

Six Schooling Issues Which Can Contribute To International Assignment Failure

Education As A Factor In Assignment Failure

For international assignees moving with families, schooling is one of the most important issues to be addressed in the relocation process. Parents will be keen to find a school in their new home where standards are high, where their children are happy and where they can be confident of future continuity in their education. Families relocating to a country which shares their own native language may have the option of sending their children to a local school (when availability of places and regulations allow). However, in many cases, one of the various types of 'international school' that exist around the world is the only realistic educational option for parents moving to a new country.

Until fairly recently most global locations contained a limited number of schools calling themselves 'international'. However, in recent years there has been something of an explosion in the quantity of such institutions and currently it is estimated that there are over 6500 'international schools' around the world serving 3.3 million students, with new examples opening all the time. This growth is driven, not only by the needs of an increasingly globally mobile workforce but also by the growing number of local families who regard international schools as prestigious and value the fact that English is usually the language of instruction in such institutions.

International schools come in many shapes and forms. Some are allied to domestic systems: British, American, Australian and Canadian International schools are examples of these. Franchise groups are another category; chains such as GEMS, have been joined in recent years by famous UK independent schools, such as Harrow, which lend their names to international counterparts. Some are non-profit schools, while others are privately owned businesses. International schools vary enormously in their nature and characteristics and families moving to major cities will often have no lack of choice (although it should be said that in

some locations, particularly China and the Gulf states, demand for places often outstrips supply).

While the international school market is booming, there is evidence that some parents' expectations with regards to their children's education are not being met in these schools.

"Family and spouse/partner issues remain as critical challenges to assignment success. Like last year, the top critical family challenges identified were spouse/partner resistance, along with family adjustment and children's education. Respondents indicated that the top reasons for assignment failure remained the same as last year, with family concerns far outweighing all the rest at 34%", says International School Consultancy Group.

Global Relocation Trends Survey Report 2012, Brookfield Global Relocation Services

This White Paper outlines some of the major challenges and difficulties that families may face when sending their children to an international school. The content of the paper is based on anecdotal feedback from parents who have experienced international schooling in various contexts and also on analysis of discussions on expatriate forums. Using these sources, a list of the most commonly occurring issues described as 'problematic' by international school parents has been compiled. At this stage, it should be stressed that many families in international schools have very positive experiences; however, it has been possible to identify a core of common issues which are regularly identified across a range of schools and countries and which, in some cases, have led to parents withdrawing their children and even taking the decision to repatriate.

1. Quality Control In A Booming Sector

International education is a growth industry. New schools are opening around the world at a tremendous rate

and it is predicted that the market will continue to flourish as global mobility increases and local elites seek to tap into the cultural capital and English language skills that international education is seen to bestow. However, as with any industry that experiences rapid growth, there are dangers associated with this. Entrepreneurs and investors may seek to tap into the demand without having the necessary know-how for setting up an international school. Other projects may not benefit from the levels of investment required for the establishment of a viable institution. Certainly it is the case that there are huge variations in the levels of 'quality' that exist in international schools around the world. In many cases, appearances can be deceptive in relation to this. Highly impressive buildings and infrastructure may mask a lack of experience, know-how and effective leadership in the school. Some schools may seek to 'cram' as many students into their classrooms as possible, with an inevitable impact on the ability of teachers to effectively interact with students.

Quality assurance mechanisms for international schools do exist. Schools allied to national systems may be subject to domestic inspections (as with British International Schools and OFSTED). Bodies such as the European Council of International Schools offer rigorous evaluation procedures which lead to accreditation to their organisation. International curriculum providers such as The International Baccalaureate Organisation and Fieldwork's International Primary and Middle Years Curriculums require schools using their programmes to undergo authorisation and reauthorisation processes.

Accreditation and (when available) inspection and evaluation reports are useful in making judgements about a school, however, they are by no means failsafe hallmarks of quality. Similarly a trawl through the various international school internet forums that exist will give some insights into a school, but here there is a risk of a false impression, as many of

the parents (and teachers) who post on such sites have particular issues with a school and their views may not reflect the prevailing opinion in the community.

A visit to the school is essential in order to give parents the best possible insight into the quality of the institution. Parents should seek to talk to administrators, teachers, current parents and even students in order to gain as complete a picture as possible. Plenty of information can be gleaned from a school tour, especially if parents are prepared and know what to look out for. Moreover, it is vital that parents have a set of questions ready for the different people they will meet with; school visits can be bewildering experiences and tend to be led by people who are experienced in 'selling their school' and so a set of questions that can cut through standard school PR is very important.

2. Curriculum Continuity - Content And Examination Concerns

A major concern for many parents when moving into the international school system is that of educational continuity. Some of the most common worries parents have are: 'Will there be gaps in my child's learning when s/he moves to his/her next school?'; 'Will my child's performance in examinations be affected by their time in an international school?'; and 'Will my child's university prospects be impacted?'

In theory, continuity should not be a major issue for those attending IB or IPC/IMYP schools, as these programmes were designed to facilitate a smooth transition for students moving between international schools or returning to their national systems, and it is true to say that the numbers of students experiencing difficulties when moving schools or repatriating into their own systems is relatively small. However, the problem here is often one of perception: parents are sometimes shocked by the differences between the way content is decided in international curriculum models (mainly school defined) and national curriculum models (mainly state defined), and are concerned that this will cause their children problems in the future.

These concerns become more focused when the 'exam factor' is thrown in. Unlike in many national curriculum models, students from the age of 3 to 16 do not have to take mandatory, externally

moderated examinations in either the IB or the IPC/IMYP programmes. For parents accustomed to high profile nationally mandated assessments, this can be something of a culture shock and although international schools will usually develop their own comprehensive and informative assessment systems, parents can often equate an absence of 'proper tests' with a lack of rigour.

Many international schools are associated with particular countries and as such their programmes are supposed to reflect the national curricula of those states. However, even in these cases, parents can become disillusioned with the way the way the programmes are delivered in practice. Local statutory regulations and restrictions often mean that a school has no option but to modify their programme in order to comply with requirements. Likewise, an international school may lack access to the support and guidance often given to schools in the home country, meaning that they are not always able to keep up with the rapid pace of change typical of national curriculum models around the world. All this means schools often end up offering programmes which are 'influenced by' rather than 'guided by' national requirements. In such situations, parents may become concerned when they talk to friends and family with children in schools in their home country and make negative comparisons with the way the programme is being delivered in their children's own school.

As mentioned previously, experience demonstrates that it is actually the exception rather than the rule for children to have problems when moving between international schools or back to their home system. In fact, many repatriated parents are convinced that experience in the international system has a positive impact on their children's educational performance when they return home. Despite this, there does remain a problem of perception in this area and to avoid this leading to potential assignment failure, it is important for those managing global mobility of employees to provide parents with authoritative information and support before the assignment, and to respond quickly to concerns if they arise during it.

3. Differing Educational Philosophies And Teaching Styles

Education is an emotive subject. Parents

often hold passionate views about schooling and have clear ideas about the type of academic environment they believe is best for their children to succeed and thrive in. This can be thrown into sharp focus by an international relocation. Curriculum models common in international schools, such as the IB, are often committed to a particular educational philosophy and advocate certain teaching styles. These can be inconsistent with the pedagogical approaches inherent in some national systems and in some cases, may run contrary to what parents believe to be 'good teaching'. Indeed, there are many examples of parents taking the decision to repatriate their family due to dissatisfaction with the type and style of education on offer in international schools.

Avoidance of such scenarios is again connected to the need for preparedness and access to reliable information. Parents should be aware of the educational approach and teaching styles on offer in international schools before they commit to one school or another. Moreover, they should be given the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about education in the light of research and encouraged to make schooling decisions based on available data rather than pre-conceived notions.

4. Social Issues: 'My Child Just Can't Fit In'

Adjustment issues are a common feature of any international assignment and these can often centre around children and their ability to settle in their new school environment. Much has been written about the phases of culture shock and children will often move fairly quickly beyond an initial stage of feelings of loss and homesickness into one of coping and adaptation to their new environment. Having said this, unhappy children tend to have a significant impact on the whole family unit and there are many cases of assignments coming to a premature conclusion due to particular difficulties children have settling in to school.

This type of adjustment challenge can be exacerbated by the issue of language. A majority of international schools have English as their main language of instruction. For children entering such an environment with limited or no access to English, the challenges of accessing the curriculum and making friends are great, and can make the already difficult task of adjustment even more problematic. This picture is further

complicated in international schools with a high percentage of non-English host country students. In these cases, even though English is the 'official language' of the school, the reality is that the 'social' language of the playground tends to reflect that of the host country, meaning that those students without immediate access to that language can be left feeling isolated. Many international schools recognise the vital importance of doing everything they can to facilitate a smooth settling in experience for new students and there are some highly impressive induction programmes available around the world. However, there is a great deal of variation in the quality of such programmes; some schools offer very little in the way of formal induction, while other schools' programmes don't always do 'what it says on the tin'. It is important for parents to gain as much pre-assignment knowledge as they can about, not only what schools claim to offer, but also about the reality of their provision.

5. The Home Language Factor

The last section alluded to the role that language can play in school-related social problems during international assignments. Language is also central to another common area of concern for globally mobile parents.

The multiplicity of languages typically present in an international school setting often leads to worries that can be summed up in the following question: 'Will my child's ability to communicate, read and write in his or her native language be diminished by his or her time in an international school?' This type of question may emanate from parents of English speaking children who attend an English medium school but where the majority of students actually have English as a second language; or from parents of children whose mother tongue is not the same as the school's language of instruction.

Language development is a hugely complex area and there are a myriad of research studies on factors that enhance or inhibit native language development in multilingual school settings, many of which reach differing conclusions. Despite this, parents responses are often instinctive and an understandable desire to ensure their children's native language skills are maintained can lead to a decision to withdraw them from the international school system without necessarily having considered all the relevant evidence or taken properly into account the language policy

and philosophy of the school they are in.

6. Special Educational Needs

Ensuring a child with special educational needs receives appropriate educational provision and support is complex enough at the best of times, but the challenges and obstacles are even greater in the context of international schooling. Parents of children with SEN sometimes make the mistake of thinking an international move will offer the chance of a 'fresh start' and this can lead to them withholding information regarding their child's educational history from a receiving international school, often with problematic consequences for the family, child and school. On the other hand, not all international schools have well established learning support departments and even in those that do, the extent and quality of the actual provision can be varied. In other cases, parents are sometimes asked to pay extra fees to cover the cost of additional support and where this cost is not covered by employers it can lead to families having to take a decision to return home.

Navigating a potential international relocation when children with special educational needs are involved is a delicate and complicated procedure. There are plenty of examples of families who have had to return home early because the full extent of the nature of the challenge was not recognised or catered for in the school search and selection process, leading to a poor match between a child's needs and the chosen school's capacity to provide for these. In any international school search there is a need to use all available information to ensure there is a 'best fit' between family and school; in the case of families with children with SEN, this takes on an even greater importance.

A recently formed group of international schools called 'Next Frontier: Inclusion' includes the following amongst its key beliefs: "We need to redefine international education to be inclusive of students who learn differently or at different rates. Parents who travel overseas should not have to leave some of their children behind or divide their families between schools."

The very fact that there is a need for such a group to exist demonstrates the complexity of the current situation with regards to international schooling and SEN provision. It is important that parents of children with SEN considering an international relocation, enter into a decision making process that is both fully informed and realistic.



Duncan Partridge is Lead Consultant at International School Move, an educational consultancy offering independent

expert support services to globally mobile families.

Duncan's involvement in international education has taken him all over the world and he has held the position of Principal in three renowned international schools. Currently completing an MA in International Education, Duncan brings extensive experience and insight to the individually tailored and independent advice he offers families. Duncan is also a father and believes his children have benefitted enormously from their international experiences. He is committed to helping parents make the best choice for their children as they embark on their own international adventure.

FREE SEMINAR

Monday 2nd February 2015 - 10.30am

Raising Internationally Mobile Children: Understanding and Nurturing the Third Culture Kid Experience

A significant reason for failure of international assignments revolves around the 'soft' issues - the adaptability of families and children. For the majority, when properly understood and managed, the benefits of growing up abroad can far outweigh the challenges. This session for parents and professionals who are working with internationally-mobile families will share research-based insights into how a global experience can enhance future educational and career opportunities for children, and how to manage the stumbling blocks encountered along the way. While parents naturally worry about how moving away from the home culture and language will impact their children, when approached with knowledge and optimism, it can be an enriching life-changing experience.

Hosted by Mary Langford

This seminar is taking place at
The 2015 Corporate Relocation
Conference & Exhibition

To reserve your free place in this seminar please email:
helen@internationalhradviser.com