



Hugh Ferguson helps students add more detail to their mural.

Third Culture, Third Age and the School Wall

Painting the mural on the perimeter wall became a whole-school activity where children worked across the ages in nationality groups

Needing support

'You know you are a Third Culture Kid (TCK) if you can ask for a coke in three exotic languages but cannot spell it in English!' – this quip is typical of the wry, self-deprecating humour that the children of missionaries abroad use when they email one another. Mission agency conferences and a growing professional literature on the subject have helped to define the difficulties, and recommend the support for youngsters and their families as they face a form of cultural identity crisis. Often overseas service has alienated them from the

culture of their passport country, without allowing them to be completely absorbed into the culture of the country in which they now live.

TCKs share this mixture of rootlessness and global belonging with children of other overseas workers, both Christian and secular. Ted Ward (former Professor of Education, Michigan State University) has said that, with their flexibility and world outlook, these young people are the 'prototype of the 21st Century Christian.' For this reason, if not out of a sense of compassion for the price these children are paying for their parents' vocation, the church should cherish and support them.

Offering support

At the Senior Volunteer Network Conference held in October 2003 delegates celebrated the fact that SVN has, over the last seven years, responded to requests for 'third age' (ie 'retired') educationalists

to support the third culture communities around the globe. In addition to 46 projects in the UK and indigenous schools abroad, SVN has also sent volunteers to Central and South East Asia and East Africa to support the education of missionaries' children. Other volunteers have joined missionary families in Kenya and Mozambique to support home schooling, and to help prepare families for re-entry to the UK system.

In November 2003, John Crump (Executive Director of SVN and a former Headteacher) and Hugh Ferguson (a former Deputy Head) undertook a consultancy on behalf of SVN at Hope International School in Cambodia. John and Hugh both had wide experience of primary education and had undertaken similar tasks before in East Africa, Central Asia and India. Their brief at Hope International School was three-fold.

Three aims

Firstly, John and Hugh were asked to help write policy statements based on a Biblical world view for all curriculum subjects as well as for Admission, Behaviour Management, Parent Council (ie PTA), etc. Experience shows that when a Biblically-based world view runs through the curriculum it can overcome the conflicting expectations of the parent body and the School Board.

Secondly, they were invited to prepare and take some music and drama resources for a Christmas

Local food and travel can be a little unsettling (especially when the latter involves pillion rides on motorbikes)



Parents taking their children home at the end of the day.



Students engrossed in a discussion about their work.

production. Parents need reassurance that their children are not completely losing touch with their first culture... and exposure to Christmas music from 'back home' helps!

Thirdly, they organised a mural painting on the perimeter wall of the school. This activity was designed to allow children and adults from various nationalities to explore the richness of the differences between them whilst nurturing a growing appreciation of what unites them.

Unsettling and challenging

John recalls: "The school certainly lives up to its 'international' billing: teachers from Australia and New Zealand work alongside local, Khmer-speaking, Cambodians to teach an even more diverse multi-national intake of 5–14 year olds – many of whom are Korean. Painting the mural on the perimeter wall became a whole-school activity where children worked across the ages in nationality groups. After Hugh's introduction, the groups set about drawing and putting together a composite picture on paper, using objects, shapes and icons representative of their home country. This was transferred to the wall and then painted – stunning! Hugh spent hours in the blazing sun, guiding the students through their work. Perhaps it was the sun that led to Hugh's bad bout of dehydration, but he found, as many other volunteers have found, that the missionary community has both the care and the skill to look after even its most sun-damaged visitors!"

Even though SVN consultants are given sound advice in preparation for every trip overseas, they may return home with symptoms of having

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absorbed elements of the third culture. Sometimes local food and travel can be a little unsettling (especially when the latter involves pillion rides on motorbikes). Likewise, sharing with Christian families who have transcended national boundaries and seized their 'citizenship in Heaven' can be exciting... and challenging.



Students waiting to go to lunch.

Liberating and exhilarating

Hugh reflects: 'Third culture children are often too practised in saying "Goodbye" – friends move on, visitors go home, pets are left behind, and grandparents are far away. But the third culture child grows up to become the third culture adult. For them the Gospel is global, nationalism is petty, prejudice is offensive, the environment is important and solutions must include all humankind. All in all, the concept of the third culture is liberating – even exhilarating – but there is a price to be paid. It is not possible to visit these communities without becoming aware of the tectonic grind of the cultures against each other. Hence the need for Christian unity and practical support.'

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that so many 'retired' teachers who volunteer abroad with SVN testify to the fact that they always receive far more than they give!

■ Tim Slater

SVN volunteer and former Head of a large Essex comprehensive school.

More information

If you are a retired teacher and would like more information about SVN or might consider being part of a team, please visit the SVN website or contact the office. SVN needs more volunteers to be able to respond to the many requests it receives.

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