

# Up in the hills

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or Burmese languages. As Paul explains, “Thailand is mainly intensively farmed flat land, which means they [hill-tribe people] can’t go any further south. For reasons which one can partly understand, the Thai government is giving out IDs very sparingly and generally speaking, only people with IDs can get healthcare and education. Our main focus is to help those who can’t get any help from the Thai government. They are the ones who we will be trying to target when we try and ‘spread the [Montessori] message’ a bit further.

“You could argue that by hill-tribe standards the people we are helping are already quite privileged people,” says Paul. “They come to a school which was already relatively well-equipped and it already had talented and dedicated teachers. Our dilemma was that we had to get it started somewhere and the chance of it succeeding here was much higher than in a poorer or less socially-aware school. These people had all heard about Montessori and they were willing to put resources behind it – they jumped at the chance.

“So we wanted to create a beacon and we have chosen a slightly privileged environment in which to create it, as we needed the beacon to be lit the first time round. We are ... basically very concerned to help other hill-tribe schools.”

## International links sought

The Sahasat School and Ay and Tony’s Doi Tung School are seeking to form a link with an international school that would share written materials. “A sister school, or a group of schools that would be interested in collaborating in sending teachers out, would be perfect. There will always be a place for a volunteer teacher out here,” Paul maintains.

Paul says that donations are always strictly monitored, as the school is a Thai foundation, which has a very strict control over how it manages its money. “If people want to make donations to attract UK tax relief, we have an arrangement with the Mudita Trust, which is a UK registered charity, which would only dispense the money against receipts. The school has worked out that the cost of sending a Thai teacher to the UK for training is equivalent to equipping a complete classroom, so they will have to think very hard before doing that.”

Paul and Patricia made a commitment to make the project a success, putting a certain amount of their own money into it. “We budgeted £1,500 for materials

and we’ve probably spent about £1,200 to £1,300 of that. It went on equipment ... and on a stereo cassette player, a laminator and 80 picture books. The school provides the uniforms and the parents have to pay for meals and a bit for some of the school equipment. The cost of training the Thai teachers and employing a Thai Montessori teacher/trainer accounted for another £3,500.”

Paul says that they are mainly interested in donations of materials for the older children. “Our school is kindergarten 1 and Ay and Tony teach up to kindergarten 2 and 3. They are about to start teaching children aged seven and eight and they want to try and expand it up to age 12. We basically need any syllabus or training material that extends up to age 12. I’m already getting some translated for this school.” Like the St Nicholas school material, Paul says they have carpenters in Thailand who can renovate stuff quickly, which is better than making it from scratch.

“I’m interested in getting help in terms of teaching materials and syllabuses and training materials and anything that will help us become self-sufficient. If there are charities set up as overseas Montessori networks then I’d like to tap into them, but I suspect we may have to go to people like Unicef and other international agencies that have got money to spend on more general education efforts rather than specifically Montessori ones. Of course cash donations would be very welcome, but we are in competition with many other very worthy causes.”

## First volunteer teacher

Alexandra Dendle, from Vancouver, Canada, is going out to Thailand in September for six months to work at Sahasat School. Alexandra is a Montessori St Nicholas trained teacher who is originally from Newcastle, England, and has lived in Canada for 12 years.

Perhaps it was serendipity that allowed me to meet her soon after I arrived in Vancouver and just before she left for Thailand to begin her big adventure. ■

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## Further information

To find out more about the Green Montessori project visit [www.paulhancock.net/montessori](http://www.paulhancock.net/montessori) If you have any materials or other help you would be willing to offer the project, please contact Paul Hancock at [Paul@PaulHancock.net](mailto:Paul@PaulHancock.net)

# One week in Provence

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learning a new language is acquiring confidence to use what little you know without the fear of embarrassment. And this is the same for children. On that first day, once Alice and Elizabeth settled down, looked around at the prepared environment, saw materials they recognised, knew they had the freedom to select their own work and possessed the skills to work independently, they began to lose their fear.

By the end of their first day they were actually looking forward to their second. It vividly makes the point how international Montessori is, and how ideal it is to prepare an environment with materials that cater for children’s needs, and not the cultural differences – language being just one – that differentiates them.

## Extraordinary

I do not claim that there were no moments of boredom for the children, or that they did not feel lost at times. The school is busy and it was not always possible for teachers to devote one-to-one time to our children. But what took place in terms of the children’s confidence was extraordinary. They started with pleasantries, greetings, saying hello and goodbye; they then began to actually think in this simple French when they were with their new peers. The other children also took the opportunity to practise their English – the breaking down of the fear barrier works both ways!

On Friday we watched the children skipping out of their class. Somebody said something to them and the children replied “Au revoir” and “A bientôt” in a relaxing, easy and friendly way. How do you quantify the value of such an experience?

Oxford Montessori Schools is now developing an official exchange programme with Pouces Verts and we hope to see the numbers of children who benefit from this rise each year. The school is also considering widening this programme to include other schools in Europe and perhaps further afield. It is an exciting prospect. ■

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