

Introduction

In this edition of Educare, we are privileged to include an article written by one of our own MKs, Abigail Erskine. Her experiences and insights will be helpful for all who teach or care for MKs, both in mission agencies and sending churches. Secondly, on page 5, there is a detailed review of Tanya Crossman's book, *Misunderstood*, written by Steve Bryant.

Abigail's story

A collage of colour

I'm sat in bed, looking at the collage of bitter-sweet memories that covers my cupboard doors in the form of postcards, Bible verses and photographs of special people. The memories are bitter-sweet because they fill me with nostalgia for the life I lived before but also a sincere thankfulness for the wealth of friendships and cultural experiences that God has gifted me in only 25 years of life. I've probably seen more places and interacted with more cultures than most people would in a lifetime and grown under the influence of godly people from all denominations and nationalities. Yet, despite the privileges, I've sometimes been tempted to wall off the past, to believe that friendships and experiences are no longer relevant and that my history is no longer of value.

Uprooted

We moved to England in 2011, after sixteen years of living in a rural Gambian village with no mains electricity or internet access. My parents served the local church as missionaries and I spent most of my school years at a Christian boarding school in Senegal, the neighbouring country.

These days, 'boarding school' might sound quaint and a tad pretentious but, in my experience, it felt more like spending all year at a Christian summer camp! We were surrounded by staff who genuinely cared about their students and we spent our free time playing games, going to the beach and climbing trees. I was amongst other missionary children who didn't really fit in to their host culture but we felt at home together, creating our own micro-culture in our international melting-pot of a community. With so much time living and learning together, the staff and students become family to me. My best friend and I shared a dorm room for five years and related to each other like sisters.

So, when the day came that we drove away from the school for the last time, my little world fell to pieces. (There's only been one other occasion when I cried as much and that was when a family member nearly died!) In one day, I lost a lifetime of relationships, my responsibilities and my reputation. Those people knew who I was, my strengths and weaknesses, and what they could rely on me to achieve. I didn't need to explain myself or prove my capability, as I would soon be doing all the time when we moved to England. We had shared history and it meant a lot.



Family photo at home in Gambia



My classmates in Year 11, representing 6 nationalities.

A few years later, I adopted the following image that helped me explain to people the emotions that emerged that day and developed in my transition to a new culture:

“Leaving the country and the school where I grew up felt like being a plant, ripped up from fertile soil and being thrown down on cement, expected to make new roots.”

Building a wall

When we moved to England, I quickly realised that no one was really interested in my exciting adventures of living in a rural African village without electricity or the 7 hour journeys to boarding school in another country. Or, at least, they struggled to understand. So I stopped talking about it. I built a wall across the past and moved forward as though I had no history, no shared jokes, and no stories of moving to high school, no music with memories attached, and no photographs to laugh over with friends. It was a very confusing season of life and I withdrew into myself during my last two years of school, unsure of how to begin again or how to relate in a world completely unknown to me. Even the church youth group - where I expected to feel most at home - was a minefield to navigate with young people who professed to be Christian using profane language, sleeping with their boy/girlfriends and bringing drugs and alcohol to the church weekend away. (Of course, not all youth groups in the UK are like that!)

If you’ve ever watched the film *Inside-out*, it might help you to imagine the numbness that Riley feels as each of her Islands of Personality shuts down. The Islands of Personality are locations inside Riley’s mind that represent aspects of her personality and define her as a person. Each island is powered by a core memory and, without this core memory, the island turns grey and is susceptible to destruction and loss.

Building a wall across my memories felt very much the same and lead to a similar sense of numbness. It was a coping mechanism to help me move forward but if anything, it held me back. Why? Because my past is what makes me Abigail Erskine. My experiences are what shape my personality. Without them, I was like an empty shell: hollow and numb. Thankfully that didn’t last forever.

I spent a year with YWAM and during this time, God gave me the safe space and surroundings to rediscover my passions and interests and to develop my identity in him. I also started going to an 18-30s group at a nearby church where lots of the young adults had been on short-term mission trips and people actually listened to their stories. If their experiences were important, then so were mine!



Back in Senegal with YWAM team in 2014.

More recently, someone shared another plant image with me that I think captures the value of our past in God's plan for us:

"Each of us is like a seed that God plants in soil but the soil we are in determines the kind of plant we grow up to be. Each plot of soil is so different that no plant will grow up to be the same; it will have its own unique appearance and scent. That is its beauty."

Redefined

One of my biggest challenges in the first few years of being in England was deciphering between culture and faith. So called 'British Values' were not the kind of values I had been brought up to appreciate and, compared to living in a small Christian community, moving to Britain felt like entering Sodom and Gomorrah! Shopping centres were decorated with posters of scantily-clad women and buses advertised movies glorifying demons, magic and the occult. Even in church, teenagers turned up in clothes that would have made my dorm parents' eyes grow wide and anticipated that turning eighteen naturally meant a license to get drunk.



Arriving in the UK, July 2011.

The challenge was to decipher which of my values were rooted in cultural upbringing and which were Biblically formed. I quickly realised that it wasn't cool to turn up at sixth form in a red raincoat but to what extent should I adapt my wardrobe in order to adapt? How can a teenager dress modestly when the definition of biblical modesty differs so drastically between cultures? In the UK, it's normal for Christians to eat and drink at pubs but, when I lived in the Gambia, Christians rarely drank out of courtesy to their Muslim neighbours. To what extent was it okay to adapt to British culture in an effort to relate to other people and which values were important to maintain for living a life pleasing to the Lord? After all, adult missionaries moving to a new country must consider how they will adapt to the culture in order to relate to nationals.

A verse that really helped me through this internal conflict was Romans 12v2:

'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

A positive spin



I'm very thankful for the good group of friends God provided through Sixth Form. Unsurprisingly, we were the misfit group of mixed faiths and nationalities.

I've found it quite hard writing this article and deciding what to share in order to give a true representation of what it was like to transition to my passport country, without being too negative or unrealistically optimistic. What I've shared barely scratches the surface and there are lots more blogs and articles out there that will give more insight and a wider representation of the MK experience. Transitioning to a new country is a huge deal for young people, especially when they're expected to fit right in (the 'Hidden Immigrant' conundrum). It challenges their whole identity and strips them back to being like a baby, forced to learn things from scratch that their peers already know: things as simple as recognising brand names and national celebrities, how to use a bus or pay for items at a self-checkout.

Some sources have said that the grief children can feel when moving countries is equivalent to what they might feel after the death of family members. Young people don't have the same autonomy or perspective as adults and what adults might see as temporary can seem like an eternity to young people. I remember thinking that I would never see most of my friends again the day we left school in Senegal and spread out across different continents. God never ceases to amaze though. Since then, I've been able to reconnect with students and staff at weddings, reunions and have even bumped into a few friends while travelling. Even my best friend has been able to visit me in the UK and I've travelled to Costa Rica to see her. I've also visited The Gambia with my family and returned to Senegal and The Gambia for short term mission trips with YWAM and WEC.

Thankfully, we have a God who knows the struggles of moving culture. He came from heaven to earth and then he evacuated from one country to another. He tells us that we are all aliens in this world and that our identity is with him in heaven. My prayer for any MKs who might read this is that you will value your experiences and realise that where you've been and where you are now is no mistake. It's what God planned for your life, for a unique purpose. Bloom where you're planted and be encouraged that the emotions you might be feeling now are temporary. You will be able to put roots down again but put them down in God. He is the unchanging constant.



Reunion with two of my classmates and dorm parents in Germany.



Returning to The Gambia for my first visit in 2018.

Abigail Erskine

A note: Abi would have liked to include photos of her African friends. Unfortunately she was unable to contact all of them to ask for their permission, so in compliance with Data Protection Law, we have not used them.

Misunderstood

Tanya Crossman's *Misunderstood* was published by Summertime Publishing in 2016. As one of several books on TCKs appearing after a gap of several years, it has made an essential contribution to our understanding of the influences on 21st Century TCKs.

The book is written for TCKs and those who care for them. It describes the experiences of young TCKs and is based on over a thousand responses from surveys and interviews, mostly from under-30s. Those interviewed and surveyed came from typical cross-cultural backgrounds: military, diplomatic, mission, NGO, business, international schools, and unaffiliated. Most pages of the book have short personal anecdotes and insights from the interviews which help to bring the account to life and contribute to its readability.

Since most respondents were young, it is recognised that their perceptions and ideas may well change over the coming years. The book provides a snapshot of how they felt at the time about their experiences.

The features described show influences and a perspective rather than a person. Each TCK is a unique individual and together they display a range of influences and perspectives. Some understandably resist being analysed and categorised. As Tanya says, the book is '...a window into how international life can affect the way a child thinks and feels about the world, and how this different perspective may manifest in the way they interact with others.' (Page xxix of the introduction)

Many of the characteristics identified span different generations of TCKs. These include:

- Experiencing multiple transitions and recognising the need to process grief and loss arising from transitions, alongside the dangers of repressed grief.
- The need to leave well, to help start again positively in the new location
- Living a mobile lifestyle filled with constant changes
- Having a broader worldview and perspective, but not feeling rooted
- Living between the host and passport country cultures without feeling really understood by friends in either, gaining much from the experience yet unsure of their own identity
- The fact that TCKs are part of a much wider group of cross-cultural kids
- Living with the pressure of expectations based on the parents career or vocation, e.g. being a good diplomat's child, or a 'mission kid' who shares their parents' vision and commitment

There needs to be ongoing recognition of these features shared with previous generations. There is a continuing responsibility for parents and organisations to understand their TCKs, and give the best support possible to help them maximise the advantages while working through the challenges.

The technological revolution which has brought about instant worldwide connectivity in the last few years has resulted in many changes. Pre-COVID 19, the impact of cheaper and easier travel has also affected the global picture. These changes include:

- Increased, and still increasing, levels of mobility and change
- Many more TCKs are being educated in the increasing number of international schools that have been established in major world cities. This includes students learning in a language foreign to their parents. (A significant number of parents have no real command of that educational language).
- Proportionally, far fewer are in boarding schools. Just 10% of all TCKs and 15% of MKs born after 1985 attended a boarding school compared to a peak of around 50% in previous generations.
- Many more were learning via the internet even before the pandemic forced schools to deliver lessons on-line.
- More TCKs were being home-schooled.
- Fewer are likely to be immersed in the host culture, and compared to older TCKs, more than twice as likely to have lived in an expatriate bubble.
- Internet contact allows for easy contact with friends who could be anywhere in the world, but can make adaptation to a new culture in the real, physical world more difficult.
- There are more 'latecomers' arriving for the first time as teens in a new culture with the extra challenges that this can bring*
- More non-traditional families with single parents and blended situations

'Misunderstood' is an appropriate title, as over 70% said that this was how they felt in the passport country, and almost 90% said it about the host country. Given those feelings of being misunderstood, what can be done to bring understanding and support where and when it is most needed? Tanya stresses the importance of family resilience; families where parents communicate well with their children will always do better. Involving the children's needs in their decisions rather than just moving on to the next assignment also comes through as crucial. Some TCKs experienced a total lack of involvement in their parents'

decision to relocate, and this produced resentment and a sense of powerless, expressed very strongly by some respondents. A good number referred to good preparation and a listening ear through transitions, with parents and others being available to hear their struggles and challenges.

There are some encouragements for those of us who care for TCKs in mission. Of the MKs interviewed, 77% said that they would not have given up their international experience, 81% said that they gained more than they lost, and 92% stated that they were thankful for their experiences. This included a number who were not following their parents' faith. The figures for MKs were higher than for TCKs in general.

'Misunderstood' raises ongoing and new challenges to both parents and sending organisations. Reading it should affect advice given to parents, as well as our organisations' policies and practices. We highly recommend it as an important addition to our TCK resources.

** As covered in the March 2021 edition of Educare*

Educare is a ministry of WEC International