Choosing between Local and International schools

In this modern age and era, we as parents are constantly presented with many ideas and it is only understandable that every parent would like to pick the best for their child. We are extremely fortunate that our opportunities are boundless in this vibrant city where there is a good range of education for us to choose from but the question is how do we make the right choice? I find this topic quite fascinating and would like to share some insights as to how I arrived at my decision when choosing the “right” track for my little one.

Having been born and raised in Canada for the earlier part of my childhood, I had little choice when my parents decided to move me back to Hong Kong for my education. I was already in grade 7 (equivalent to HK’s form 1) so it was only perceivable that I could continue my education in an international education setting with English as the primary teaching medium and French or German as a second language. As a really outgoing youngster, I had competed in many interschool competitions and through the many exchanges and encounters with various HK’s renowned local schools, I had formed many heartfelt friendships, which remain strong even to this day. Through my friends, I understood the traditional methods of learning that they had experienced, which relies on continuous assessment, self-discipline and highly competitive exam driven curriculum. By all means, there is no one or correct way of teaching but I began to appreciate it was a personal choice to be made and I often contemplated what I would have picked if I had been given the choice if circumstances allowed back in my school days.

My personal experiences inspired me to look at the different options available and to advocate an open mind on education for my little one hence, I diligently spoke with many professionals in the education arena to seek advice. As my family is now based in Hong Kong, I aspire my child to be fluent in both Cantonese in speech and literacy, and the local system definitely supports this. The local system also provides a bilingual environment where the majority of schools in Hong Kong use English as the medium of instruction – with the exception of Chinese and Chinese history.

One has to have the right expectations for either system. If one goes for local schools, one’s attitude should embrace rote learning (dictation, number crunching mathematics, hours of homework and exam-driven assessment). If one chooses international, one is signing up for less homework and possibly a less structured curriculum that
fosters more instances of collaborative tasks, enhancement of student’s social growth and self-exploration.

Personally, I like the discipline in the local school systems and understand that even as the standards are high and competition is fierce in the top-tiered local schools, it offers a good foundation for children, which prepares them well for future scholastic challenges. Most children in local schools seem happy enough but there will always be problems in both international and local schools. I root for rote learning as it ensures you actually know the basics. I truly believe a deeper understanding comes after the basics have been learnt. It is obviously up to the parents but my biggest fear of sending my child to an international school is that she may be offered very few employment opportunities if she chooses to reside in Hong Kong when she grows up. So why not give her more options and if one day, she chooses to attend an international school, there is more flexibility but starting from international school and turning back to the local system will be less opportune and quite difficult to do the switch. An ideal compromise would be to send the child to the local school in the earlier years like primary where he/she will learn sufficient Chinese to get by and will also get the benefit of good discipline, then switch to international by secondary or send him/her abroad to boarding schools.

Indeed, this is very much a widely discussed topic and every parent needs to balance out the pros and cons of either choice and consider one’s family situations before the choice is made. Ultimately, as a parent, our role is to provide guidance and support to the child and embrace the school philosophies to create a healthy and fruitful learning platform for our little ones.

Writer: Lillian Lee

Kaitlyn Wan Lum Fong (P Parrot)