

## A personal view by Barbara Deveney

### Coming Home to Culture Shock

I have had the pleasure of working in international schools for over twenty years as a teacher and an administrator and I have enjoyed the experience wholeheartedly. Having seen the benefits that an international school education can bring young people, I was happy to enrol my own children as and when they came along and reached school age. Both of my daughters have thrived in classrooms where their peers have hailed from far-flung countries as well as from the local community in the host country. I am proud of the fact that my children have close friends from all races, cultures and religions.

Having to deal with playground tears or classroom outbursts when new students have found the experience just too overwhelming has made me sensitive to my own children's 'new school' experience, particularly more recently when they have made the move as teenagers and have left good friends behind. The internet has proved to be a real blessing and, at any given moment, the girls might be on MSN Messenger to friends in Canada, Australia, Finland, Estonia, Africa, England, Czech Republic, Kuwait, Thailand or Vietnam. To ease the transition from one school to the next for my own children, I have ensured that they have always been fully involved in the process of moving on – the applications, the interviews and, yes, even the polite rejections when applications have not been successful. The whole family has shared the anticipation, the pre-interview nerves and the post-interview suspense.



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**"I am proud of the fact that my children have close friends from all races, cultures and religions"**

My elder daughter has now joined a 6<sup>th</sup> form in an international school in Vietnam and her university years, which she plans to spend back home in England, are looming fast. This brings with it the excitement of forthcoming independence, but it has also raised some worrying thoughts. Just before our last move, my daughter, whose entire school career has been in international schools in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, shared her concerns with me: 'how will I fit in with other English people at university when I've never been part of their culture? Will I be able to make friends? Will everyone think I'm weird because I don't know what they know?' Her concerns are genuine and valid.

It was Useem (1976) who first coined the phrase 'Third Culture Kid' – a description which seems to now so aptly fit my daughter: 'When they come to their country of citizenship ...they do not feel at home because they do not know the lingo or expectations of others – especially those of their own age'. However, strange as it may seem, I have never considered my own children to be classic 'third culture kids', possibly because we have always spent long enough in each country and school to put down some semi-permanent roots rather than more superficial ones. And the term *global nomad* seemed to me to describe those young students who roamed around the international school circuit never seeming to stay in any one place for very long. As a family, we have returned to England each summer deliberately to allow our children to grow roots in

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their own culture, but it is hard to judge how deep those roots will extend when only six weeks of each year have been spent nourishing them. Will all the years of watching 'Auf Wiedersehen Pet', 'Only Fools and Horses', 'The Royle Family' and 'The Office' be enough to place our daughter in the heart of English culture? I think not.

**"I am curious to know whether my daughter will feel drawn towards her English peers"**

However, the 'global village' is working to my daughter's advantage, at least in respect of youth culture. Satellite television has gone some way towards closing the cultural divide; MTV ensures that music is no longer parochial. Teenage fashion has also become international, and particularly easy to procure in those countries where copyright laws are lax and designer name T-shirts, bags and jeans can be bought for next to nothing. These visible accessories of English culture can easily be taken care of, but those invisible traits of culture, those values that sit below the surface of our every social action - well they are not so easy to take care of.

As educators in international schools, we make real efforts to welcome our new students into the school community in order to ensure their experience is a positive one. Most international schools have systems and 'back-up' personnel in place should any child struggle to settle, but universities are beyond my personal experience. What I do know is that they can be large, crowded, intimidating and anonymous places for any young person who has just left home, let alone a young person whose life experiences have been mainly in countries on the other side of the planet. Cushner et al (1992) list the emotional experiences that can be encountered by someone who finds him/herself 'out of culture': *anxiety, disconfirmed expectations, a sense of not belonging, ambiguity and a confronting of personal prejudices*. And all this is on top of the mixed emotions experienced when leaving home for the first time.

I am curious to know whether my daughter will feel drawn towards her English peers on starting university or whether she will feel more comfortable with students who, like her, have spent many of their school years in more distant or exotic cultures. Will she lean towards those other students who don't share a background that is grounded in English culture? Will she be able to navigate Gania and Powell's (1999) '*shifting sands of unshared meanings*' or will she find the experience alienating?

The benefits of being educated in an international school are invaluable and indisputable, but I am interested to see how this education has equipped my daughter to deal with the first stage of her independent adult life. It is interesting to note that, in spending so many years abroad, her first task 'back home' will be to successfully negotiate the obstacle course presented by her own national culture.

**"Her first task 'back home' will be to successfully negotiate the obstacle course presented by her own national culture"**

### References

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