not wish to stay in one place in the future. She concluded that children were not lacking a sense of belonging but rather profited from the rich and varied experiences associated with a mobile lifestyle. However, it is unclear to what extent their parents and family connectedness influenced the views of the child participants as parents' perspectives were not considered. Therefore, it is difficult to establish the potential interaction between different family member's experiences, as posited by MMT theory. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in the paper's methodology section and lower Weight of Evidence should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings.

A paper by Adams (2016) used a longitudinal multiple case study approach across home and school contexts involving one five year old in Malaysia and found parents prioritised their children's social interaction when moving to a new country. Play dates were used as tools to support building new friendships, which are central to growth and a positive transition. In an earlier paper, Adams (2014) found that attending a new school was one of the first stable routines that the child undertook as it provided the child with both stability and progress in their new life. The paper presents a different perspective of children and international transition, in that the emotions experienced during international transition is viewed as dynamic and part of the child's whole process of development, hence a move away from isolating one form of emotion, such as shock or grief found in earlier studies (Fail, Thompson & Walker, 2004; Gilbert, 2008).

#### *Feelings of loss and anxiety*

The literature reviewed reported evidence that children who move abroad due to their parent's employment, experience feelings of loss and anxiety (Ebbeck & Reus, 2005; McLachlan, 2007; Dixon & Hayden, 2008; Gilbert, 2008). In accordance with MMT theory, transitions within parents' professional domains appeared to trigger transitions for children across several studies. Indeed, losing old friends and leaving extended family (psychological, social and educational domains all impacted) were identified as critical challenges for children. For example, Dixon & Hayden's (2008) study (see Table 7) noted children experienced a strong sense of loss concerning leaving their old school (educational transitions), extended family, friends, and pets (social transitions) behind. However, the study used a computer-based questionnaire for children aged 10–11 and may have potentially impacted the type of responses provided, as children may have been 'led' into choosing a response. Echoing these findings, McLachlan (2007) explored the experiences of 45 globally mobile families at an international school in England. She found that adolescents (ages 13–14) in her study experienced stress and emotional pain during the relocation to their new school, suggesting participants experienced negative transitions within their educational and psychological domains. Both of the studies mentioned above were cross-sectional and therefore, do not tell us how children's feelings of loss and anxiety may change over time. As transition is a process that unfolds over time, a longitudinal study would offer a stronger base from which to make these arguments. For example, a longitudinal study conducted by Ebbeck & Reus (2005) which explored children's (n = 11, age 8) feelings after immediately joining an international school in Singapore and again after eight weeks, reported that children felt vulnerable and nervous when starting the new school but that these feelings subsided after eight weeks. Grieving the loss of old friends and not having a sense of belonging to their new school were all identified as the immediate emotional challenges for the children in the study. However, it is questionable whether a study with a duration of only eight weeks can be considered longitudinal.

Alongside experiencing varying degrees of loss and homesickness (psychological transitions), five studies reported that children expressed anxiety about their ability to make new friends (social transitions). Dixon & Hayden (2008) observed that levels of worry about building new friendships did not reduce according to the number of international moves. Similarly, Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller (2009) observed that teenagers (n = 18, ages 14–19) who moved to

a new international school in Shanghai were more worried about making friends and fitting in within their new school environment rather than learning the local language and forming social networks outside school. It should, however, be borne in mind that all the studies above conducted their research only within international school settings. It would, therefore, be useful to explore additional contexts, such as the home or local community in order to provide a broader understanding of children's experiences of international transitions. By exploring different MMT contexts, it is also possible that participants might report different experiences.

The literature on ATCKs has also highlighted feelings of loss and anxiety when examining the retrospective experiences of an international childhood (Fail et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2008; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). Gilbert (2008), for example, conducted 43 in-depth interviews with ATCKs exploring their international childhood experiences. She observed that ATCKs childhoods involved grief and loss, and that these feelings were reported to have extended into adulthood, hence suggesting participants navigated negative psychological transitions. However, as over 70% of the ATCKs in her study were Americans, the results are somewhat biased towards one nation and/or culture. Comparably, participants in Lijadi & van Schalkwyk's (2014) study seemed to be experiencing multiple social transitions as participants were reportedly anxious to commit and build close friendships with peers, for fear of later separation. Similarly, Fail et al. (2004) conducted a multiple case study examining the lives of 11 former international students. Participants in their study appeared to experience transitions within their psychological and identity domains as they observed a loss of identity and belonging while growing up in different countries, and these challenges were found to extend into adulthood. It should be noted that while these ATCKs studies provide us with some understanding of the long-term impact of a mobile childhood, they do not give us any insight into current perspectives of international transition experiences. This is because they rely on individual's memories, which usually only retain critical incidents and airbrush issues which can be both positive and negative. Moreover, such retrospective studies can be critiqued for lacking a multi-informant perspective which is central to understanding the multi-dimensional nature of transitions.

#### ***Anger, frustration and potential strategies***

Five studies made mention of children's anger and frustration when moving abroad, providing insights into potential strategies that can support transitions. A key concern identified was children's powerless positioning within the whole transition experience (Dixon & Hayden, 2008; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Hannaford & Beavis, 2018). In their longitudinal case study (n = 20, ages 8–13), Hannaford & Beavis (2018) reported that children's feelings had been overlooked by parents, resulting in heightened emotional frustration for the children. They reported on one case study and found that during the early weeks, the children grieved their 'old' household possessions as they awaited the shipment of their household possession e.g. toys, access to a computer and online membership of 'Club Penguin' etc. They noted that membership of an online world (e.g. 'Club Penguin'), offered these children a familiar place to reconnect with old friends and a sense of belonging during the challenging period of immediate adjustment.

Similarly, Adam & Fleer (2015) observed the significance of children's belongings in alleviating frustration during an international transition. In their case study examining the experiences of one Australian family moving from Malaysia to Saudi Arabia, they found personal belongings acted as a cultural tool for facilitating family transition. It was found that the subsequent reunion with belongings signified how belongings embody emotional meaning for children, alleviate frustration during transition, and help facilitate connections with home. Comparably, frustration and repressed anger were reported by Lijadi & van Schalkwyk (2014) to play a significant role during ATCKs developmental years as a result of repeated farewells, reflecting the high turnover of students in international schools. They concluded that the ATCKs in their study used avoidance strategies to cope with the loss of friends during their international childhood. A shortcoming of the studies addressing children's experiences is that they do not consider the broader context of the child in transition. Indeed, as transition is a multi-dimensional process, it would also be useful to explore how a child's anger and frustration during transition might potentially impact other family members.

## Parents' experiences

Six studies reported the transition experiences of parents moving abroad (McLachlan, 2007; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Velliariis & Willis, 2014; Adams & Fleer, 2015; Korpela, 2016; Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia, 2018). Social and emotional advantages, guilt and uncertainty, and loneliness and strain were all identified as key themes emerging from the literature.

### *Social and emotional advantages*

Four out of the six studies talked about the social and emotional advantages that parents, and families as a whole, experience when moving abroad (McLachlan, 2007; Velliariis & Willis, 2014; Korpela, 2016; Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia, 2018). Parents reported that their families had become stronger and more cohesive as a result of a globally mobile lifestyle (McLachlan, 2007; Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia, 2018), thus highlighting positive family transitions (MMT theory). Indeed, McLachlan (2007) found that parents created opportunities for growth through undertaking family-based activities, in addition to spending time with other internationally mobile families in the international school community. A critique of the study, however, was the small sample of fathers interviewed (four fathers and forty-one mothers), hence limited conclusions can be drawn regarding their experiences. Further, Zittoun Levitan & Cangia (2018) conducted a mixed methods study in Switzerland and reported that the family acted as a resource in an emergency situation. As one family member experienced negative health transitions (major illness), the family unit seemed to be experiencing positive social and psychological transitions as they reported becoming a much stronger and closer family unit (MMT theory).

Three studies talked about the factors which made expatriation an attractive option for their families (Velliariis & Willis, 2014; Korpela, 2016; Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia, 2018). Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia (2018) found parents deemed Switzerland attractive due to career opportunities and salary, as well as an attractive place for families to live (e.g. transportation, healthcare and education). Similarly, Velliariis & Willis (2014) observed that international parents (n = 9) in Tokyo were attracted to the city, not only for career and financial reasons but also due to the social and educational benefits for their children. It is, however, unclear from these studies, whether such social and financial advantages helped facilitate a positive transition experience or whether they were the main reasons for undertaking the assignment in the first place. It is therefore of merit for studies to capture the pre-departure expectations of families in transition.

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, Korpela (2016) observed that parents in her study were not employed by multinational companies with expatriate benefits. She reported that parents moved to Goa for a better quality of life and to raise their children in an open-minded community, away from the cultural and social practices of their native countries. It is important to note that whilst she conducted one of the very few longitudinal studies in the field, her study lacked an underpinning theoretical background, alongside neglecting the pre-departure expectations of families.

### *Guilt and uncertainty*

McLachlan (2007) found that parents reported feelings of guilt regarding the family decision to move abroad. In particular, fathers struggled to find a balance between work demand and family commitments while mothers stopped working and took on traditional parenting roles. Parents supported grieving children, worrying about their children's emotional security development and becoming a 'counsellor' as they developed new friendships. A shortcoming of this study, however, is that only 'traditional' type families participated, and other types of family units were excluded. Furthermore, the study did not provide any insight into individual family characteristics, which would have improved understanding of not only the family's transitions experience but also the impact of transition on them and the factors which help facilitate a successful transition.

### *Strain and loneliness*

There was some evidence that the spouse experienced strain and loneliness when moving to a new country. Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia (2018) worked with 29 families but analysed one family's transition experiences in detail and found that the mother was distressed and lonely during the initial months moving to Switzerland due to having limited German language skills. In contrast, the father's professional and domestic proximal spheres of experience were

reported to be relatively stable across the various international moves. Their study is useful as it offers a multi-informant perspective of family transition, although it fails to consider any evidence of the potential impact of transition on family wellbeing.

Similarly, in a more comprehensive study examining the relationship between family flexibility and the stressors experienced by the working expatriate ( $n = 111$ ), spouses ( $n = 15$ ) and children ( $n = 7$ , ages 14–18), Rosenbusch & Cseh (2012) highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of transitions. They observed that the spouse was concerned with organising family life, finding a job, learning the culture and language of the host country, and felt isolated in the absence of a professional identity. Meanwhile ‘working’ expatriates found it challenging to understand and communicate with new colleagues and experienced a demanding new workload, alongside balancing family commitments. Relationships were cited as a common challenge for the entire expatriate family, namely the difficulty of building new friendships and maintaining contact with old friends. The disconnect from old friends and family contributed to feelings of loneliness, particularly for the spouse. It is worth noting, however, that the study did not take into account that a family arriving in the US after six months is unlikely to share the same experiences as an expatriate family who has lived in the same country for three years. By grouping families together, they failed to appreciate the importance of individual family characteristics in explaining international adjustment.

Adams & Fleer (2015) talked about an expatriate family moving to Malaysia who appeared to be experiencing multiple transitions. They observed that whilst the mother enjoyed the expatriate lifestyle, she struggled with the regular and long absence of her working husband, particularly setting up a new life in a different country with young children. The mother reported finding the whole moving process a challenge. Educational transitions for her children seemed to impact and interact with transitions within her psychological domain as the mother appeared to worry about her children making friends and settling into life in Malaysia. The mother reported requiring additional support when her husband returned from his travels. However, her expectation was left unmet as her husband needed extra sleep, leading to disappointment for both the mother and children, hence highlighting multi-dimensional transitions due to the father’s professional transitions.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION 2 – WHAT EVIDENCE IN THE LITERATURE IS THERE FOR IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL TRANSITIONS ON THE WELLBEING OF INTERNATIONALLY MOBILE FAMILIES?**

Surprisingly, only one study made direct mention of wellbeing of internationally mobile families. However, there were 16 additional studies which seemed to support the notion that IM families experience multiple transitions across several MMT domains, including psychological, social and cultural, identity and physical domains, and can impact family wellbeing. The reported impacts on families related to their sense of belonging, identity, maintenance of long-term relationships, cultural, physical and organisational stress and resilience.

### **Sense of belonging (*MMT psychological and social domains*)**

The greatest weight of evidence in the literature related to reported impacts on children’s sense of belonging when living abroad. In a large-scale study of 120 globally mobile children across four different expatriate schools in Botswana, Nette & Hayden (2007) found that primary aged children had a sense of belonging, but they had difficulty in identifying a specific country of belonging. Only after living for two years in Botswana did any of the children regard it as their main country. Making new friends and becoming familiar with the physical aspects of the country (e.g. local shops, roads) all contributed to children’s sense of belonging. The study concluded that children identified their family as the most crucial aspect to their sense of belonging, therefore suggesting family members supported each other which seemed to trigger positive transitions for children’s sense of belonging. The study’s data only provided the child’s perspective and only offered a cross-sectional snapshot of children’s sense of belonging. In contrast, Hannaford & Beavis (2018) conducted a one-year longitudinal study and found primary aged children undergoing an international transition gained a sense of belonging through membership of ‘online worlds’ e.g. Club Penguin. They argued that during the early stages of the transition, the children grieved their old belongings, thus highlighting

the significance of children's familiar belongings and activities to ensure a stable sense of belonging and wellbeing. A similar finding was reported by Adams & Flear (2015), who found the importance of belongings as a facilitating factor for supporting families in transition. The absence of belongings for a prolonged time, together with a child's reunion demonstrated how belongings embody emotional meaning and promote sense of belonging. Comparably, in a study by Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia, (2018), it was observed that mobile children who moved to Switzerland became very attached to places or anecdotic objects that acted as powerful symbolic resources (e.g. a toy). They concluded that children's sense of belonging in transition might be facilitated by careful attention to these important objects.

Other smaller-scale studies have also noted an impact on children's sense of belonging when moving to a different country (Ebbeck & Reus, 2005; Kwon, 2019). Kwon (2019) reported in his study of 6 ATCKs that globally mobile children develop a sense of belonging from relationships they form with individuals from similar backgrounds (such as those who have shared a mobile lifestyle), rather than geographical location. Ebbeck & Reus (2005) however reported that children did not have a sense of belonging when starting their new school in Singapore. In particular, they felt a loss of belonging to a specific 'membership group' in their new cultural context. This changed after eight weeks however as students developed a sense of belonging to the new school as they started to develop new friendships, gained acceptance, and received academic success.

In a qualitative study examining student (ages 15–19) belongingness at an international school in Rio de Janeiro, Bagnall (2012) found students carried a challenged sense of belonging. Similarly, Fail, Thompson & Walker (2004) in their multiple case study of former international school students, reported that three out of 11 ATCKs had no sense of belonging in adulthood and continued to feel like outsiders throughout their life. However, a critique of these studies is that they frequently considered belonging from the perspective of attending an international school. There are of course, several contexts and domains, e.g. home where the sense of belonging might be stronger and potentially even enhance through the transition experience. Fail, Thompson & Walker (2004) did however concede that some ATCKs in their study used their multicultural upbringing to their advantage by possessing a multiple sense of belonging to different places, hence facilitating the ability to adapt and integrate. However, as previously mentioned ATCK studies rely on memory and may report a different sense of belonging than children.

In another study on the experiences of 33 ATCKs reflecting on their developmental years attending international schools, Lijadi & van Schalkwyk (2018) argued that international schools offered mobile children the opportunity to socialise with other like-minded individuals, helping them to obtain a sense of belonging. However, they also observed how international schools have changed in recent years, such that mobile children now share classrooms with local students who often cannot fully appreciate the highly mobile lifestyle of some children. As a result, they concluded that mobile children may become more vulnerable within a context which is supposed to be supportive and provide them a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it could be argued that internationally mobile children who share the classroom with more 'locals' could potentially assist with the acculturation process of expatriate children as locals are more likely to stay in the school and hence provide a 'stable' context to build deeper friendships.

Only two studies talked about parents' and children's different understanding of the impact of moving abroad on belongingness. For example, Korpela (2016) found that adults and children did not share the same culture or understanding of what constitutes a vital practice or custom, and hence children did not necessarily share the same sense of belonging to their parents. In contrast to earlier research, she found that parents had an unproblematic sense of belonging to their native 'cultures' and were happy to distance themselves from cultural and social practices of their native countries. She also observed that for expatriate children, the culture and social environments they experience is a process of negotiation rather than being inside or outside of a culture. She argued against the notion of a fixed and permanent culture in a critique of the 'third culture' concept and concluded that we should focus on emerging new cultural forms, including by IM children themselves. Similarly, Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia (2018) reported how children experienced temporality differently from their parents. They reported how children actively built strong networks of proximal and distal spheres of experience, which presented



various qualities of homeness and belonging, supporting the idea that children have agency and can create their own identities as well.

### **Identity (MMT identity domain)**

There was strong evidence across the literature that moving abroad impacted children's identity (Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller, 2009; Sears, 2011; Bagnall, 2012; Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015; Kwon, 2019). Sears (2011) conducted a qualitative study exploring the formation of identity among globally mobile children at an international school in France. She found globally mobile children quickly identified themselves as people on the move. The children seemed to experience multiple identity transitions as they were reported to hold multiple identities. It was reported that narratives were the means where globally mobile children form and maintain identity, and was used to provide an explanation of themselves to others. However, the mother was frequently the ongoing compiler of individual stories of her children and secured the family identity, highlighting an interaction between family member's identity transition experiences (MMT theory).

In a study on adolescent identity, Bagnall (2012) identified three distinct groups of students. 1. students who know exactly which country they are from; 2. students who are not sure; 3. students who feel an attachment to a global rather than national identity, although he did not report which group found it easier or more difficult to grow up abroad. However, he did argue that the children in his study (ages 15–19) were at a very vulnerable stage of identity formation as adolescence is a time of confusion where the notion of identity and role confusion may clash. In support of the notion that adolescence is a difficult period for student identity formation, Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller (2009) found that teenagers are at a crucial stage in forming their identities independent from their parents. In their study at an international school in Shanghai, they suggested that an international move disrupted student's (ages 14–19) identity formation due to the absence of a friendship network at the new school. As these studies were both cross-sectional, it is difficult to understand the long-term impact on identity formation and whether these studies were referring to personal, self, or social identity.

Studies focusing on the experiences of ATCKs also made mention of the impact of international transition on identity formation (Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015; Kwon, 2019). For example, Kwon (2019) presented the challenges of ATCKs' identity formation during their international childhood years, while a mixed method study involving 54 participants (ages 18–30) in Israel (Tannenbaum & Tseng, 2015) found that participants used languages to define themselves and others. Being multilingual was considered by many to be their identity. A critique of the study was that it assumed an individual must identify with a particular culture, hence disregarding the possibility that individuals can forge identities across different domains due the multi-dimensional process of transition. Furthermore, Korpela (2016) has criticised previous literature for overemphasizing the loss of cultural identity for globally mobile children. She found that children did not view national or ethnic identity to be personally significant.

### **Maintenance of long-term relationships (MMT Social domain)**

There was evidence from only one study (Lijadi & van Schalwyk, 2014) of an impact on the maintenance of long-term relationships. In their study of 10 ATCKs (ages 18–23), it was found that children who spent their developmental years abroad feared commitment and reticence in forming close friendships. The participants in the study seemed to experience multiple social transitions as they reported that while friendships formed quickly, these relationships were both transient and short-lived in nature, hence impacting overall wellbeing. However, as the study focused exclusively on the experiences within international schools, we are unable to ascertain how the participants developed relationships in other contexts, such as local groups and within the home.

### **Cultural, physical and organisational stress (MMT Cultural and Physical domains)**

Only one study made mention of the impact of cultural, physical, and organisational stress on families (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). Rosenbusch & Cseh (2012) reported that cultural stress had the most considerable impact on expatriate families with many feeling unprepared for

the move abroad. Professional transitions seemed to trigger organisational stress for both the expatriate and spouse due to a lack of support from the company and job uncertainty through organisational restructuring. Physical stress was found to impact all family members and many participants highlighted weight gain or inability to exercise due to the new unfamiliar environment.

### **Resilience (*MMT Psychological domain*)**

There is reasonable evidence across three papers that international transition enhanced resilience and contributed to family wellbeing. Indeed McLachlan (2007, 2008) reported increased family resilience and unity as a result of an expatriate lifestyle. Similarly, Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia (2018) discussed how the family can act as a resource in times of emergency, becoming stronger and more resilient without the support from extended family or a broader social network, hence offering a more positive perspective on the transition process.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION 3 – WHAT FACILITATES AND HINDERS INTERNATIONALLY MOBILE FAMILIES' SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION EXPERIENCES?**

Before moving to the factors which facilitated and hindered international transition, it is important to briefly explore what defines a successful transition experience. Successful transitions can be viewed differently depending on the context and stakeholders involved. In terms of educational transition, previous research has looked at successful transition in terms of solely educational adjustment, e.g. achievement and attendance (Ng-Knight et al., 2016), whilst others highlighted the need to look at the broader context and include social and emotional adjustment as part of a successful transition (Peters, 2010; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). In terms of expatriate families, Haslberger & Brewster (2008) note that successful family adjustment is the preservation of family pre-assignment functionality and that of its individual members. They argue that as long as the capabilities of each individual family member are sufficient, an international move may prove a successful experience. It is only when demands exceed the adjustment capabilities of the family that the assignment abroad becomes unsuccessful.

Keeping these brief explanations of successful transition in mind, only three studies made direct mention of what factors facilitated and hindered a successful transition experience. However, there were eight additional studies which indirectly referred to the transition outcomes. None of the studies directly asked families what for them constituted a successful transition experience despite them being most impacted by the transition.

### **Facilitating factors of successful transition**

There was some evidence in the literature that children used anchors (protective factors) to help them cope with frequent international transition (Nette & Hayden, 2007; Dixon & Hayden, 2008; Sears, 2011; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014; Adams & Fler, 2015; Adams, 2016).

#### ***Anchors: friends, school, symbolic objects***

Nette & Hayden (2007) reported that making new friends and becoming familiar with the physical aspects of school all contributed to children's sense of belonging and facilitated their intercultural adjustment. However, the study did not explain which physical aspects of the school were important to the children. Similarly, Lijadi & van Schalkwyk (2014) talked about how international schools became stable contexts for the ATCKs in their study as the school allowed for the possibility to share experiences and make new friends. Furthermore, Sears (2011) found 48 students (ages 8–17) at an international school in France gained confidence and comfort joining a school community where their mobile lifestyle was considered normal. She observed that students understood the need to be open to making new friends as well as welcoming new students, which facilitated a smoother transition. Adams (2016) also found making new friends to be central to young expatriate children's successful transition. In her case study, she observed that Western parents placed high priority on arranging play dates to facilitate a positive experience. In addition, Dixon & Hayden (2008) found that children reported adopting strategies to cope with parting friends. They observed that children employed strategies for developing less meaningful friendships, as a result of multiple transitions.

Other small-scale studies reported children using belongings as a symbolic anchor to facilitate international transition. For example, Adams & Fler (2015) focused on the importance of



children's belongings as objects that facilitate international transition and suggested that parents pay close attention to children's belongings when moving abroad. Comparably, Zittoun, Levitan & Cangiá, (2018) found children who experience multiple international transition may become very attached to places and anecdotic objects that act as symbolic resources.

#### ***Anchor: family***

There was evidence that family-related issues (notably the family and spouse adjustment) directly impacted the success of international assignments (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012; Lazarova, McNulty & Semeniuk, 2015), highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of transitions. For example, in their large-scale study examining 656 expatriate family members, Lazarova, McNulty & Semeniuk (2015) found a key characteristic of the successful moveable family was a solid relationship between the partners and where the family unit was considered "water-tight". Rosenbusch & Cseh (2012) identified family flexibility as key to facilitating a successful cross-cultural transition experience during a web-based survey involving 111 expatriates, 15 spouses, seven adolescents (ages 14–18) conducted in the USA. Moreover, in an experimental study examining the relationship between family characteristics and intercultural adjustment of expatriate children across 21 countries (n = 104, ages 8–18), Van der Zee, Ali & Haaksma (2007) found children from highly cohesive families demonstrated greater adjustment ability than children from low cohesive families. Expatriate work satisfaction was also shown to significantly impact children's adjustment and influence their feelings towards the host country. Similarly, in a longitudinal study by Zittoun, Levitan & Cangiá, (2018), the authors found that the family became a resource in the case of an emergency and an anchor in a distal experience (e.g. grandparents' home).

#### ***Family characteristics***

Lazarova, McNulty & Semeniuk (2015) reported that the successful moveable family possessed the following characteristics: adventurous spirit, communication skills that involved sharing and active listening, family commitment to the move, a sense of humour, a conscious effort to socialise outside of the family unit, a family where all members are treated as important and come first in family decisions. On the other hand, Van der Zee, Ali & Haaksma (2007) talked about specific personality traits and attachment styles in facilitating a positive transition experience. They found that children with personality traits comprising emotional stability and those with secure attachment styles exhibited the strongest predictors of a successful adjustment. However, none of the studies addressing the facilitating factors of transition provided any insight whether the parents in the studies experienced a mobile upbringing as this would have likely influenced their own child's transition experience.

#### ***Inhibitors of successful transition***

Four studies made mention of the inhibitors relating to a successful transition experience. Lazarova McNulty & Semeniuk (2015) reported that three main factors prevented a successful international transition for families. Firstly, the change in individual circumstances for the spouse, from full-time employment to staying at home and finding work in a new country was reported to lead to a shift in power relations between the partners. Secondly, financial worries were experienced due to the loss of a second income and incurring unexpected additional costs (e.g. new driving license). Thirdly, considerable marital tension arose as the working expatriate juggled the challenges of a new job resulting in spouses feeling lonely and unsupported. It was reported that 92% of expatriate families in the study believed that relocation-related marital problems filtered down to the rest of the family, a finding supported by Van der Zee, Ali & Haaksma (2007) and illustrating MMT Theory in action where transitions of one individual can trigger and interact with the transition experiences of significant others. In their study on international adolescent adjustment, Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller (2009) concluded that expatriate job tenure was closely related to teenager wellbeing. However, Brown (2008) found no relationship in the duration of the expatriate assignment and stressors experienced in an experimental study based in London, suggesting the experience of transition and length of assignment did not appear to reduce overall stress levels. He observed the following main stressors which acted as inhibitors to a positive transition experience: not spending enough time with partner; not having close friends to confide in; uncertainty about the future after assignment; feeling isolated and cut-off; coping with too many conflicting

demands/expectations. He found that while spouses were more stressed by a reduced self, local pressures and isolation, the working expatriate was more stressed by relationship strains. However, the study only involved predominantly native English-speaking expatriates who were based in London and did not take into account the experiences of non-English speaking expatriates. Conducting the study in another country, where a language other than English is spoken, would likely have also presented communication and language challenges as potential stressors. As the study grouped all the participants together, it is difficult to ascertain the unique experiences of newly arrived expatriates and those who had been in London for over two years.

Except for Zittoun, Levitan & Cangia (2018) all of the studies were cross-sectional and used web-based surveys/questionnaires to collect their data. While a cross-sectional study offers several positive features, it is somewhat limited in international transition research as it only tells us about family experiences at one point in time and in the studies in this literature review, frequently only from one family member's perspective. It does not tell us how experiences vary for each family member over time. Longitudinal studies with a multi-informant perspective would offer the opportunity to look more closely at how different family members' perspectives evolve over time.

## CONCLUSION

As is evident from the review of reviews, this literature review makes an original contribution to this field. However, it is important to first acknowledge some of the limitations of the review. Firstly, it is possible that relevant studies have been missed in the initial search due to the inclusion/exclusion criteria. However, some overlap between the literature was found through different databases, hence providing a degree of confidence that relevant studies emerged through different routes. Secondly, although a sample cross-check was undertaken by the second author, the screening process could have excluded relevant studies. Thirdly, some papers that typically would not have been incorporated due to lower Weight of Evidence were included. However, as they provided some valuable information in response to the research questions, we opted to include this literature.

This literature review has provided some unique insights into the transition experiences of international families, impact of transitions on the families and facilitating/inhibiting factors of successful transitions. From the review, it was apparent that IM families experienced multiple simultaneous transitions, even though children's and parents' transition experiences seemed to differ. While children were primarily concerned with losing friends and their ability to make new ones, parents frequently displayed multi-dimensional transitions as they reported feelings of guilt, loneliness (psychological domain), and concerns about managing family/work commitments (across home and professional contexts). A recurring theme for children was feelings of anxiety and the importance of personal belongings. According to Jindal-Snape & Miller (2009), parents and the school community should promote conditions that might enhance children's resilience and ease anxiety associated with transitions. This could include heightened awareness from teachers and parents about the importance of children's physical belongings during international transitions, thereby enhancing children's resources and overall wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012).

With regards to children and parental experiences, the literature review displayed a slightly negative discourse regarding international mobility and pointed quite heavily to feelings of anger and frustration and guilt/loneliness, respectively. The majority of children's studies only reported on experiences from within school settings and therefore failed to explain how children fared in other contexts. Four out of the six parental studies, highlighted a surge in family resilience, thereby acting as a 'resource' during the transition 'challenge'. However, as limited studies explored contexts outside of the school environment, we cannot draw any conclusions as to children's experiences within the home and other contexts.

Three recent studies on international family transition experiences (Adams, 2014, 2016; Korpela, 2016) attempted to move away from the negative discourse and highlight the positive aspects of transitions. These studies were longitudinal and therefore, helpful in understanding how families transition internationally over time. By viewing transition as an ongoing, multiple and complex process (Jindal-Snape, 2016), as opposed to the widely used chronological framework

offered by Pollock & Van Reken (2009) for international school research, in line with MMT Theory, it may be possible to move the discourse away from highlighting only the negative aspects of transitions to a balanced narrative.

Concerning the second research question about whether international transition has an impact on family wellbeing, findings were somewhat mixed. Part of the problem was related to wellbeing being poorly defined in the literature, and as a result, different factors were used in the papers that closely linked to wellbeing and only one study directly referred to the impact on family wellbeing (Weeks, Weeks & Willis-Muller, 2009). Where an impact on sense of belonging and identity was found, caution should be taken, since the majority of studies were cross-sectional and only collected data from within school settings, limiting the ability to understand how sense of belonging and identity unfold over time and within different contexts. The literature has typically failed to examine the impact of wellbeing on the child and their significant others from their perspective. Moreover, the literature reviewed tended to group participants' data making it difficult to understand the unique family situation, e.g. impact of the country of origin and previous experiences and their implications for family wellbeing (Zittoun et al., 2018 case study is an exception).

Finally, in relation to the third research question related to facilitating/inhibiting factors of internationally mobile families' successful international transition experiences, we found that literature did not define successful international transition experience. While the literature identified factors facilitating/inhibiting transitions, such as having good friends, a supportive family, adventurous spirit or lack thereof, these studies failed to examine the complexities of the international mobile family experience – of the multiple simultaneous facilitating and inhibiting factors, across different MMT domains and contexts.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this review has provided some evidence against the research questions, it has been surprising to find a general lack of empirical base concerning international family transitions, given the growth of expatriate assignments and international schools worldwide. Further, the literature focused upon the adverse outcomes of international transitions. Much literature lacked a theoretical background and largely neglected the multi-informant approach. For example, the literature has surprisingly little to say about the interrelated experiences of children and parents and fails to take into account the cultural aspect of the relocation. Therefore, the following key recommendations are proposed. Future research in this area needs to be methodologically robust and transparent, which can provide clear evidence of the links between the experiences of families in transition, the impact of their transitions and the factors resulting in a successful transition. We recommend the use of case studies to not only capture the voices of different family members, across multiple domains and contexts, but also to understand how their transitions interact with each other's. The MMT theoretical lens can assist with this so that researchers, policy makers and practitioners can understand how to provide holistic transitions support. Further, as transition is an ongoing process with adaptation over time, it is crucial that longitudinal studies are conducted across countries and school years, starting pre-departure to capture their expectations and overall perspectives as they are likely to have an impact on their ongoing transition experiences and related wellbeing.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Some implications can be outlined for policy and practice. Firstly, international school staff should be aware of the heightened anxiety that some children face when joining an international school, especially concerns associated with making new friends. Teachers should therefore provide multiple opportunities for new students to build strong peer networks and identify with a new group through planned activities, such as small group work, and the use of a buddy system starting predeparture. Secondly, the international schools should support the development of a sense of school belonging and identification with the school through wearing school crested clothing, learning school mottos and songs; this is important for the wellbeing outcomes for both the child and family. Furthermore, schools and families should be mindful of the importance of children's personal belongings as a tool for supporting children in transition. Packing objects significant to them in their bag (e.g. family photo or toy) might be used as part of a 'show and tell' activity. Third, international schools' transition practices should

provide opportunities which enable new students to form secure attachments with peers and professionals. New classroom teachers should become familiar with the individual child's characteristics and preferences; this could be achieved by the previous school providing an online portfolio for each child to take with them when they move schools. Fourthly, parents and schools should promote conditions that might enhance children's resilience during transition by giving them positive messages and by being their support network. Parents should ensure that they openly discuss and prepare their children for the move, including rehearsing any potential concerns about making new friends in a safe and familiar environment. Finally, the discourse around international family transitions needs to change at an international level. It is important that at policy (International Baccalaureate Organisation) and practice level more emphasis is placed on celebrating the positive experiences and wellbeing outcomes for IM families as this could reduce transition related anxiety for children and parents.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Divya Jindal-Snape is Editor-in-Chief of IJELT. She was removed from the editing system for this article to ensure independent review and editing. The article was edited by Professor Iva Strnadová.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The study was designed by CK and DJS. CK undertook the literature search and review. DJS cross-checked a sample of articles for quality assurance purposes. CK wrote the first draft, and DJS and AR revised and finalised the article. All authors approved the final version for publication.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Dr Catherine M. Koini**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-9059-8813](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9059-8813)

School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Transformative Change: Educational and Life Transitions (TCELT) Research Centre, University of Dundee, UK

**Professor Divya Jindal-Snape**  [orcid.org/0000-0003-3851-3381](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3851-3381)

School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Transformative Change: Educational and Life Transitions (TCELT) Research Centre, University of Dundee, UK

**Dr Anna J. Robb**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-2441-7834](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2441-7834)

School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Transformative Change: Educational and Life Transitions (TCELT) Research Centre, University of Dundee, UK

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