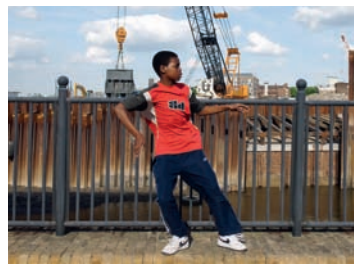


Clockwise from left: Kabir, aged 15, is originally from the Dominican Republic; five-year-old Moeko, from Japan, now lives in Cambridge; London newcomer Isabella, also five, comes from the Pacific Island of Kiribati; Boubacar, aged 14, is from Niger



we are the world

185 children, 185 countries...
 Caroline Irby on capturing the lives of the UK's migrant kids on film

Wherever I'm working in the world – be it on a commercial magazine job, or shooting a photographic campaign for an aid agency – I tend to focus on the children I meet. I'm very interested in migration and the stories of the migrants who come to settle in this country. In every example of a migration, there is a story: a risk taken, a sacrifice made, hopes and dreams pursued. Migration is fascinating because the stories are hidden – it's like picking up a stone and turning it over to find something extraordinary beneath.

When I started to interview and photograph the 185 children for the *A Child from Everywhere* project, I didn't have a preconceived idea of what they might be like – I think it's unfair to have expectations, particularly with children. When I was setting up the interviews, it was the teachers, parents, caseworkers I'd see, so meeting the child was always a surprise. After endless phone calls, train journeys, bus rides and even flights, I never knew who would be waiting for me at the end. It was never a disappointment.

I remember all the children vividly, but if I had to distil the project into just one child, it would be Khulan, from Mongolia. I'd contacted a school in Leicester about interviewing a couple of their students and

was told about a 14-year-old Mongolian girl who had arrived in the UK two years earlier. She came from a traditionally nomadic family, had never been to school and would spend her days looking after their animals and collecting firewood and water. The settled community where they now lived was fractious, and there was animosity towards their way of life. I don't know precisely what happened to them, but, when Khulan's sister and uncle were killed, her parents fled, ending up in the UK. A year later, Khulan came to join them.

Her story is extraordinary. When I asked if there was anything about Mongolia she missed, she told me that, when she's on a train, passing cows and sheep in the fields, she misses the animals she used to tend and wishes she could ride a horse again. Of course, I couldn't resist going back a couple of months later and taking her riding. It was quite surreal to be trotting through the Leicestershire landscape with a girl who'd last ridden across the Mongolian plains. I still get texts now and then from Khulan, telling me what she's up to. The last one said she's had a new haircut and now looks like Victoria Beckham.

Since publishing the book I've given birth to my first child, Laszlo, who is now 11 months old. I would have approached the

project very differently had I already been a mother – it would have been difficult for me to keep a distance and maintain a sense of objectivity. Every child's pain would have felt like Laszlo's pain. I photograph him all the time, but I haven't yet decided how I feel about publishing images of him. Perhaps they will be just for him.

Children share a universal quality of openness. The differences between those I met had more to do with their personalities than where they were from. But almost all of them had an undertone of melancholy that came from having left behind the culture they grew up in.

I find it easier to photograph children than adults – they are unmediated in what they say and the image they want to project. It's quite a revelation to them when you tell them they don't have to smile for the camera. They have a gift for living in the present and being totally involved in what's happening right now. As an adult, that's a rare experience and, when you're with them, it's infectious.

Caroline Irby set out to photograph a migrant child from each of the world's 192 countries. Her book, A Child from Everywhere, £14.95, tells the stories of 185 of them