

International Mobility and Melancholic Mothers?

An Investigation of transience upon
mothers of primary-aged children and their
school

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Abstract

Global organisations increasingly expect their employees to embrace an internationally mobile lifestyle. For the families of these 'global professionals', such a lifestyle involves becoming 'transient', with a move to a new location, on average, every three years. Within this context, it is typically the mothers who assume the role of primary-carer to their young children. While an international lifestyle appears attractive, the cyclical experiences of loss and upheaval have hidden costs.

This study explores the experiences of twelve mothers living a transient and international lifestyle, whose children were attending a British International primary school in a Western European location. The study was motivated by an interest in some of the psychological effects resulting from the experiences of frequent transience. Some relationships in this school are characterised by a superficial friendliness/harmony which serves to mask the closed-down and defensive undercurrents pervading some of the adult relationships: some mothers appear to staff as overly-demanding and expectant, whilst some staff are generally perceived by the mothers to be distant and unconcerned about their children's progress.

Data were gathered over a four-year period from a variety of sources including: mothers' narrative interviews, school-managers' structured interviews, and a teachers' discussion group. This research identifies and explores some of the nuances such as guilt, anger, envy and loss, which were found to be affecting the mothers' (and the school's) behaviours and perceptions within this international context.

Drawing primarily on psychosocial theories, findings reveal that the mothers are powerfully affected by many losses; a significant and often-unacknowledged loss was found to be that of their previous professional identities. The study proposes that there may be a pattern of melancholic-mothering emerging in relation to the mothers' international-mobility, their positioning within a strongly-gendered series of discourses, and the obstacles preventing them from acknowledging and grieving their many losses. The findings also reveal the need for further research to be undertaken in relation to the experiences of internationally-mobile mothers (and families) with primary-school-aged children.