



EDUCATION

International Education In A British Setting

I am a mother of four; I have little time to think, or reflect. However, in a moment of clarity and rare thoughtfulness a few years ago, we made a choice to step out of the British school system and place our children into an International school in Woking. In contrast to many English families, this was not a leap into the unknown for us. Years previously spent living abroad meant we were familiar with the International Baccalaureate, and how well IB graduates fared after school, but we have had a lot of explaining to do to our friends and families!

Woking, and Surrey in general, has wonderful schools, stocked with dedicated teachers and often impressive facilities, but we were disappointed to discover that such rich resources were not always fully utilised. We met parents at our local primary school who were refused permission for a morning off to take music exams. Incredibly, the school was under such pressure to maintain its impressive test scores that children in this primary school were unable to partake in wild and frivolous activities such as playing the violin. Children of

friends in a local independent school were not allowed to take a national times table quiz until it was sure they could pass first time. Giving it a shot? Unacceptable. Meanwhile, teacher friends lament over the pointless requirements of Ofsted inspections and SATs tests, and the unavoidable impact of excessive paperwork on the time they spend on the important work of educating our children.

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We know that maths and literacy in primary education are important, it goes without saying. But we also know that success in life requires much more than the 3 Rs. Confidence, risk-taking, independence and resilience are all key to succeeding in this modern world, and young children learn these skills best through play and experimentation. Interestingly, recent studies have also suggested that a play-based, “easy-going” start to primary schooling, results in better maths and literacy scores at age 11. In our rush to get those great scores, we are missing the building blocks for genuine success.

Parents here in the UK have justifiably started to react against this culture of performance. Recently, thousands of children were kept out of school in protest against irrelevant and unnecessarily stressful SATS tests. Teachers associations have expressed concern about the harmful effects on children’s mental health, and social media is flooded with articles about Finland - a country where teachers work autonomously, students don’t begin formal education until the age of 7, and homework is

abandoned in place of outdoor play and child-led activities, all the while remaining at the top of international league tables.

“In the middle of our busy days, we owe our children a moment of reflection. Does our education system, as it stands, best prepare them for the world in which they will work and live?”

Senior schooling offers little respite. Many senior schools now start the GCSE curriculum in Year 9. This means that our children lose three years of education in rigorous preparation for meaningless exams. GCSEs, originally

intended to take students into vocations, careers or further study, no longer fulfil this purpose. CBI Director-General, John Cridland, has led the call for the scrapping of GCSEs, and the complete reinvention of education for British 14-18 year olds.* The IB answers this call. The enquiry-based curriculum means that teenagers learn to be active and authentically curious participants in their own education, and cross-curricular work allows them to make connections across subjects, while the service and research requirements mean IB students must take charge of their own learning, as well as their place in the community. Instead of spending their formative years on GCSEs, my ‘kidults’ will be laying the groundwork for success in the world beyond the school walls.

Rather than token “empowerment” initiatives and tick-box opportunities for the UCAS form, schools like The International School of London (ISL) Surrey, which my children attend, offer genuine opportunities for autonomy and self-determination. This can be an intimidating thing to witness, as a parent! To give an example, the ISL student body recently created the school’s official mobile phone usage policy. The Student Government led a town hall style debate, without adult intervention, and the students themselves defined the policy. In a stunning leap from how I run my home (“yes, you have to get off the iPad - this, darlings, is not a democracy”),

these children debated the pros and cons of how mobile phones are used by students and teachers, decided upon what was reasonable, and created their own contract.

The importance of this cannot be overstated. Drinking coffee with a friend recently, we discussed his role in charge of the finance internship programme at a large multinational company, based here in Surrey. “Thousands. We have had thousands of applicants over the last three years. On average, perhaps six a year impress us enough to get an internship and less than half of those impress us enough to get offered a job. The applicants need to show us they can take initiative and have done something beyond the list given to them by their Careers Advisors. The interns need genuine curiosity; they must be able to connect-the-dots and form new insights; and they need to be able to collaborate. We struggle to find this, even amongst apparently highly qualified applicants.”

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* (<http://news.cbi.org.uk/news/cridland-calls-for-education-system-that-works-for-all-young-people/>)

Stephanie Parkes, Parent at The International School of London (ISL) Surrey.

“ISL has steered me in the right direction to help me choose what I’m going to do in the future.”
 Kyle, Grade 9
 ISL Surrey

Kyle joined ISL from the United States and is currently completing the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme. Although he has not yet decided his future path, ISL is giving him the foundation to turn his dreams into reality.

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