

The Challenges of Providing an International Education: An Interview with the Deputy Headmaster of St. John's International School in Bangkok, Thailand

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I conducted the following interview with Dean Lanaras, the Deputy Headmaster of St. John's International School (SJIS) located in Bangkok, Thailand. SJIS was established in 1993 and has an enrollment of 400 students offering English education to children (aged 3-17 yrs) from a wide range of backgrounds, countries and religions. The school comprises three sections: the British style primary school, the British style secondary school and the North American High School. It operates largely within the framework of the National Curriculum of England with full provision made for study in Thai language and culture as required by the Thai Ministry of Education. SJIS's assessment procedures are similar to those found in England with National Curriculum Tests at KS1, KS2 and KS3 and with (I) GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11. It is formally recognized and licensed by the Thai Ministry of Education, and accredited by the Worldwide Education Service (UK). The school is a member of the Council of International Schools (CIS), the Federation of British Schools in South East Asia (FOBISSEA) and International Schools Association of Thailand (ISAT).

What is your official title here at SJIS?

I am the program head of the North American High school. I have three new titles actually. I'm the Program Head of the North American High School, Deputy Headmaster of the whole high school (the North American and British High Schools) and Marketing Director for the entire school. These are the three areas that I oversee.

How long have you been employed at SJIS?

I have been here eight years. I started as the Deputy-Head of the North

American School. About four years ago I became the Head of the entire North American School. Next week I will also become the Deputy-Headmaster of the whole school, of both the North American School and the British School.

Do the two high schools at SJIS share the same curriculum?

No, the curricula are totally separate. The British School follows the National Curriculum of England and Wales. The students sit for (I) GCSE and A-level exams. In the North American School we follow a modified North American curriculum that draws heavily from the curricula of California and British Columbia, Canada. However, our curriculum is modified to accommodate the academic needs of the students here with a very strong emphasis on ESL.

Exactly what percentage of the students at SJIS are non-native English speakers? (in the North American School)

Most of the students in both schools (the British and North American schools) are non-native English speakers, especially here (in the North American School). I would say ninety percent of the kids are non-native. We have a very good ESL department and we include ESL in every classroom activity. For example, students may study physics in combination with ESL activities (referred to as EAL) that pertain to the physics curriculum. The problems that most international students have are that they cannot access a curriculum, because the syntactical structure, the grammar and vocabulary are beyond their means. Therefore, we have to give them substantial ESL/EAL support so they can access the curriculum.

How do you mainstream students coming to SJIS who have never previously attended international schools?

That is not a problem. Such students have two options open to them. If they are highly academic, we can integrate them on the spot. That is, assuming they have at least an intermediate level of English. If their level of English is very low or if they are not very academically inclined, we will ask them to enroll in a pre-matriculation course, which can last three to six months. This will prepare them for the mainstream classes.

How is the ESL program integrated in the main subject courses?

Well we use the same books as a typical high school student would have to use

in, let's say, in California in grade 12. Our books are the same as the ones used in Advanced Placement in the US that prepares students for university. It's quite academic, so the curriculum is very western and it's our responsibility to help our students understand the curriculum material by giving them ample ESL support inside the classroom.

What are the special challenges faced by teachers at SJIS?

Teachers have to assess the needs of the students in an objective manner and then based on assessing the needs of the students to differentiate course delivery and content with pedagogic delivery. All the students should be able to access the curriculum so there is no child left behind, as they say in the US. That is why the teacher must know the students' needs, must know the requirements of the curriculum and must be able to shape the delivery of the content in a way so that the students can access it. For example, there may be a class of fifteen students, but inside the classroom there will be groups of students receiving different handouts and also being assessed differently based on their academic abilities and needs. If I go to a classroom to do an observation and see that the same content is being offered to fifteen students, the teacher will receive a less than satisfactory performance. I want to see differentiation, as this is very important. I want to see target setting so this is a big challenge for the teacher to decide what the abilities of the students are and how high they can aim. Differentiation and target setting for each individual student are absolute necessities. Moreover, each teacher, with the help of the Head of the English Department, must prepare ESL materials for each class. Sometimes there may be three different sets of ESL materials for one single class.

What is the average teaching load at SJIS?

The teaching load is about eighteen hours a week, but can go up to twenty hours. Each class is fifty minutes and to prepare for the classes the teachers will need another eighteen hours. Class preparation takes at least one hour per class so you can observe instructors preparing Power Point presentations, interactive presentations, hands-on teaching activities, student centered learning activities, group work, etc. All in all, it is very challenging. Unless the teacher is dedicated, he or she will suffer a burnout within two or three months.

How do you address the mix of English levels when students are involved in group work?

One way is to mix students so there are strong students who will act or serve as models for the weaker students. You cannot do it all the time, because then the stronger students are not moving as fast as they should. The second model is to have very good students working together on something more advanced and the weaker students trying to catch up with a more intermediate level activity.

So, all the teachers really have to be in tune with the program.

That's correct. They must know what the curriculum demands are. They must know the needs of the students. We assess students thoroughly when they come here. We give them a battery of tests that are quite demanding. The tests, called the NLLA Band, were originally developed in Australia, but we have adapted them to the needs of the students here. Afterwards the teachers have to keep a very close eye on the students. They have to meet the needs of the students and that's the academic aspect. Then we have the pastoral aspect. The students typically come from very wealthy families from the upper-middle class to upper class. They are often not used to being told what to do. They can be very arrogant at times because this is still a post-feudal society, so wealthy people usually can get what they want. They come here and we treat them like we would treat students at a good American public school. Not better or worse than any other student.

Do you have scholarship programs for indigenous students?

Yes, we do have a scholarship program. About thirty percent of our students, mostly from northern Asia, are on some sort of scholarship, usually on an academic scholarship or on a scholarship for some talent they possess like art, music or sports. If they can prove that they possess a talent and they have good grades, more than a 3.5 GPA, they will be on scholarship. It starts from ten percent of the tuition. A national athlete can receive a one hundred percent scholarship. Also someone who is famous, such as a painter or musician who won an international award somewhere in Europe or Japan can get up to one hundred percent. But most students pay full fees. They wouldn't blink an eye in paying the fees. Let me go back to the pastoral aspect. The students come from wealthy families, so the students have a lot of leeway at home so a good part of my staff's time is devoted toward taking care of the students, trying to teach them how to be responsible about their lives. Every morning for half

an hour, there is a PSHE (Personal Safety and Health Education) assembly inside the classroom. Adolescents are bound to make mistakes, not one, but one after another, and it's our business to direct them time after time. In many cases, we also function as substitute parents for them. When they have a problem, they often come to us first and then to their parents.

What is SIJS's specific academic role?

We have an academic role, which is to prepare students to go onto an international college either here in Thailand or at a university in the States or Canada. And the second role we have is a pastoral role. The kids are very busy. Foreign instructors, who come here, because they think the lifestyle is nice and the climate is pleasant, are in for a big surprise. They are going to work fifty percent more than they would work in a high school in a western country because the needs of the students are bigger and because this is an international school, the work load, is enormous. The demands from the executives on the staff are very high. Unless the staff is willing to work well in a very efficient way they will not last long here. In international schools in Thailand, at least the better ones, only a special type of teacher can survive. The teachers who do well here are certified professionals. Such people are emotionally, mentally and professionally ready to put in the extra effort required. In our school it's three strikes and you're out. If you do something wrong, first we give you a pat on the back and you have a friendly chat with the Head. The second time you are wrong you get a recorded verbal warning. That's the first strike. The second time is a recorded, written warning. The third time is again a recorded written warning, two months severance and you are out the door. No ifs and buts. It is in the contract. Mistakes are not allowed to happen. We have about fifty odd policies on how to deal with the students, such as how to speak in class, how to handle students. We cannot touch students. We must be careful about the vocabulary we use with them, everything. We have a staff handbook about one hundred pages thick. Everybody has to read it when they first come here and must also attend a one-week long set of in-service training on professional development activities, so they can learn what we expect of them. Then they have to perform. The same applies to executives here. They are given targets, very exact and they have to meet them. There is no room for error or incompetence. It is a very competitive market. There are eighty-six international schools here in Bangkok, more than in Tokyo. It is a mature market. When we first opened there were six, now there are

eighty-six so the competition is immense, so you cannot compete on price because the costs are fixed. All good schools pay more or less the same to the staff so you can not really lower the price without affecting the quality of what you deliver and so you have to compete on the quality of service. Therefore, the service must be outstanding. The students and parents are customers. They are stakeholders here so we have to make sure they are happy with the services we offer and render. We cannot please them all, but we have to please most of them.

Because most of the students are Thai, is the Thai language integrated in the regular curriculum?

No, the students are required to take from one to three hours of Thai language instruction a week but that's only a Thai language class. They don't use Thai inside the classroom to study physics, for example, or any other subjects. Thai is an independent subject, which is taught by our Thai teachers. That basically is the extent of Thai language instruction at St. John's. Students get ESL support as much as they need if they speak no English at all so language deficiency is not viewed as a problem. They study English for one year after which they are mainstreamed into the regular program. Also forty percent of the students are from North Asia or Europe. Many children come from mixed backgrounds. We have about three students here whose fathers are from Germany and the mother is Thai. We have many kids who are Japanese, Korean Taiwanese, but they speak no Thai. Because of these students, we can not have Thai used inside the classrooms and so we forbid the use of Thai in the classrooms.

You said you have Japanese students. What is their background?

Most of them come from families where the fathers are *salarymen* or executives who have been posted in Bangkok for about three to five years. The wives are here too. Their children typically go to the Japanese school until grade nine but there is no grade ten, eleven, or twelve in the Japanese school in Bangkok. After that, they have to look for an international school. I would like to add that now in Japan large companies are into internationalization and want employees who speak English. The *salarymen* here are very keen on their sons and daughters coming to our school, because they will receive a western education and by the time they reach grade twelve they will be at least in the upper-intermediate or low-advanced level of English. They can easily obtain a TOEFL score of 550, quite often 600. When they

return to Japan they can go to Sophia University's or Waseda University's international programs. The parents now are quite keen on these schools even though the fathers may have graduated from the University of Tokyo or Kyoto University. They want their sons and daughters to go to a western school. They see the value of such an education. We often get Japanese *salarymen* and their families touring the school premises. There are also students from Korea, Taiwan, China, and other Asian countries. In other words, SJIS has a very international student body.

References

Retrieved on September 19, 2009, from Saint John's International School website
<http://www.international.stjohn.ac.th>.

