

Tough Choices: International School or Local School:

What is Your Child's Best Schooling Option?

By Angelika Siaw, M.A.

Three years ago our family had *the perfect* tranquil lifestyle on Canada's West Coast. We lived in an oceanfront house on Vancouver Island, facing beautiful snow-capped mountains. In the summer we would go for long walks along the water and in the winter we would watch loudly barking male California sea lions visiting to feast on Canadian fish before returning home south for mating. Our daughter was excelling at a good school, seemingly effortlessly rolling in one great report card after another. School was just an easy 5 minutes drive from home along the gorgeous coastline. Our careers were steady and we had friendly neighbors and trustworthy friends. Yet, something was painfully missing in our lives. Life was as bland as a bowl of laksa without spices. Rich flavors and colors were missing, boredom was nagging. We were a so-called interracial East-West couple, yet we lived in a totally homo-cultural environment. Cross-cultural exposure amounted to my daughter's textbook images of Inuit and Native Indians, annual multi-cultural music festivals, mediocre dim sum in the city's two blocks of Chinatown and the listening to some strange stereotypes about Asians. At that time, we asked ourselves, how could we as an East-West couple, fully expose our child to the best that both the East and the West had to offer? How could we facilitate for her to have one foot each firmly planted in both worlds? How could we raise her as a true world citizen, able to bridge gaps of lifestyle habits, beliefs and values?

After agonizing for months, we finally decided to sell all that we owned, take a plunge and move to Singapore. We enrolled our daughter in a well-established International School, hoping that this institution would have a good mix of Asian and Western students. My daughter enjoyed her time at this school and made many wonderful friends. Yet, is this what we had come to Asia for? We still felt that she was isolated and protected from fully immersing herself into Asian thinking. Furthermore, school fees were outrageous for us since we were not members of a corporate structure that would absorb schooling costs. Local language and cultural learning were mediocre at best. Students came from all over the world, but teachers were largely drawn from Anglo-phone countries such as US, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand. There was no true richness of worldview amongst the educators. At best there was an "old world (i.e. Europe) – new world (i.e. North America) mix. Yes, there was breadth. Yes, there was diversity. But no, it was not an environment where the East and West met, intermingled and dialogued on an equal basis. Perhaps that has never been the mandate of an international school.

International schools offer academically sound curricula, rich extra-curricular activities, motivated teachers, creative learning environments and excellent support systems for global families on the move. They are designed to allow students to continue their education in a stimulating environment that is not *too different* from what they are used to, and that will allow them to smoothly transfer back home to their passport country or to the next placement location of the family's bread winner. For many families, they *are* truly the perfect choice. Our family, however, choose to walk the road less traveled.

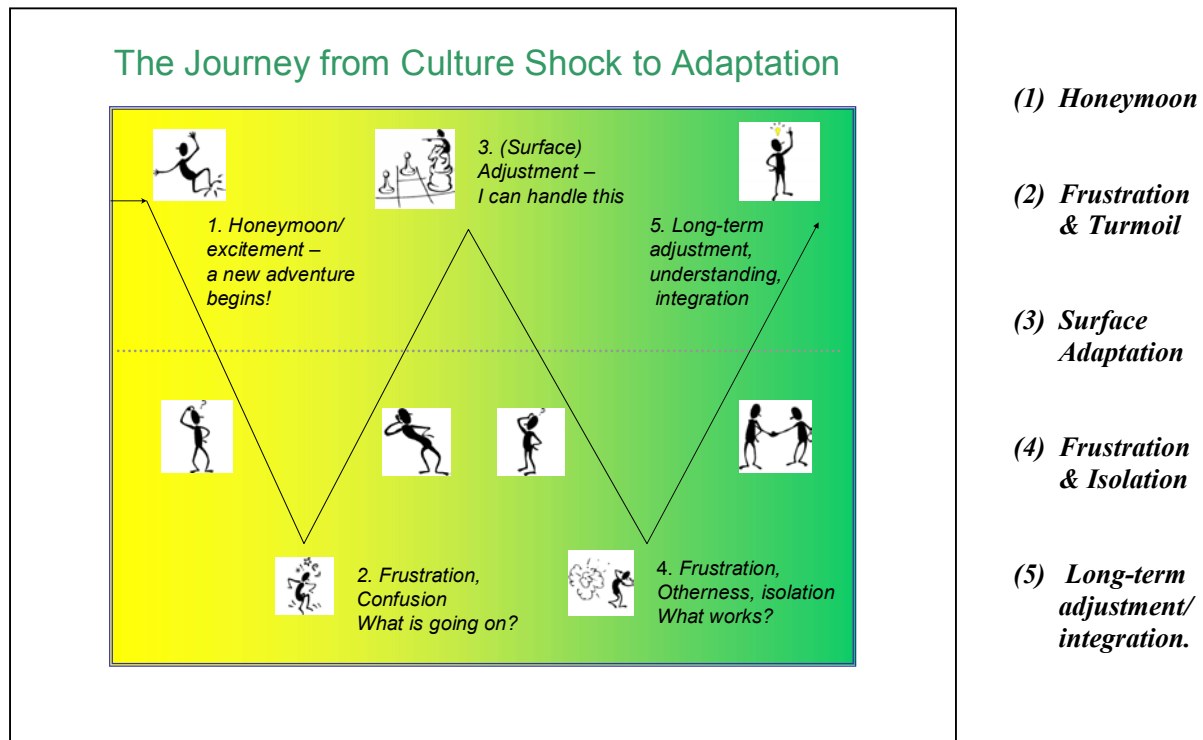
At the end of grade six, we pulled our daughter out of the international school and set about the difficult task to enroll her into the local system. Since the international school's year ended in June and the Singapore school year commenced in January, we had a few months' transition time which we utilized for intensive language tutoring. Choosing a local secondary school was a bewildering process at best. Local children get placed in a secondary school according to their performance in

the *Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE)* at the end of Primary Six. Students can express preferences, but may or may not get what they were hoping for. Non-local children new to the system can apply to sit exams at the local schools of their choice, but they have to complete an additional *centralized qualifying test (CQT)* if the desired school is rated amongst the top thirty. As foreigners we did not know what criteria we should use for choosing schools. *Everyone* – locals and expatriates alike – kept on telling us how *tough* Singapore secondary school would be, and how much performance pressure we should expect. Putting forward our best guess and not wishing to overwhelm our teen, we enrolled her in an average neighborhood school. Our daughter's Secondary One experience ended up under-challenging her. Contrary to what we had been told, the workload was more than manageable and pressure seemed to be mainly exerted by anxious parents worried about their precious ones' future and school officials concerned about the school's overall ratings and O-level performances. Objectively speaking, our daughter had more free time than ever before! It was then that we realized that the *right match* between the student and the institution was important after all. There was no escape from academic profiling for a student attending secondary school in Singapore! Armed with improved understanding about local schooling options we set out to identify a better fit. At present our daughter attends an all-girls school and is content with the *right quantity* and *quality* of academic expectations.

Why might expatriate families consider local schools at all when there are so many excellent international schools to choose from, and how can they determine if this option would suit a particular son or daughter? What could be possible benefits and challenges of fully immersing children into the local school culture? Last, but not least, how can you identify the school that could best meet your child's needs?

Within the last two years I have observed that an increasing number of expatriates come to Singapore for shorter assignments and with fewer perks. Foreign talent is becoming younger, well qualified but with fewer years of work experience under their belts. Furthermore, overseas families already working here and being half-way through a longer-term contract might be offered lump sum payments upon contract completion in exchange for surrendering generous expatriate benefits packages. Considering the present state of the global economy, political uncertainty about a war with Iraq and recession, I would expect this trend to continue. Enrolling a child in local school offers a viable affordable alternative to the high expense of international schools while ensuring an equal standard of education. Singapore has heavily invested in its education systems and schools are modern, well-equipped and up-to-date on skills needed for the new millennium. Within the last year I have noticed increasing calls for nurturing creativity and problem-solving abilities. Education policy makers have realized that just memorizing and regurgitating information will not provide the country with the dynamic and flexible workforce that it needs to thrive. More and more I see schools integrating project work and exploring experiential learning activities. Top 30 secondary schools in particular seem to become increasingly interested in and appreciative of diversity amongst their student body, knowing that differences can breed cross-fertilization, creativity and innovation. While all the above reasons are practical, I believe there is one more reason of even greater importance. Attending a local school will give your child the unique opportunity to become fully bi-cultural and to gain understanding from within about Eastern (Confucius-based) worldview. Not only will s/he be fully literate in English and *Singlish*, but your child will be "*bi-culturally literate*." Later in life these adaptation skills can be easily utilized for bridge-building between cultures or *any* conflicting stakeholder group. Living *inside* and learning about another worldview, while retaining your own cultural roots, nurtures incredible flexibility for understanding conflicting points of view and for discovering the commonalities and joint interests that can unite. I can think of no skill that will be of greater importance in an increasingly globalized, turbulent, fast-paced and mobile world.

What are the challenges that you may encounter when you enroll your child into a local school? I believe that most expatriate families are familiar with the culture shock theory, the W-shaped pattern of experiencing the following four stages of adapting to an unfamiliar environment:



All families and individuals moving abroad experience culture shock. For some this experience is brief and painless, while for others it is intense, prolonged and challenging. For sure you and your children experienced this when you first re-located to Singapore, moved into a new neighborhood, got used to the hot and humid climate, different foods, living with maids, different rules, values and last but not least the unique global nomad culture of international schools. (Yes – international schools have a culture of their own as well!) However, when your son and daughter enters a local school for the first time, you can expect this experience to be more turbulent and intense than it would be in a school environment similar to the one previously attended. In addition, your child might be one of a few visible foreigners and, depending on the extent to which the school had prior experience with hosting students from other cultures, teachers will have basic or extensive skills in helping the student to ease the transition. There are numerous new spoken and unspoken rules to be learnt, expectations to be understood and styles of disciplining, teaching and grading to get used to. Your child will make multiple *mistakes* no matter how hard s/he tries. Punishment might be perceived as strict and the ways teachers motivate students will be based on different values. Western systems tend to encourage self-confidence and independence, while the Singapore school system is definitely collectively driven. You may run into teachers that believe that instilling humbleness is best accomplished by drilling strongly on perceived weaknesses. You will also run into teachers that are wonderfully supportive and make an effort to truly understand your child and to gently encourage exploration of new ways of learning and community-building. There will be cross-cultural misunderstanding in the way questions are phrased despite mutual English literacy. Teachers are more transmitters of knowledge and take on less of a coaching role than we would see in an Anglo-worldview driven school. Assertive outspokenness might be misinterpreted as disrespect and as the challenging of school authority. Just by being herself or himself, your child

and all the rules s/he has previously learnt will be challenged. Some confusion and frustration is unavoidable. Expect several months of turbulence until your child comfortably settles into the new routine and the different expectations. Talk about the challenges at home and use them as unique learning opportunities to enhance cross-cultural understanding. Once your child has survived culture shock, s/he can thrive in a local school and learn skills and cultural knowledge otherwise inaccessible or invisible. The long-term pay-off and learning is great!

Once you have decided to take the daring plunge into an unfamiliar school system, you will be faced with the confusing challenge of picking the *right* school. Draw on your Singapore network of local colleagues and friends. Your network of locals will give you great insights into how the system works and which schools are considered best and why. Your job is to clearly define what your son and daughter *must have* to feel happy. The right match is possible. I believe that each family will come up with a set of requirements unique to the personality of the junior VIP. For our family the following three criteria emerged: we wanted our daughter to be able to build meaningful friendships and to be accepted for who she is; we wanted sufficient academic challenge to nourish her intellect, and last but not least, the school needed to have extra-curricular activities that she would enjoy. After the trial and error of the first year we accomplished the perfect match in year two. We enrolled her in a school that was not only a good academic match, but where the students were open and welcoming to friendships across cultures, a place where she could blend in easily and joyfully. We were also impressed by the school's open-minded, friendly and visionary leadership and their willingness to take a chance on us. After all, spaces in Singapore's top schools are limited and to be treasured resources. If admission is graciously offered to your child, you want aim for a win-win situation. Advice in a nutshell: do your research, talk to the schools! Inquire how many international students a potential school has and where they are from. Observe how happy and integrated foreign students appear to be and what support system is available to ease the initial transition. I believe now that a school administration that is open to parent-school communication and committed to integrating your son and daughter into the existing school culture, is the key to a happy existence and full integration of your child in a local school.

Is local school a good option for your son or daughter? To answer this question, major soul-searching and analysis will be required. The answer would depend on the confidence level and motivation of yourself and your child to explore a different school and value system. Teenagers should have a sense of rootedness, a feeling of who they are as a person. From a strong sense of self or personhood, confidence arises to explore and to learn, to tolerate and embrace the unknown. Your family should be in Singapore long enough to make the experience worthwhile, to allow for bi-culturalism to unfold. Last of all you will need time and patience at hand to help your child through a potentially rocky transition. I will end this contemplation with a quote by my 14-years old teenage daughter. When asked how she felt about her Singapore schooling so far, this is what she replied: *“Even though this has been a very challenging and at times frustrating experience, I would never regret it! I have had the opportunity to learn many new things and to build strong friendships with local people. I can switch from English to Singlish, from Mandarin to phrases of Hokkien or Malay. I now also understand the challenges for anyone, anywhere on this globe to be different, to be occasionally stared at, stereotyped or commented on. All differences can be worked with and talked about -- bridges can be built, and students of different cultures can come to deeply appreciate each other. I have learnt to get into another culture's “head” and to understand it on a deeper level. This experience will benefit me for the rest of my life.”*

Information for foreign students considering attending Singapore primary or secondary schools:

- Ministry of Education website: <http://www.moe.edu.sg/esp/foreign/overview.htm>
- Article on national education policy: <http://www1.moe.edu.sg/press/1997/st00197.htm>
- Information on secondary schools: <http://www1.moe.edu.sg/secondary.htm>
- School performance information: <http://www1.moe.edu.sg/press/2002/pr15082002.htm>
- Personal perspective on choosing a secondary school: <http://www.vtaide.com/png/choosing.htm>