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Are National Schools a Viable Option?

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Missionary families today have multiple options for their children's education, including international Christian and international secular schools, boarding schools and home schooling. Another popular option, especially among those living in Europe, is the host country national school, defined here as a local public or private school where the language of instruction is the local language, the curriculum is what is typically studied by nationals of the host country and classmates and teachers are by and large host country nationals.

In one survey, forty-four percent of the 711 students surveyed (representing eleven mission agencies in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States) were attending host country national schools (Beattie 2002).

National schools offer many potential benefits. Jack¹ describes the benefits of a national school by saying, "My siblings and I were completely immersed in the Argentine culture, resulting in our fluency in the Spanish language and our knowledge and understanding of that culture." National schools are conveniently located and relatively inexpensive. Having children in a national school may help in the entire family's integration with the local culture and provide contacts for parents in their work.

ASSESSING HOW MKS IN NATIONAL SCHOOLS COMPARE TO THE GENERAL POPULATION

However, missionary parents may wonder if using national schools might be harmful in some way to their children, particularly in first (home) language development and in adjustment to the home culture. Parents who use national schools ask when or even if children should begin study exclusively in the home language to be adequately prepared for college in the homeland. To begin to answer these questions, I surveyed 142 college-age missionary kids (MKs) and interviewed twenty-one of them. All spoke English as their first (or home) language and had lived overseas at least two years. They were enrolled in one of ten Christian colleges/universities at the time the data were collected. Fifty-three had national school experience, and eighty-nine had not attended national schools. The essential question of the research was, how do MKs who undertook elementary and/or secondary studies in a national school do in college in their homeland? The answer, in a nutshell, is that they do very well. Here are three reasons that support that conclusion.

1. MKs with national school experience are successful in university studies in comparison with the US population at large. This was measured in three ways. First, their SAT scores were higher. The average total SAT score for college-bound students in

2002 was 1020 out of a possible 1600 (College Board 2002); for the national school-experienced MKs in this sample, it was 1239. This 219-point difference is statistically significant (unlikely to have occurred by chance). Second, their college GPA was higher. The national school-experienced MKs had an average college GPA of 3.46 out of 4.0, which is significantly higher than the 2.82 mean grade point average of students at private, nonprofit, four-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics 2000). Third, their graduate school plans were similar. If students are not academically successful as undergraduates, one assumes they would not plan, or even be able, to go on to graduate studies. Based on published data (Bradburn et al. 2003), one would expect about one-third of the college students to have definite plans for graduate school, and the remaining two-thirds to have indefinite or no plans for graduate school. There were no significant differences between the national school-experienced MKs and the population at large's graduate school plans.

2. The national school-experienced missionary kids are also doing well academically when compared to students with well-educated parents.

Comparing missionary kids to the US population at large is not necessarily an equal comparison. Missionaries tend to be well educated; at least one parent in seventy percent of the homes of the national school-experienced subjects in this research had a masters or doctoral degree. Therefore, to make a more equitable comparison, national school-experienced students were compared to US students whose parents were more highly educated. There were two measurements here. First, their SAT scores were higher. The national school-experienced MKs' mean SAT score of 1239 was compared to the mean SAT score (1166) of US students in schools sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Office of Overseas Schools (2004). This was selected for comparison because the mean SAT score of this group is higher than the average SAT scores for test-takers with the highest level of parental education (graduate degree) reported by the College Board. The MKs' scores were higher at a statistically significant level. Second, their graduate school plans were also similar. Published data reports graduate school plans by parent education levels. In the general population, thirty-nine percent of those whose parents have doctorates have definite graduate school plans, and sixty percent have indefinite or no plans for graduate study. National school-experienced MKs planned to attend graduate school at about the same rate.

3. University academic success is comparable between national school-experienced MKs and MKs who did not attend national school.

For missionary families who consider using host country schools, the issue is not typically whether or not they will live overseas, but rather if they will enroll their children in national schools, and if so, for how long and under what circumstances. By comparing MKs who attended national school with those who did not, parents and mission leaders can consider the differences in university academic success of those who used national school compared to MKs who used other available educational options. We can again look at three measurements. First, their SAT scores are about the same. The average SAT score of those who attended national school (1239) is lower than the mean for the non-national school group (1270). This difference, however, is not statistically significant. Second, their GPAs are almost identical. College GPA was 3.455 for those with national school experience and 3.465 for those without national school experience. There is no significance to this difference. Third, they earned honors in college at about the same rate, and their plans to attend graduate school were not significantly different.

The answer, then, to the question of how MKs who studied in a national school do academically in college is that, at least for this sample group, they do well. They achieve at levels comparable to other MKs without national school experience. Their achievement is well above the US population as a whole as well as above the levels of American students with higher parental education. For missionary parents who have placed their children in national school or who are considering doing so, this should be welcome news.

CHALLENGES FOR MKS WITH A NATIONAL SCHOOL EDUCATION

There are challenges, however, for families who choose national schools. It is important to emphasize that this research focused on academic and language issues. Cultural and social issues came up in the interviews but they were not a primary focus and are an area for further research. Though attending the national school affords a linguistic advantage in learning the host country language, it can potentially limit the student's first-language development. Because the missionary kids are learning in the host country language, their first language vocabulary may be limited. Students also reported difficulties with spelling and grammar.

Culturally, national schools prepare their students to be successful adults in that culture. Missionary parents are unfamiliar with the local school system and related mores. "My parents weren't familiar with the system and how parent/teacher relationships should be and how much you can say without completely offending them," Brianna observed. Cultures also have different definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior; humiliation was common in several of the national school systems.

There are also potential social challenges. In some countries, students are socially different because of physical characteristics. Kathy remembers, "I was always different. I was the only blond-haired kid." In some situations, social difference can lead to privilege, which is not necessarily positive for the MK. Geopolitical issues sometimes created negative labels and feelings. Another social obstacle to some of the students was not being members of the majority religion.

So what do these results mean? Implications for mission policymakers, parents and teachers and other caregivers follow.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The most important implication for mission policymakers is that study in a second language host country national school made no significant difference in these students' university academic success. Based on these data, national schools are an option that may be appropriate for students under the mission's purview. However, policymakers must consider ways to provide for and ensure the on-going development of students' first language for those who use a second-language host country school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS

There are five actions parents need to take.

- 1. Develop first language skills.** Parents who choose a national school for their children's education need to make ongoing first language development a high priority. The literature (e.g., Collier 1992, 1995) is clear on the importance of developing the first language to a high cognitive level at least through age twelve. Results from a study of

immersion students indicate that three hours of English language instruction per week “seemed sufficient to enable the immersion students to acquire academic skills equivalent to those of students of comparable ability who were educated completely in English” (Reeder, Buntain and Takakuwa 1999, 53).

The English classes at the national schools are not sufficient for this purpose. English classes in national schools teach native German, French or other language speakers conversational English. They are not designed to teach English language skills (i.e., “language arts”) to native speakers of English.

Seventy-four percent of the national school-experienced students engaged in some sort of activity to develop English language skills while in national school. Some used workbooks, others were home-schooled and some even had Saturday school in English. About seventy percent read in English while in national school. One option for parents is to inquire about the possibility of substituting a parent-taught lesson or correspondence course for the school English class.

2. Maintain your home language. While the majority of the students reported that they spoke mostly English at home, some described mixed-language patterns. This “code switching” is natural in a bilingual family. In fact, it is a skill to know when and with whom to switch languages. At times, the other language may have just the word that is needed and it is more expressive to use the other language. However, parents are cautioned about code switching to the degree that a child cannot express complete thoughts in either language. Parents also need to model appropriate English (or other first language) to help children develop the first language to a high cognitive level. If parents have limited proficiency in the host country language and use that language with their children, they could be modeling poor language patterns and conversing at a lower cognitive level with their children.

3. Consider how you will close the gaps. Many of the national school students talked about having gaps in US history, geography and other subjects. Parents, especially of students who continue in national school through high school, must address this limitation. One way is to provide instruction and/or resources in these subjects. Some parents choose to home-school their children in these areas. Another option would be to enroll in one or more online or correspondence courses in these subjects.

Another theme in the interviews was learning to write in English. Students were not talking about the simple mechanics of putting words on paper and spelling them correctly. Instead, they were referring to the challenge of learning what was expected in a high school or college essay in English. Students who attend national schools learn the writing norms of their host country. One student mentioned how it was normal in her host country to copy directly from sources, because the sources are knowledgeable and students are not. This same copying is labeled plagiarism in North American universities. Others talked about style of argumentation and how to express their ideas in English. Even if parents do not require their children to write argumentative papers at home, they can dialogue with their national school-educated children in ways that encourage development of homeland academic-style argumentation and analysis that will be needed in university.

4. Think about when (or if) your child will change to first language school. This

research cannot offer clear guidance regarding the best time to change from national school to English language school. The individual student's needs and circumstances must inform family decision making. Comments from interviews illustrate different perspectives. Hannah, who attended a German school where a natural endpoint was after grade ten, thought "tenth grade was a really good break." The switch to Black Forest Academy made her feel "kind of at home." Kathy, who attended a Japanese school, says she "would have gone into an American school maybe a little earlier, like third or fourth grade...any longer than that, you get really behind in language." Craig, who attended Austrian school K-12, was glad he was able to finish in Austria.

5. Be prepared to help your children with transitions between educational systems.

Students described their adjustment to an English educational environment after national schooling. They mentioned limitations in vocabulary, possibly knowing the concept in the host country language but not having the academic vocabulary in English. Other challenges included learning to write academic English, testing and subject-matter gaps (notably US history and geography, English literature and non-metric measurements).

College adjustment included not only changing the language of instruction but also transitioning culturally to the US. (All subjects were at schools in the US.) Jane spoke about cultural differences, saying, "I never thought that I was that different.... Many things that people do are very foreign to me." Even those who left national school earlier in their educational career experience adjustments in college. Kathy left national school eight years prior to the interview; she was in her first year in the college when we spoke. She said, "It's still a huge transition. I'm still very much Japanese, the way I relate to people, the way I communicate, the body language I use and the things I don't say when I communicate."

Parents with concerns about their child's ability to eventually matriculate at a quality college will be encouraged to note that all research subjects were students at what the College Board defines as "more selective" colleges. Interview data suggest that the national school-experienced students were highly desirable to colleges because they were "broader," bringing diversity and rich experiences to the campuses. However, for those who remained in national schools through high school, and even for those who entered English-language school during the latter half of high school, the SAT was some students' first experience with this type of testing, which was a challenge. Some also reported struggling with college applications. For example, the activities and honors section frustrated Melissa. "There were three empty pages for extracurricular activities, and Germans don't have extracurricular activities," she said. She also found it difficult to get a recommendation letter, because "Germans don't know what recommendations are."

Obtaining transcripts and "translating grades" were also challenges for the national school-experienced students. In France, for example, students are rated on a twenty-point scale with twenty being the best and "pretty much unattainable." Jessica reports that she had "a good average in France but when it transferred in, it looked like seventy-five percent, which is bad." In spite of the challenges in providing meaningful transcripts, national school-experienced students find they often earn significant college credit for their work in national schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS, SCHOOLS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS

Teachers, schools and other caregivers can be resources for parents as they seek to

address issues discussed in the implications for parents section. Especially if the mission agency does not have staff dedicated to children's education, parents often look to international Christian school staff or service organizations such as SHARE Education Services and Asia Educational Resources Consortium (AERC).

Several of the interviewees described a divided identity. One, for example, said, "I felt more Argentine than American." When discussing her struggle with identity after she started attending Black Forest Academy, Brianna said, "The term Third Culture Kid didn't come up in my understanding until about the end of my junior year." I am personally acquainted with Black Forest Academy and believe Brianna did encounter the concept there prior to her junior year. The point, though, is that she did not grasp the meaning or significance of being a TCK until her third year at the academy. Schools and other caregivers need to provide this kind of information on a regular basis, with special attention to students who are undergoing transitions. Brianna's comment illustrates a readiness issue related to when a person will actually "hear" available information.

When students are making the adjustment from one schooling system to another, they will need support from their school, teachers, parents and other caregivers. School staff members need to be made aware of the difficulties experienced by such students (c.f. Berry and Williams 2004). Interviewees gave Black Forest Academy high marks for the way the school helped them transition. Specific things included teaching them, step by step, how to do papers in English, and working with students' different national ways of doing math until the students understood.

CONCLUSION

Should missionary parents enroll their children in national schools? A little over half of the interviewees said yes. Thirteen made strong, positive statements about choosing national school. Jessica would "strongly recommend that parents put their children in the national school." Hannah said, "I really enjoyed German school. I definitely think it was an advantage." Krista was matter-of-fact about one advantage of a national school, saying, "After all, I was in Germany; it made the most sense. It was the normal thing to do."

Missionary kids who attend host country national schools have a unique opportunity to be immersed in the language and culture of the host country. This research indicates that missionary parents can be confident their children are not necessarily academically disadvantaged by the choice to use national schools overseas. While individual and circumstantial variables need to be considered in selecting an educational option, national schools in and of themselves are not necessarily detrimental to a student's academic development. The subjects of this study were able to enroll in quality post-secondary institutions and were successful in their academic pursuits at these institutions. This positive result is an encouragement to parents and policymakers. Host country national schools can be a viable education option for the children of missionaries.

Endnote

1. All names have been changed for privacy.

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