SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL CHOICE IN MALAYSIA

by

MARCEA LEIGH INGERSOLL

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(June, 2010)

Copyright ©Marcea Leigh Ingersoll, 2010
ABSTRACT

This study offers a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of Malaysian parents who selected an international education for their children. Data collection was conducted at one international school in Kuala Lumpur, and consisted of both a survey and interviews. The study focused on parents’ own educational background and experiences, their expectations and motivations for selecting an international school, factors affecting school choice, and attitudes to cultural and self-identities within the context of international education. Findings suggest that Malaysian parents from different age groups as well as varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds had similar motivations for sending their children to an international school. From the data analysis, three themes emerged: aspirational priorities, discouraging influences, and enabling factors. By scaffolding my examination within the theory of reproduction in education and notions of social and cultural capital, I examined how multiple forms of economic, cultural, and social capital are recognized and mobilized in the search for a quality education in an increasingly globalized market. I conclude that Malaysian parents in this study chose an international school for their children based on experiences forged in four spheres of influence: individual, social, national, and global.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No single thing is ever accomplished without the efforts of many.

This thesis embodies the contributions of many wonderful people who have given me guidance and from whom I have drawn strength and support. Thank you to all of my friends and family who have helped me along the way. My list of personal acknowledgements easily outnumbers my list of works cited, but here is the abbreviated version.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Sheryl Bond, who supervised the initial stages of this work; thank you for setting me on this path and moving me forward. I also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of my committee member Dr. Cynthia-Levine Rasky, whose expertise and professionalism have brought so much to this work. Thank you, Cynthia--your insight and encouragement provided sustenance along the journey. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler; thank you for picking me up and dusting me off and helping me find my way. Your supervision has given me the confidence to see this journey to completion.

To all my kawan-kawan and colleagues in Malaysia, thank you for many years of laughter and learning. I am forever grateful for your willingness to welcome me home again. Thank you Kathy, Rosie, Sara, Jas, Grace, Adrika, Lau, Fiona, and Jaime—who so generously gave of their time and shared their experiences; without you this study could never have taken shape. Terima kasih.

CJ, thank you for holding the fort while I was gone, for being my person along the way, and for everything that you are. I am grateful to you beyond words.
Thank you to my mother, from whom I get my propensity to organize and sort, to cross that $t$ and dot that $i$. Mum, there is an infinite total on the bill of how much I owe you. And to my dad, who taught me the importance of listening and watching…who showed me that if you wait… just one more moment… the sky will meet the water in a hush of tranquil shades, and you just might hear the humpbacks blow.

And finally, I dedicate this thesis to Saad and Kaelan--the men in my life. You are my inspiration and my joy. I take this journey for you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................................................... iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................................................................................................. iv
LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................ ix
LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................ x

CHAPTER 1: MAPPING THE TERRAIN ............................................................................................................. 1
A Journey of Connections .......................................................................................................................... 1
Purpose and Research Questions ............................................................................................................. 5
Definition of Key Terms .......................................................................................................................... 8
Context for the Research .......................................................................................................................... 9
Significance ................................................................................................................................................ 10
Overview of the Thesis .............................................................................................................................. 12

CHAPTER 2: SPHERES OF INFLUENCE ......................................................................................................... 14
School Choice across the Spheres of Influence ....................................................................................... 15
The Global Sphere ................................................................................................................................... 18
    International Schools .......................................................................................................................... 18
    Definition of international school ...................................................................................................... 18
    Growth of international schools ......................................................................................................... 19
    Parents and international schools ........................................................................................................ 21
Globalization and International Education .............................................................................................. 27
Neoliberalism and the Rhetoric of School Choice Policies ........................................................................ 28
The National Sphere .................................................................................................................................. 31
    Malaysian Education in Historical Context ......................................................................................... 31
    Malaysian Education in a Global Context: Competition, Quality, & Choice .................... 33
        Competition ................................................................................................................................. 34
        Quality ........................................................................................................................................... 34
Choice .............................................................................................................. 35
The Social Sphere ............................................................................................ 37
Value .................................................................................................................. 37
The Forms of Capital ........................................................................................ 39
  Social Capital ................................................................................................. 39
  Cultural Capital .............................................................................................. 40
Summary ............................................................................................................ 42

CHAPTER 3: PATHS TO MEANING .................................................................. 44
Submitting to a View ........................................................................................ 45
A Qualitative Approach .................................................................................... 46
  Research Design .............................................................................................. 47
  Setting and Participants ................................................................................ 47
Feeling my Way Forward in the Inquiry ........................................................ 48
Principles of Hermeneutic Phenomenology .................................................. 50
Reaching into the Inquiry ................................................................................ 51
  Ethics review .................................................................................................. 51
  Criteria for Inclusion .................................................................................... 52
  Data Collection ............................................................................................... 52
  Language of Inquiry ...................................................................................... 53
Survey ................................................................................................................ 53
Interviews .......................................................................................................... 56
Analysis ............................................................................................................. 58
  Quantitative Analysis .................................................................................... 58
  Qualitative Analysis ...................................................................................... 59
Approaches Used to Enhance Trustworthiness .............................................. 60
  Credibility ..................................................................................................... 61
  Reciprocity .................................................................................................... 62
  Equity ............................................................................................................. 62
Summary ............................................................................................................ 64
CHAPTER 4: SURVEY STORIES & INTERVIEW VOICES ................................................................. 66
Survey Stories ................................................................................................................................. 66
  Demographic Background............................................................................................................. 66
  Educational background................................................................................................................ 67
  Factors of Influence....................................................................................................................... 68
Interview Results: Individual Vignettes......................................................................................... 74
  Jaime ........................................................................................................................................... 74
  Jas and Sara ................................................................................................................................. 76
  Lau ............................................................................................................................................... 81
  Fiona ........................................................................................................................................... 82
  Rosie ........................................................................................................................................... 84
  Grace ........................................................................................................................................... 86
  Adrika .......................................................................................................................................... 89
Reflection on the vignettes........................................................................................................... 92
Summary ....................................................................................................................................... 93

CHAPTER 5: INDIVIDUAL UNDERSTANDINGS ................................................................. 95
Aspirational Priorities: The Global Sphere ...................................................................................... 96
  Balance ....................................................................................................................................... 97
  Recognition ................................................................................................................................. 98
  Exposure ..................................................................................................................................... 100
  Mobility ..................................................................................................................................... 107
  Belonging ................................................................................................................................... 108
Discouraging Influences: The National Sphere ............................................................................. 112
  Standards ................................................................................................................................... 114
  Imbalance ................................................................................................................................... 120
Enabling Factors: The Social Sphere .............................................................................................. 124
  Education abroad ....................................................................................................................... 124
  Professional and social contacts ............................................................................................... 125
  Parents’ relationship with English ............................................................................................. 126
  Income level ............................................................................................................................... 127
Summary ....................................................................................................................................... 129
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: CONNECTING &amp; CONCLUDING</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of Individual Experience</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Role of English</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of English in Post-Independence Malaysia</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English in the Global Context</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Influential Factors</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia in the Realm of International School Choice</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to the Three Themes</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirational Priorities</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouraging Influences</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling Factors</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and Self-Identities</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting the Cultural to the Social, National and Global Spheres</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections and Divergence</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions for Future Research</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: Interview Guide</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: Ethics Approval</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C: Survey</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX D: Recruitment Letter</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX E: Letter of Information &amp; Consent</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX F: Sample Transcript</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Excerpt from the interview with Lau ................................................................. 65
Figure 2. Excerpt from the interview with Grace ............................................................. 94
Figure 3. Connected Experience ..................................................................................... 96
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Language of School Instruction .......................................................... 68
Table 2: Factors of Influence ........................................................................... 69
CHAPTER 1
MAPPING THE TERRAIN

My study emerges out of the interest generated when a particular event led me to question and reflect on my professional circumstances more deeply than I ever had. I was the Head of Secondary at a successful international school in Kuala Lumpur, and my days were filled with the multiple challenges faced by many educators whose days are sometimes subsumed by administrative responsibilities. I had a multiplicity of tasks to complete, items to attend to, plans to make, problems to solve. Sometimes the drone of routine is a comfort which continues to propel us along our journeys, but a significant event can disrupt that drone, and challenge us to alter course.

A Journey of Connections

Malaysia is a peaceful plural society that has seen remarkable economic development in recent decades. I lived in Malaysia during a time of rapid growth, and was caught up in the excitement of expansion. The international school where I taught had moved from a small shop lot to a spacious and beautifully landscaped campus. Empty fields made way for multi-level shopping facilities, and I strolled alongside Malay, Chinese, and Indian Malaysians through the air-conditioned comfort of IKEA on the weekends. The presence of international brands, products, and services had become increasingly apparent and influential in our lives. This thesis had its genesis on a bright sunny morning in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. On that morning I began to think more deeply about my role as a Canadian educator in a Malaysian international school that offered a British curriculum. I became increasingly conscious of how global influences
can affect our individual, social, and national experiences. As a reflexive introduction to the phenomenon that altered my course, I offer the reader an excerpt from my journal and a window into my personal experience with the phenomenon at the centre of this inquiry.

**Journal entry: May, 2006.**

*After daily assembly this morning, I entered the administration office of Raya Malaysia International School*, as I have done every school day for many years. *On this day, however, there was a tangible sense that something unusual was taking place. The office staff appeared harried and frustrated, the phones would not stop ringing, and the closed-circuit security screen showed a queue of cars at the school gates. The confused voice of the security guard came across the intercom, wondering what he should say to the crowd who was disturbing his normally quiet mid-morning routine.*

This excerpt from my journal records my personal reaction to the intense and immediate rippling effect of a proposed policy shift announced by the Malaysian Minister of Education. The announcement suggested that the restrictions on Malaysians sending their children to international schools would be changed. Prior to that announcement, there were a number of restrictions in place that prevented Malaysians from selecting one of the nation’s thirty-two international schools as the location for their children’s education. Malaysian parents were reacting with visible and tangible excitement to this proposed change.

*There was most certainly neither place within my job description nor time within my schedule to pause and be reflective about the queues outside the school gates or the barrage of inquiries flooding the school office. My interest in the immediate and ardent*

---

1 Name has been changed.
response to an announcement that more Malaysians would be able to send their children to an international school would have to wait. However, the intensity of my own response to the reaction created by the media announcement lingered with me, and I continued to reflect on why Malaysian parents responded with such excitement to the announcement. My reflections about the scenario that morning forced me to think about the role I played, and the system I taught in. I felt challenged to embark on the journey charted here.


The event which had prompted a public reaction that May morning in Kuala Lumpur was the catalyst for a dismantling of my private assumptions. That morning, local newspapers reported a potential liberalisation of government restrictions on Malaysian enrolments at international schools. The reports suggested that Education Minister Hishamuddin Hussein intended to announce an official policy shift enabling Malaysian parents to enrol their children in international schools. The policy shift initiated a visible reaction socially, and provoked a profound response from me individually and intellectually. Within this transformative moment, I was prompted to ask questions about international education which had not occurred to me before, despite my 15 years as an international educator.

I include these entries from my journal to reflect how my thesis is imbued with the understanding that research arises out of a personal interest and attachment. I have lived and taught in Malaysia for most of my adult life. What was meant to be a year off between my undergraduate and graduate studies turned into a fifteen year absence from Canada and a life built and lived in a country that fascinated me, with people who
welcomed me, and where I established roots that run deep into Malaysian soil. I have attempted to leave Malaysia twice. But the country has held me in its grasp and refuses to let me go. Each time I’ve left, I’ve returned. After my first attempt at permanent departure, I felt compelled to go back, and packed up my two children for a physical journey which felt very much like going home. After my second departure, I longed to return again; I was filled with a sense of disconnection from the patch of earth where my youngest child was born, where both my children had taken their first steps and gone to school. I still felt a strong sense that I needed to return to Malaysia once more. This thesis has allowed me to make an intellectual return to the country where I became a teacher and parent, and where I once found myself in the position of deciding where I should educate my own children. As a Canadian with children who hold Canadian passports, my choice was confined to the international schools in the country. Until 2006, the choice of most of my Malaysian friends and colleagues was constrained to sending their children to national schools. When the government relaxed the restrictions on Malaysians at international schools, I had numerous conversations with my colleagues and friends about why this shift in policy had generated such an enthusiastic response. Their comments and insights revealed that reasons for this reaction were complex, personal, and often unspoken in the public realm.

This study is a record of my personal and academic quest to give voice to Malaysian parents who decide to send their children to an international school. In conducting this research, I found that a complex interplay of factors is involved in the act of choice-seeking. Malaysian parents in this study, who elected to send their children to an international school, share similarities with parents who are exercising school choice
in intra-national contexts. Across the experience of international school choice there is an interesting emergence of commonality with the realm of choice globally, whereby it is apparent that middle-class actors from emerging economies are exhibiting traits of solidarity with their middle-class counterparts in economically advanced nations. Class desires are superseding traditional ethnic, racial and cultural attributes in the competition for advantage in an increasingly urban, cosmopolitan, and globalizing world. But in Malaysia, the decision is far more complex than the fact that parents can afford it. While having the economic means to enact choice is an important aspect of parents’ ability to choose, there are individual, social, national and global influences at play.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to understand why Malaysian parents decide to register their children in an international school. My specific research questions include the following:

1. What elements of parents’ own educational experiences are influential in this decision?
2. What other considerations are influential when making this decision?
3. How are parents’ cultural and self-identities reflected in this experience?
4. What themes of commonality and divergence occur across the experience of this decision?

The research process is a complex journey. The diversity of perspectives and paradigms, theories and concepts, was initially overwhelming. How could I align myself with only one? What if it’s not the right one? What if my perspectives changed over the course of my research? These were my fears as I read and read and read. And the more I
read, the more hesitant I became to write. I felt like I was in an optometrist’s chair, being asked which pair of glasses was best and being confused because after a while they all just seemed the same. I could see everything quite well but none of the pairs seemed sharp enough or quite focused. I needed to make a decision, but nothing quite fit.

Then I found phenomenology.

Phenomenology allows for the voices of those who have lived through an experience to speak to the complexity of meaning contained in their individual stories. In talking about my research, whether in Canada or Malaysia, I was frequently met with others’ pre-conceived ideas about why Malaysian parents would elect to send their children to an international school. The informal commentary fascinated me. There was a consistent readiness to give a singular, explanatory factor. “Because they can afford it,” many people commented. The popularity of this view, that money was the single factor, compelled me to conduct my research in a way that allowed for the voices of those who were being singularly categorized to speak to the complexity of their individual experiences. The importance of recognizing the diversity of expressions of lived experience is at the heart of phenomenology.

Phenomenology reaches deep into the meaning of the things themselves. It allows for the exploration of a phenomenon through reflection, through story, and through rich descriptions of how something is lived by those who have experienced it (van Manen, 1997). Its principles encourage an approach which seeks to uncover meaning through people’s reflective consideration of their actions. All the time I had been searching for a singular prescription, when what I was really searching for was a combination of transitional lenses to capture the complexity and spontaneity of meaning.
Phenomenological inquiry is useful for this study in that it is a theoretical framework as well as a methodology; it serves as a methodological guide for the interpretation of meaning and provides theoretical guidance for the study. I chose it after considerable deliberation. I struggled with theories that compartmentalize, generalize, or explicate. I hold a strong belief that meaning is personal, contextual, and temporal. Meaning is fluid and dynamic—as soon as it is captured it will disperse and re-form. My purpose is not to explicate, but to capture an empirical moment and describe it through the words and contexts of those whose lives have led them to be part of that phenomenon.

At the same time, I understand that the meaning which emerges will be influenced by the ways in which I solicit it, and that individual meaning is co-constructed with, and in relation to, larger social and historical influences. And so, in addition to the theoretical principles which guide phenomenology, I turn to the work of others to consciously guide my inquiry, knowing of course that I am also unconsciously guided by ontological relations which are not overtly stated or plainly seen. In understanding that our decisions about education are informed by our own educational experiences, I look to the theory of reproduction in education offered by Bourdieu and Passeron (1979). Within the theory of reproduction, schools are considered sites of social and cultural reproduction. Although the theory was originally devised in relation to education and social stratification in France, its concepts are useful for guiding and supporting my inquiry. Simultaneous to phenomenology’s principles of investigating lived experience as a way of uncovering individual and shared meaning, the theory of reproduction offers conceptual guidelines for understanding this meaning within the larger social context. The conceptual framing of this study will be outlined and expanded upon in Chapter 2.
Definition of Key Terms

Several terms will emerge in this research that will hold meanings which are understood differently depending on context. An *international school* in the Malaysian context refers to those schools which provide an education that features a curriculum that is taught in English and recognized by an educational authority or organization not Malaysian in origin. Fees are the main funding source although not all international schools are run as for-profit institutions. International schools are different from *expatriate schools*.

In this thesis, the term *expatriate school* refers to a school which caters to a particular nationality or linguistic group. Examples include the German, French, and Japanese schools. In each instance, curricula, examinations, and classes are conducted in the language of the home nation and recognized by their respective national educational authorities.

In Malaysia, *private school* is a commonly used term which indicates that a school is privately owned and operated. Generally it is used in reference to schools which follow the Malaysian syllabus and where Malay is the language of instruction and examination. Private schools in Malaysia do not receive government funding.

The term *local school* is frequently used interchangeably with the terms *national school, sekolah kebangsaan, or government school*. It usually refers to schools which are government-funded and which are Malay-medium. There are also government-funded primary schools in which the language of instruction is Mandarin or Tamil. Often called *vernacular schools*, they are commonly distinguished by their language of instruction, such as *Chinese schools, or Tamil schools*. 
In Malaysian usage, the term *Chinese school* can refer to either the government-funded national schools in which Mandarin is the language of instruction, or to the *Chinese independent schools* which are privately funded, fee-paying schools for secondary students. Clarification will be provided in context as these terms appear in the thesis.

*National language* refers to the official language of Malaysia and is also referred to as *Bahasa Malaysia*, the *Malay language*, and *Bahasa Melayu*. In common usage it is frequently abbreviated as simply *Malay*, as in the following example: “We don’t speak *Malay* at home.”

The term *Malay* is also used to denote ethnicity and is frequently used in these forms: “She is Malay” or “She is a Malay.”

In this thesis, the term *race* is used as it is commonly employed in Malaysia: as a marker of ethnicity. Use of the term is widespread on Malaysian government forms and in everyday conversation. Official documents require citizens to identify themselves by “Race” and the categories provided are *Malay, Chinese, Indian, or Other.*

**Context for the Research**

In 2006, the policy shift announced by the Malaysian Minister of Education echoed education policies taking root on a global scale (Forsey, Davies & Walford, 2008; Stromquist, 2000). Traditionally, international schools in Malaysia have served the expatriate community, and narrow criteria had to be met before the Ministry of Education would grant a Malaysian student approval to study in one of the country’s 32 international schools. In 2006, however, Education Minister Hishammuddin Hussein announced that Malaysians would be able to attend international schools, provided that
their number does not exceed 40% of a school’s capacity (Subanayagam, 2006). At the
time of the announcement, Malaysian students accounted for only .05% of enrolments at
the nation’s 32 international schools.

According to the Minister of Education at the time, the Malaysian policy shift was
implemented to keep students from pursuing their primary and secondary education in
other countries, such as Singapore, Australia and Britain. The policy, the government
hoped, would prevent this “brain drain” of several thousand young Malaysians every year
and promote Malaysia as a regional education hub (Subanayagam, 2006). Following the
policy shift, there was an increase in both the number of Malaysians at international
schools and the growth of the number of such schools in Malaysia. Provided that they
could meet certain criteria, Malaysian parents would have access to locally offered
educational opportunities ranging from the British National Curriculum to an Ontario
High School Diploma.

The 2006 policy shift invoked considerable discourse around international school
choice in the Malaysian context. Recent enrolment figures show that Malaysian
enrolment figures have grown since the policy was implemented. Although education is
frequently at the forefront of the Malaysian national consciousness, there is no published
research in English regarding parental decisions to send their children to international
schools in Malaysia. As far as I am aware, this study provides seminal insights into why
Malaysian parents decide to send their children to international schools in Malaysia.

**Significance**

In this section, I outline my academic interest in the phenomenon and the
significance of the study to the field of international education.
In October of 2008, the front page of The International Educator ran an article entitled “International schools show phenomenal growth.” According to the article, there were only 1,700 English-medium international schools in the year 2000, while in 2007-2008 that number had jumped to 4,958 (“International”, 2008). While quantitatively it is clear that international school enrolments are increasing across the globe, an in-depth exploration of the multiple realities behind this individually enacted but socially influential phenomenon is not sufficiently addressed in the academic literature. Projections indicate that this market will continue to grow, particularly in Asia. Exploring the nuanced motivations and experiences of Malaysian parents who decided on an international education for their children is an important contribution to the growing body of research on international school choice.

A cursory internet search revealed that international schools around the globe offer significant variety in choice options, especially in relation to curriculum, facilities, and fees. In this sea of categorical difference is an emerging current of commonality: the mission statements of many international schools claim that they aim to provide a global perspective, to promote international mindedness, and to create global citizens (e.g. Yokohama International School, International School of Islamabad, International School of Kuala Lumpur, Canadian International School Hong Kong). The global scale on which these aims are being attempted, and their increasing use in the marketing of education (Cambridge, 2002), provide additional justification for greater research into the realm of parental choice in international school contexts.

My study will be the first phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of Malaysians who have chosen an international school for their children. It will have the
potential to serve as the basis for future studies which focus on different groups, have
greater numbers of participants, include additional factors, or deploy alternative
methodologies. My research will provide a consideration of how parents’ lived
experiences affect their considerations when making this choice. These experiences are
examined in the Malaysian context, assembled as they have been explained by
individuals who have enacted them, and discussed within the contextual frames of this
inquiry.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces my personal
connection to the phenomenon being studied, briefly situates the research, and provides
an overview of the chapters which follow. In Chapter 2, prior research and literature
related to the study are explored and outlined in order to lay a foundation for the context
in which I will examine my research questions. I will review educational choice through
literature which is informed by theories of reproduction in education. Malaysian parents’
choice-making experience will be contextualized in reference to four levels of influence:
choice as it is manifest globally, nationally, socially, and individually.

The design and methodology of this study are outlined in Chapter 3. I provide a
rationale for the use of a qualitative research design and expand on the phenomenological
approach to research. I present the questions I posed in this study, and explore the ways
in which these questions are connected to my theoretical framework and the four levels of
influence outlined in Chapter 2. I also discuss trustworthiness in qualitative research, and
detail my engagement with strategies that were used to ensure the trustworthiness of this
work.
Chapter 4 contains the findings from the survey and interviews. The responses from the 44 surveys are presented using descriptive statistics, and the eight interview participants are introduced individually. By providing narrative vignettes of each of the participants, I hope to give the reader a sense of whose voices are being heard.

In Chapter 5, three themes which emerged from the study are explored. Each theme is explored independently, and interwoven with supporting quotes from the in-depth interviews and the open-form questions on the survey. In closing, the overall experiences of Malaysian parents who elected to send their children to an international school are synthesized.

The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 6, presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the concepts presented in Chapter 2, and considers additional literature suggested by the findings of the research. Observations and conclusions are drawn, the implications of the findings are explored, and directions for future research are suggested.
A phenomenological paradigm assumes that through an examination of participants’ lived experiences, understanding of the phenomenon will emerge (Creswell, 1998, Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994, van Manen, 1997). Another assumption of a phenomenological study is that the researcher comes to the study with a particular set of assumptions, a unique worldview, and an epistemological standpoint which frames the inquiry. In this chapter, I identify and elaborate on the intellectual frames of reference which have informed my thinking about the phenomenon, and which both guide and circumscribe this study.

The literature presented in this section of Chapter 2 is guided by theories of reproduction in education (Apple, 1982; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). The theory of reproduction has been selected because it presents a framework for connecting the individual parental choice of an international education for their children to influences which are played out in at the global, national, and societal levels. In this thesis, I refer to these four levels as spheres of influence, and use this heuristic tool to organize and understand the complexity of these influences. This chapter presents an overview of literature which spans and connects the four spheres of influence, through an overview of international school choice as it is situated in each sphere: global, national, societal, and individual. At each level, these influences can be further connected to concepts of capital, which are present in but played out differently across each of the spheres. The concepts
of capital are outlined at the end of this chapter and connected to the literature on school choice and the four spheres of influence.

**School Choice across the Spheres of Influence**

Literature on school choice in national contexts is abundant. Much of the body of research on school choice as it is represented in educational databases and bibliographies is concerned with choice in practical and policy terms (e.g. OSSTF, 2005; Straub, 1997) and centers on issues related to choice in the United States and the United Kingdom where school choice policies have been the subject of much discussion in recent decades. Literature specific to parental choice is frequently found within sociological databases and focused on the social and cultural aspects of school choice in national contexts (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Bulman, 2004; Dehli, 1996; Levine-Rasky, 2007; Ogawa & Dutton, 1997; Reay & Ball, 1997, 1998; Robenstine, 2001) or choice in the realm of higher education (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005).

In their study of parents and choice, Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1996) consider how school choice policies in the United Kingdom have created an environment of competition and consumerism, where schools compete for students and parents shop for quality. They highlight the contradiction in the claim that educational choice policies are neutral by illustrating how social class differences and the reproduction of class inequalities are played out in systems of choice. Reay and Ball also argue that “educational choices are informed by an interior world of class” (1997, p. 93). Ball et al. (1996) identify three types of choosers amongst parents in the United Kingdom: disconnected choosers (who are working class); privileged/skilled choosers (professionals, middle class); and semi-skilled choosers (from a variety of class
backgrounds). Although different traits emerge within each type of chooser, there are commonalities within and between groups, with the role of social class acting as a direct influence across the experience of choice-making. In a related study, Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe, (1995) illuminate how access to economic, social, and cultural capital is associated with parents’ choices, and conclude that educational markets are a mode of social engagement that privilege the middle classes. Cynthia Levine-Rasky’s (2007) work on school choice extends our understanding of how power relations affect choice, and how white middle-class desires for the “right” education converge with state policies which “position schools as the place to form young citizens prepared to compete (and win) in the global marketplace” (p. 407).

International school choice literature examines the preferences of parents whose individual identities are arguably more complex than the choosers represented in the intra-national school choice literature. International school choosers represent a diverse body of nationalities, racial and ethnic background, linguistic heritage, and religious affiliation. Also, international school choice is by comparison a small entity within the larger field of school choice research. However, international school parents, irrespective of their diversity, articulate similar motivations and traits as intra-national choosers, and the role of social class (Ball et al., 1996; Levine-Rasky, 2007; Reay et al., 2005) is similarly evident amongst international choosers.

Academic databases offer very little in terms of school choice in international contexts, and the limited number of studies which do exist tend to focus on policy borrowing and market forces (Cambridge 2002; Forsey, Davis & Walford, 2009).
In the vast body of literature on school choice, there are very few studies which directly address the issue of parents and international school choice. Studies by Ezra (2007), Potter and Hayden (2004), MacKenzie, Hayden, and Thompson (2001, 2003), and MacKenzie (2009) are notable exceptions and are discussed below. The limited research on international school choice is understandable; international education as a field is relatively young.

Until recently, international education has existed along the margins of educational research. In some instances it has focused predominantly on higher international education, and in others it has been bundled with comparative education and focused largely on the international comparison of national systems and contexts. In a comprehensive overview of the field of international education, Dolby and Rahman, (2008) distinguish international school research as one of six distinct approaches or sub-fields within the overarching field of international educational research. The six fields identified by Dolby and Rahman are: comparative and international education, internationalization of higher education, international schools, international research on teaching and teacher education, internationalization of K-12 education, and globalization and education. Their extensive review supports the claim that research in the field of international schools is nascent and “has explored a relatively limited number of research agendas” (Dolby & Rahman, 2008, p. 690). The field of international school research has evolved primarily as a field of practice, focused on the question of what international education is, and initiated a realm of research on globally mobile children who have attended international schools (third culture kids, or TCKs). Publishing practice-related research, defining the field of international school research, and examining the cultural
and identity aspects of TCKs have dominated the research agenda so far. According to Dolby and Rahman, “how international schools function on a structural level within national and global arenas” is an emergent but underdeveloped research trajectory (p. 690).

The lack of research which focuses on international school choice is also unsurprising given the historically limited scope of these institutions. International schools have traditionally served very limited populations, there were very few such schools, and they did not have much influence on or interaction with the societies in which they were located. More recently, indications suggest that this situation has changed considerably. The following section describes the nature and growth of international schools in an effort to connect the first two spheres of influence in relation to international school choice: global and national.

**The Global Sphere**

**International Schools**

Historically, international schools around the world have served the children of diplomats, expatriates and transnational employees (Hayden, 2006). Predominantly, international schools continue to cater to globally mobile families and, increasingly, to segments of local populations who have both the means and the desire to participate. Globally, growth in the international school sector is occurring rapidly, and market predictions indicate that continued expansion is likely. The reasons for this growth are discussed later in this section.

**Definition of international school.** Although there are criteria by which individual institutions can gain access to elite member associations such as the Council of
International Schools (CIS), the European Council of International Schools (ECIS), or the Federation of British International Schools in South and Southeast Asia (FOBISSEA), there is no proscribed definition or set of criteria required for any institution to adopt the label of “international school.” Across the globe there are schools that cater to students from various nationalities but do not carry the label “international.” By the same token, there are also schools that claim the term “international,” but apart from the fact that the curriculum is delivered in English it would be difficult to identify what constitutes the international component of the institution. Scholars speak to various academic definitions of what an international school is, and the most frequently conceded definition is that such schools are difficult to define (e.g. Dolby & Rahman, 2008; Hayden, 2006; Hayden et al., 2004; MacDonald, 2006). One website puts it in simple terms: “A typical international school teaches wholly or partly in English, is independent and is located in a non-English speaking country” (ISC, 2009). Various schools that operate under the banner of international education may not necessarily follow an international curriculum and may be populated by exclusively local students and staff. The chain of Amity International Schools in India is an example, and its only claim to the label “international” is the delivery of an English-medium curriculum (Amity, 2009). For many international schools, the qualifying characteristic of it being “international” is simply the use of English as the medium of instruction.

**Growth of international schools.** In 2000 there were 1,700 international schools across the globe. By the 2007-2008 school year, that number had more than doubled, with 1.83 million students studying at nearly 5,000 international schools worldwide (“International,” 2008). In a matter of months, those figures rose to 5,220 schools in 236
countries. The number of students increased to 2,166,720 and the total number of staff reached 195,009 (ISC, 2009). The growth in the number of international schools around the globe has indeed been “phenomenal” (“International,” 2008). The number of schools which are being run for profit is increasing, international schools are now “big business” and they cater to “the richest 5% of the non-English speaking world” (ISC, 2009). In a 2006 study, which examines the growth of international schools as an industry, MacDonald explores the revenue-generating aspects of international schools around the globe. As discussed earlier in this section, a consistent definition of an international school is problematic. Considering the number of international schools that operate outside of membership organizations, it is difficult to even define industry boundaries, much less to approximate the total revenue generated by international schools worldwide. In his 2006 study of the 907 schools which are members of the Council of International Schools, (CIS), MacDonald generated a low estimate of the total tuition revenues as $3.2 billion and a high estimate of $5.3 billion per annum. Even these conservative estimates indicate that the worldwide international school industry has grown to be a billion dollar industry with global impact.

As indicated by Dolby and Rahman in their review of international school research, the reasons for this growth have been the subject of limited examination (2008). Studies by Bunnell (2006, 2007) examine trends in the growth of the international school industry. Bunnell notes that many schools started as informal organizations with small enrolment numbers, and growth has fluctuated according to local and global factors and forces. MacDonald (2006) suggested “it would seem likely that demand from local residents will increase as some begin to look towards international education as a
desirable alternative to other local educational options in this age of globalization” (p. 207). There has been much speculation, but little empirical investigation, into why an international education is considered to be a desirable alternative. Conclusions have been drawn based on policy and market forces, but the voices of people making the decision are not yet adequately represented in the literature. Farthest removed from the discourse are those who have been labeled “local host nationals” and are electing to make this choice.

My study is driven by the absence of previous inquiry as to why parents are selecting an international education rather than a local education for their children. If there are multiple parental voices in the literature so far, I either have not heard them, or they have been silenced by an overwhelming concentration on markets, systems, and policy. In the next section of this literature review, I look at studies which have focused on parents in relation to international school choice.

*Parents and international schools.* Initial studies on parents and international schools explored parental perceptions of an international education in a European international school (MacKenzie, Hayden, & Thompson, 2001) and expatriate parents’ choice of certain schools for their children (MacKenzie, Hayden, & Thompson, 2003). In their first study, MacKenzie et al. found that an English language education was the overwhelming reason behind expatriate parents’ desire to send their children to an international school, but that for local host nationals, it was not their top priority. In an extension of the initial research, MacKenzie et al. (2003) examined the priorities of parents whose children were enrolled at three international schools in Switzerland. Conducted in schools which “cater for the expatriate commercial, diplomatic, and
academic communities” (MacKenzie et al., 2003, p. 301) the study examined the “basis on which parents had elected to send their children to one or other of the schools in question” (p. 299). Responses on 11 questionnaire items were solicited from primary and secondary parents. A small number of local (Swiss) students attended the schools, and the majority of respondents were from Europe, Britain, and North America. Similarly, the teachers at the schools were from “the UK, the USA and other English-speaking countries” (p. 301). The children who attend these three schools typically return to their “home” country or “take an English language course of study in the UK, the USA or elsewhere” (p. 301).

According to MacKenzie et al., “a major factor influencing parents is the perceived importance of an English-medium education” (2003, p. 229). Other factors, such as a good impression when visiting the school, the curriculum, and the school’s reputation were priorities as well. The number of mothers who responded to the study exceeded the number of fathers, and the authors offer anecdotal evidence to suggest that many families are led overseas by the father’s career, that the women follow their husbands, and the mothers focus their energies on the children. Of the predominantly corporate, diplomatic and expatriate clientele, the “majority simply found that their careers had taken them and their families to a Swiss city where the educational needs of their children had to be met” (p. 312). The choice of an international school is largely a pragmatic one in this instance.

In their 2004 study of parental choice in the Buenos Aires bilingual school market, Potter and Hayden focus their attention on Argentinean parents. Although the private Argentinean schools in the study are not referred to as international schools, they
do offer international credentials such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) or programmes such as the International Baccalaureate (IB). A total of 109 questionnaires were returned from parents at two schools, and 11 parents were interviewed. The findings from this study suggest that “parents selecting bilingual schools in Buenos Aires are, in effect, combining the priorities found to have been influential in the United Kingdom context with those found to influence expatriates living in non-English speaking countries” (Potter & Hayden, 2004, p. 90). Language emerged as a paramount factor in parents’ decision-making, followed by factors relating to school ethos. The authors connected their discussion of these factors to corporate and administrative concerns; the findings are presented in light of the “clear implications for the marketing of schools” (p. 108) and geared toward school management teams. I found only two articles that purposefully explored the selection of international schools by local parents: Ezra (2007), and MacKenzie (2009).

Specifically, Ezra’s study sought to identify the underlying issues which motivated parents to choose an international school over the Israeli public school system. Similar to Potter and Hayden, the stated rationale for Ezra’s research on parental choice in Israel is its potential value to international school administrators “who are interested in knowing, for marketing purposes” what attracts families to their schools (Ezra, 2007, p. 260). Additionally, the author acknowledges that her work contributes to a “limited but increasing body of knowledge about international schools and their constituencies” (p. 259).

Ezra examines parents’ decisions through a framework informed by Rational Choice Theory and a Push-Pull Model of choice making. Using qualitative research.
methods, her study consisted of a survey and personal interviews with local parents from one international school in Israel. Participants were identified as “local” according to the school’s administrative records, although no further explanation of what this means is offered by the researcher. Initial data gathered through the survey was used to “prioritize parents' intentions and to get a basic feeling of the main issues involved in Israeli parental choice” (Ezra, 2007, p. 265). The cover letter and survey were written in English and translated into Hebrew and Russian—the languages spoken by the majority of local parents. The survey was comprised of two sections: the first concentrated on respondents' personal backgrounds and aimed to identify possible variables for analysis; the second section included 40 random order declarative statements covering academic, administrative and pastoral needs, personal interest, and campus aesthetics. By placing a tick in the appropriate column, parents identified whether an item was “a reason or not a reason” for their choice to move from the local system to the international school. The survey was posted to 90 families and 51 completed surveys were returned.

From the completed surveys, a sample of interviewees was chosen relative to the ethnic and cultural composition of local elementary and middle school parents. Thirteen personal interviews with elementary and middle school parents were conducted in order to gain deeper understanding of the variable nature of their survey responses. The survey data is clearly reported in the form of two tables. Items are listed in rank order and show the frequency of elementary/middle responses compared to high school responses. Data from the interviews is summarized in table form and further discussed in terms of the push-pull factors influencing parental choice.
The findings of this study are in accordance with its purpose; Ezra identifies the paramount reasons this group of parents had for opting out of the local system. She reports that the costs/push factors of the local schools far outweighed the benefits of the public system for their children. Although the survey responses suggested that parents' desire for their children to learn English was the principal reason for leaving local schools, the interviews revealed other factors. School violence, poorly trained teachers, large classes, lack of a strong curriculum, special needs not being met, and a clash of cultural values emerged as the primary push factors. The research design allows for deeper investigation of survey responses and permits the researcher to examine discrepancies which would not have been highlighted from using one instrument in isolation. Verbatim quotes from interview participants are threaded throughout the explanation of the data and corroborate the findings. Finally, the article included a thorough and informed discussion of the results in relation to the theoretical model of Rational Choice Theory and Push-Pull factors.

In reviewing Ezra’s study I felt it would be useful to know whether one parent or both participated in the interviews and whether that parent was male or female. Also, the biographical note at the end of the article states that the author holds a teaching post at the school that is the focus of the research, but there is no explicit recognition of the author's role in the interviews conducted. Neither are we informed if the author was the sole interviewer, where the interviews took place, length of the interviews, timeframe in which they were conducted, or whether any of the parents were known to the author prior to their selection for interview. Finally, the rationale given for the research—that it could
be of value for marketing purposes—is not integrated into the findings or the concluding statements.

MacKenzie (2009) offers additional insight into the choice of parents who elect to send their children to an international school instead of a local school. His article reports the findings of a study conducted in six member schools of the Japan Council of International Schools, and focused on parents of Japanese parents who enroll their children in an international school. A total of 193 survey responses were received and an unspecified number of interviews were conducted. Published just as I had completed the analysis of my own data, MacKenzie’s study highlights many similarities between Japanese and Malaysian parents, and illuminates the findings pertaining to local host nationals in earlier studies. Notably, MacKenzie found that while Japanese parents rank an English language education highly, there was an indication that the cultural values associated with an international education were considered to be more important. Parents’ concerns about the local Japanese system included examination pressure, an emphasis on conformity rather than creativity, and general dissatisfaction with Japanese schools. Bullying was a concern, in particular for families with one non-Japanese parent. The majority of parents indicated that their intention was to send their children for tertiary education in either the USA or the UK. MacKenzie illustrates how parents had diverse reasons for making the decision, and that their reasons “varied according to individual experiences” (2009, p. 338).

Both Ezra’s and MacKenzie’s findings raise key issues relevant to my own questions surrounding Malaysian parents' experiences of enrolling their children in private international schools. By highlighting the fact that international school choice is a
complicated issue informed by a complex system of influences, Ezra’s article was instrumental in my decision to examine this phenomenon through the lens of complexity offered by a phenomenological approach. Decidedly, however, the experiences of the individuals making the choice are situated in spheres of influence, and the next section of this literature review sheds light on the influence of globalization on individual international educational choices.

**Globalization and International Education**

The studies in the previous section are the sole examples I found which regard parents as the core sources of data in relation to international school choice. Much of the current research, like MacKenzie et al. (2003), attributes the growth of international schools to the “increasing globalisation of business and its associated mobility of employees and their families” (p. 300). Other articles (e.g. Cambridge 2002, 2003, 2004; Lowe, 1999, 2000) have also indicated that factors associated with globalization have contributed to the growth of international schools.

Competing discourses about the effects of globalization assume different tones, depending on how the speaker is geographically or ideologically situated (Stromquist, 2002). Definitions of globalization are often divided, according to whether the phenomenon is perceived to be a positive or negative influence (Gerdes, 2006). Even within the dichotomous perspectives on globalization, there are myriad analytical frameworks and conclusions. What the English-language body of research on globalization does agree on is that globalization is a powerful force: societies around the globe are becoming increasingly connected and interdependent (Apple, Kenway & Singh,
Globalizing trends in economics, politics, culture, and society can have a great impact not merely on a national, but also on an international scale.

The enmeshed and inter-relational aspects of globalization are so interwoven that it is difficult to unravel the threads, but Apple et al. (2005) for the purposes of their work on globalizing education, refer to two overarching ways of interpreting its influence: globalization from above and from below. Within the representation of globalization from above, the world is perceived in terms of an unstoppable neoliberal economic growth, which fuses the interests of market and state, reducing or rendering incompatible any interests which do not follow the prescription of neoliberal economics. Critics of globalization from above are those who challenge neoliberal globalism and contend that it serves to exacerbate global inequalities. These critical perspectives of globalization, or globalization from below, tend to interrogate dominant economic standpoints and offer concerned questions about the “pernicious effects on education of neoliberal and corporate globalization from above” (Apple et al., 2005, p. 7). This view acknowledges that there has been a global intensification of state regulatory mechanisms which privilege a market-oriented culture, and that neoliberal economics serve as a driving force for market-oriented educational policies.

*Neoliberalism and the Rhetoric of School Choice Policies*

From the perspective of globalization from below, school choice policies are inequitable and replete with the false rhetoric of globalization from above. Central to school choice policies is the potential for the expansion of an economic market rather than promotion of widespread social benefit. The dominant discourse of school choice
policies is spoken in the language of neoliberal economics, in which the core values of efficiency, effectiveness, and quality are prioritized in order to be competitive.

In the dominant model of neoliberalism, individuals are considered to be “rational optimizers” and the best judges of their own interests and needs (Olssen, Codd, O'Neill, 2004, p. 138). Neoliberal policies are based on the notion that competition will drive the market and that the promotion of choice will permit consumers to participate in a market offering a variety of options which suit individual preferences. Neoliberal policies are embedded with the notion that educational quality is improved through the presence of competition, and many parents keen to provide their children with a competitive advantage choose a private education (Stromquist, 2005). Stromquist also characterizes privatization as an unstoppable phenomenon associated with globalization (2005).

Within a neoliberal model, choice is the positive rhetoric which promotes privatization as the freedom to make individual choices. However, individual choices which do not subscribe to a neoliberal model are considered incompatible with progress and render invalid alternative ways of knowing or doing. Berry (2008) asserts that neoliberal policies, which encourage the optimization of individual choice, are driven by profit, encourage production, consumption and commodification, and envision development in purely economic terms. According to Apple et al. (2005, p. 11), “Neoliberal globalism constructs active, self-actualizing individuals who optimize a narrow sense of the good life by their own decisions regarding consumption and prepares students to be global citizens and global consumers” (Apple et al., p. 11). Neoliberal discourse in this context leaves no room for unprofitable notions of the good life, or for alternative epistemologies to inform our notion of a good education. A concern among
scholars who are critical of globalization is that individual nations are adopting educational policies which perpetuate neoliberal values and reproduce inequitable social relations.

According to Robenstine, there are five basic assumptions ingrained in school choice policies:

1) by allowing parents to choose, the state asserts the democratic principle of free individual choice;
2) parental choice within a free market system promotes competition among schools;
3) competition among schools exerts pressure toward increased quality;
4) parental school choice promotes diversity and increases social capital by giving power to individuals; thus
5) effectively countervailing racial and socioeconomic segregation.

(Robenstine, 2001, p. 238)

However, these assumptions are not played out equitably. Within a market-driven framework, schools that wish to be competitive must strive to attract students who will increase their value. Market mechanisms do not reflect the complexity of parents’ needs and preferences, they ensure that only the preferences of particular groups are met (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Robenstine, 2001). Parents who have accumulated sufficient social and cultural capital already know the rules of school success. They can negotiate the process of school selection and have clearly defined expectations of what a high quality education means to them. “Because of the differences in social and cultural capital among parents-as-consumers, free market-based parental choice is a class strategy” and not everyone has the genuine power to choose (Robenstine, 2001, p. 243). “In the new consumer age, class analysis which addresses and exposes social inequality” is a way of looking at school choice in the national and international contexts where
neoliberal policies are circulating; such a lens “offers an important oppositional discourse to set over and against the tide of neo-liberal individualism” (Reay & Ball, 1997, p. 89).

The National Sphere

“The best way to ensure quality education is by ensuring parental choice and school competition.” Malaysia Think Tank London, 2006

In connecting individual meanings to the four spheres of influence, I draw upon the theory of reproduction. As Apple (1982) points out, the state has a significant role to play in “legitimating and setting limits on the responses that education can make to the processes of stratification, legitimation, and accumulation” (p. 4). Increasingly, the demand for globally mobile and highly skilled human capital has had a significant impact on the educational policies and practices of specific nations. To establish a context for the national sphere of influence, this section provides a brief historical overview of Malaysian education.

Malaysian Education in Historical Context

After centuries of colonisation and occupation, Malaya gained its independence from Britain in 1957 and became known in name and geography as “Malaysia” when Singapore separated from the Malayan Federation in 1965. Malaysia is an ethnically diverse country comprised of three main groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Approximately 60% of the population is Malay, and the term non-Malay is frequently used to encompass the Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and aboriginal peoples who constitute the other 40%. Migration created this plural society, and was the result of British expansion in the political and economic arenas.
Prior to independence, schools were predominantly controlled by the colonial administration and both the government and various religious bodies sponsored English-medium schools, mostly in urban centres, which enrolled students from all ethnic backgrounds (Hirschman, 1979). Additionally, students could attend vernacular schools which provided education for students in Malay, Chinese, or Tamil, but these were poorly funded and made transition to secondary school difficult since English was the language of secondary schools. Although students could elect to attend private, fee-paying Chinese-medium schools, free public secondary schooling was offered only in English.

Like many post-colonial countries, Malaysia experienced energetic nationalism. With the advent of independence, Malaysia sought ways in which to develop a new national identity. As a result, the 1961 Education Act provided for the addition of a Malay language stream in secondary schools and by 1982, English as a medium of instruction was phased out entirely. New educational and cultural policies were also introduced, and they attempted to infuse Malay culture as the national culture in an attempt to forge an assimilative national identity. Malay replaced English as the language of education and administration.

Nearly 30 years after the post-independence policies of the 1960s and 70s, the results of the changes were apparent. By 2002, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed announced that the nation was falling behind internationally because of the poor standard of English amongst its citizens. In order to compete globally, Malaysians would need to improve their English language skills (Marshall, 2002). Soon after, it was announced that from January 2003, a new policy would require that mathematics and science be taught in English. The government justification for the policy, called *Pengajaran dan*
Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris and frequently referred to by its acronym, PPSMI, was to encourage greater fluency in English and encourage Malaysians to compete on a global scale. Private language centres flourished as students (and teachers) who were previously educated exclusively in Malay struggled to meet the new expectation. The PPSMI policy requiring that mathematics and science be taught in English has had far-reaching implications that are interwoven with Malaysian parents’ concerns about education in the country. This national policy required a return to English 40 years after the post-colonial switch from English to Malay had been implemented. I mention this policy as part of the context for my study because within a theory of reproduction, parents’ experiences of educational decision-making are connected to national educational goals. Similarly, policy decisions in national contexts can also be connected to global influences.

Malaysian Education in a Global Context: Competition, Quality, and Choice

Malaysia has taken significant steps to reach “developed” nation status by 2020. The expansion of educational infrastructure and institutions has been prominent in Malaysian development discourse. In its efforts to become a regional educational hub, Malaysia has successfully branded “Malaysia education” (Tan, 2008), marketed its programs abroad and situated itself as a provider of quality international education in Asia. Malaysia has taken great strides to become regionally competitive within increasingly globalized education markets. Three of the concepts which emerge from the literature on globalization are raised in the next section of this literature review and connected to the Malaysian context. These concepts are competition, quality, and choice.
**Competition.** In 2002, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed announced in order to compete globally, Malaysians would need to improve their English language skills (Marshall, 2002). In this context, the government may have transmitted the value of English as a language which guarantees access to mathematical and scientific knowledge and global competitiveness otherwise unobtainable within a national language context. Within the context of globalization, the decision to abandon a local language as the medium of instruction for mathematics and science can be seen as a telling indication of the incompatibility of indigenous knowledge within a global marketplace. Within a national context, this policy created considerable discord. The PPSMI policy brought increased debate over the ability of the national school system to adequately prepare Malaysian youth for the realities of the English-dominated economic marketplace. The overwhelming message was that fluency in English was a skill Malaysians would need in order to compete globally.

**Quality.** Within the context of globalization literature, *quality* education has been framed in particular ways by particular sources. Stromquist and Monkman (2000) highlight the emergent connections between business and education, and how this relationship has increasingly served to determine what educational quality is and should be. Large-scale assessment, international performance indicators, and educational benchmarks are predominant in educational discourses around the globe. Privatized credentials (such as the International Baccalaureate) are becoming increasingly prized within the competitive educational market. Proponents of neoliberal school choice argue that by introducing competitive market forces into the realm of education, quality can be

---

2 For example: EQAO testing in Ontario; league tables in the United Kingdom; Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).
measured and assured. Critics of neoliberal policies assert that quality “has become a powerful metaphor for new forms of managerial control” (Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004, p. 191).

Within the context of school choice, what constitutes a quality education is not so easily measured, as it is defined differently according to varying parental priorities and experiences (Bulman, 2004; Levine-Rasky, 2007; Reay & Ball, 1998). Varying parental preferences are frequently cited as the driving motivations for implementing choice policies and as supporting evidence for such policies to enable greater competition and therefore greater access to quality education. Although definitions of quality are contested, what is readily apparent is the move by many nation-states to implement school choice policies in response to calls for quality education (Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008).

**Choice.** As the powerful current of globalization has swept neoliberal ideals around the globe, educational policies couched in the language of choice and packaged with the promise of excellence have been implemented in various contexts. The rhetoric of choice has been present in Malaysia’s educational policy discourses. Officials from the Malaysian Ministry of Education sought the advice of consultants who advised them that “the best way to ensure quality education is by ensuring parental choice and school competition” (Wan Saiful, 2006). In 2006, the Malaysian government decided to liberalise the restrictions for Malaysian enrolments at international schools. This decision echoes school choice policies which are being implemented in many countries (Forsey, Davies & Walford, 2008). The changes were made in an effort to promote Malaysia as a regional education hub and to prevent the “brain drain” caused by the exit of several
thousand young Malaysians to countries such as Singapore, Australia, and Britain for their primary and secondary education (Subanayagam, 2006).

Prior to 2006, stringent criteria had to be met before a Malaysian citizen would be granted permission by the Ministry of Education to be enrolled in an international school. In order to study at an international school, a Malaysian citizen could be granted approval if one parent was a foreigner or if the child had previously studied overseas for three consecutive years. As the result of the policy shift announced in 2006, by Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein, Malaysian nationals would face fewer enrolment restrictions. The new criteria included children of:

a) Parents who have worked overseas for at least two years
b) Parents who have business overseas and are able to attract foreign direct investment
c) Parents who are professionals who have returned from positions overseas under the government incentive scheme
d) Parents whose children have a diagnosed learning disorder
e) Parents who have children currently studying in an international school
f) Parents who have children born overseas and hold the nationality of the birth country
g) Parents who submit supporting documents that they are due for an overseas posting either from the government or private sector.

(adapted from Department of Private Education Document, n.d.)

If sufficient evidence could be provided to support that parents met the new criteria, their children would be allowed to attend an international school, provided that Malaysians constitute no more than 40% of a school’s enrolment capacity. At the time of the announcement, only 0.05% of the international school enrolments in the country were Malaysians (Subanayagam, 2006).

The international schools in Malaysia offer a variety of options. Since 2006, several new international schools have opened, and existing schools have expanded or extended their operations to campuses in new locations. Three years after the policy shift,
the number of international schools in the country had grown from 32 to 47, and Malaysian enrolments had jumped from 0.05% to 26%. Climbing Malaysian registrations, combined with the increased number of international schools in the country, support MacDonald’s (2006) prediction that the growth of the global international school industry is likely to be led by local rather than expatriate enrolments. In this next section, I review available research that considers why local parents may value an international education for their children.

The Social Sphere

In an earlier section of this literature review, I reviewed the available literature on international school choice. In this section, I comment on research which concerns the value of an international education, and place this research within the third sphere of influence, the social sphere.

Value

The few studies which have sought to isolate why parents send their children to an international school have shown that English-medium education is a paramount factor in their decision-making (Ezra, 2007; MacKenzie, Hayden & Thompson, 2003; Potter & Hayden, 2004). Kluckhohn (1962) defines value as an explicit or implicit conception of the desirable, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, which influences selections or choices.

When the opening of international schools to Malaysians was announced, there was an immediate response in the media and among the populace. School administrators had not been informed officially of any policy change and were unprepared for the

---

3 Updated information is not available on the Ministry of Education website. Figures quoted were obtained in discussions with the Department of Private Education (Jabatan Pendidikan Swasta) on May 21, 2009.
inundation of inquiries that followed the reports in local media. My journal entry in Chapter 1 briefly reflects my own commentary on how the announcement had created a noticeable disruption in the everyday routine at the international school where I taught. The office staff could not cope with the volume of calls, and the security guards at the school gates had to turn away numerous prospective parents and ask them to make an appointment with the school. This was also the scene at other international schools. Our principal shared with me that in telephone conversations with administrators at other international schools, they also reported being overwhelmed as Malaysian parents formed queues outside their gates and the office phones rang with inquiries about how to obtain places for their children. The reaction that the media announcement had created was striking. According to Kluckhohn’s definition, the education and opportunities offered by international schools would appear to be of value for many Malaysian parents. What is not so easily apparent is why.

It may seem simplistic, but of the studies that I have read, none suggests that parents are actively and deliberately making educational choices which could be considered to be disadvantageous to their children. The logical working assumption for my study was that parents value an international education and are making this choice out of an inherent desire to offer their children some element of advantage. A useful construct for the consideration of advantage is that of forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Buchmann, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). A consideration of the forms of capital as they relate to a theory of reproduction emerged as part of the formulation of this study. In the next section of this literature review I discuss the concepts of capital.
The Forms of Capital

Concepts are the building blocks of theory, are constructed to make phenomena visible, and must be restricted in focus and limited in scope in order to serve their descriptive and explanatory purposes (Fernandez Kelly, 2002). In this section, I present the forms of capital as one set of conceptual tools for my inquiry into the phenomenon of international school selection by Malaysian parents.

The concepts of capital as they relate to education emerged initially out of the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). The theory of reproduction connects cultural phenomena firmly to the structural characteristics of a society. Within the theory of reproduction, the dominant ideas of a social system are related to class and power. The reproduction of culture within educational systems is part of the legitimization and perpetuation of larger societal stratification. Notions of capital have been engaged in several studies of educational choice, demonstrating ways in which economic capital can be transformed into other forms of capital (Levine-Rasky, 2007; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Economic capital is “wealth, either inherited or generated from interactions between the individual and the economy” and can be “converted into cultural capital by buying an elite education, while cultural capital can be readily translated into social capital” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 21). Social capital is “generated through social processes between the family and wider society and is made up of social networks” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 21)

Social capital. In light of existing research on school choice and on international education, I isolate the possibility that the concept of advantage will be an important component of parents’ decision-making. Advantage is essential to the definition of social
capital as originally defined by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) and as summarized by Fernandez Kelly (2002). Social capital is designated as the “situational advantages derived by individuals from their membership in particular networks” (Fernandez Kelly, p. 74). According to Buchmann, researchers “must be careful to conceptualize social capital in ways that are sensitive to the contexts they are studying” (2002, p. 137). Within my analysis, I was attentive to whether parents made claims of membership in, or exclusion from, particular networks or associations in relation to their decision to choose an international school for their child. The concept of social capital provides a useful construct for the identification and analysis of these connections.

**Cultural capital.** Culture can be defined as “the values, norms, institutions and modes of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance” (Brown, 2002, p. 67). The concept of cultural capital acknowledges that behaviors and signals are symbolic reflections of power and exclusion. The conceptualization of choice in higher education as theorized by Reay, David, and Ball (2005) is informed by Bourdieu’s notions of cultural capital. In outlining their examination of choice at the level of higher education, Reay et al. acknowledge that certain desires and preferences as well as linguistic competences and behaviours are forms of cultural capital. In its embodied form, cultural capital is the set of cultural distinctions that are acquired through familial and social influence. Confidence, for example, is articulated as a form of cultural capital. Educational qualifications are identified as an institutionalized form of cultural capital.

In the theory of reproduction, cultural variations are present in and reproduced through schools. Within a school system, cultural capital can take many forms, and can
manifest itself in hierarchies of linguistic competence and educational credentials. By investing in cultural capital, individuals can maximize their upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu argues that educational systems perform a culturally reproductive function and contribute to the maintenance of social inequalities (1977). In this tradition, Cambridge (2002) asserts that one of the outcomes of globalizing international education is cultural convergence with the values of the transnational capitalist class.

Within the multi-cultural context of Malaysia, the concept of cultural capital is complex. Cultural markers of inclusion and exclusion are present within and among classes, ethnicities, regions, and linguistic groups. The historic and contemporary realities of Malaysian schooling and society are not a closed system: they are interwoven with the country’s colonial past and with the current influences of globalization. Malaysia’s colonial past and globalized present have been considered in the first two sections of this review: the global sphere and the national sphere.

In considering the social sphere of influence, notions of cultural and social capital are important to the framing of my research. Within the context of globalization, which turns spheres of life into a business, and social services into products (Olssen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004), international schools are regarded as a potentially powerful force of transnational cultural transmission. In considering the research design for this study, I felt that it was important for Malaysian parents to speak to their own experiences. By sharing stories of how their social and cultural worlds have been shaped, Malaysian parents will add their voices to conversations which have so far excluded them.
Summary

There is ample research on school choice, but a paucity of research on why parents choose an international school for their children. In the educational and sociological databases available to me, I found only two studies of host national parents who elect to send their children to international schools, and no prior research focusing on the experiences of parents engaged in making this decision. Within the field of research on international schools, studies of parental choice have focused on factors that will assist schools in reaching their clientele and promote further understanding of school markets. To my knowledge, there are no studies which focus on understanding the experiences of the parents.

There is a general dearth of information in the field of international school choice. Researchers’ calls (e.g., Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2005; Davies & Aurini, 2008; Ezra, 2007; Lee, 2000; MacKenzie, Hayden & Thompson, 2003; Potter & Hayden, 2004) for deeper inquiry into the transnational and global trends of choice-seeking within the context of globalization acknowledge this deficit. These calls also provide a strong rationale both for conducting my research and for contextualizing it within spheres of influence which connect the individual, social, national, and global.

Within the body of literature on international schools, anecdotal and theoretical studies have addressed the role of globalization, policy, markets, and credentials in the growth of the global international school industry. However, in-depth knowledge from the perspectives of the parents leading this growth remains unexplored. It is my intention to understand the experiences of Malaysian parents who have made the decision to send their children to an international school. My selection of literature has been guided by the
principles of phenomenology, which assert that through an examination of experience, we gain knowledge. It has also been guided by the theory of reproduction, which frames experience within our individual, social, national, and global spheres of influence. In Chapter 3, I connect my review of the literature to the methodological design of my research and describe the methods I used to gather and analyze the knowledge that this study synthesizes.
CHAPTER 3
PATHS TO MEANING

Within educational databases, much of the literature on school choice has focused on policy and the private versus public debate within Anglo-western nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. The literature is dominated by discussions of market forces, vouchers, and policy implications. There is much less discussion of the experience of decision-making as it is lived by participants. Although my personal connection to the research can be traced to the policy shift that allowed greater access for Malaysians, my interest was prompted less by the policy shift itself than by the tangible excitement created on the day Malaysian newspapers reported the shift. The primary purpose of the study was to understand what was behind that excitement and to describe parents’ decision-making experiences. When conducting research which seeks to understand and describe, the “aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 5). Simultaneously, I understand that any research is consciously or unconsciously underscored by our epistemological and ontological assumptions. In preparation for the construction of a research design, I did extensive reading in the areas of school choice, international education, and Malaysian education. The diverse theoretical and conceptual frameworks present in the literature are complemented by a variety of methodological paradigms suitable for initiating a study of parental intentions relating to international school choice in Malaysia. Careful consideration led me to the
choice of a qualitative research paradigm that is framed by the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Reproduction theory and phenomenology form the methodological basis of this qualitative study. Phenomenology explores individual meanings, and the theory of reproduction connects individual meanings to the social structures which influence their construction and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1997). In this chapter, I first discuss the qualitative nature of this study and how phenomenology informs the research design. Next I outline how the principles of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 1997) guide this study. I present a discussion of how phenomenology informs the research design and articulate the specific methods used to collect and analyze data. I then detail the components of the method: (a) setting and participant selection, (b) pilot study, (c) data collection, and (d) analysis. The chapter ends with a description of the approaches used to enhance the trustworthiness and overall quality of the study.

**Submitting to a View**

Selecting a research paradigm involves “submitting to a view” (Stanage, 1987, as quoted in Groenewald, 2004, p. 6). I use this term because it acknowledges that as social science researchers we are not unbiased. The phrase “submit to a view” speaks to the humility required as I entered into peoples’ lives in the act of soliciting their perspectives. In the case of this research, I submit to the view that knowledge is contained in the perspectives of individuals, and that the words of the participants constitute the data obtained. I also submit to the view that my understanding of these perspectives is framed by the theoretical and methodological choices I have made and that the voices I present
will be shaped by my interpretation. Therefore, I engaged a qualitative interpretive paradigm to direct my study. This paradigm provides solid methodological support for the epistemological acknowledgement that who I am, what I ask, and to whom I speak are contextual variables that impact this research.

This research is conceptualized within the understanding that our decisions are contextualized by our social and cultural experiences. It is not my goal to generalize. I make no claims that the perspectives of these parents are representative of anyone but themselves. I do assert that their perspectives constitute knowledge and that diverse forms of knowledge are worthy of study. My goal is to understand how these parents came to make this decision, to gather their reflections on how they as individuals elected to participate in this socially influential phenomenon, and to illuminate the meanings that emerge from their words. The goal of this inquiry is not answers but understanding.

My quest for understanding is guided by the literature I have read and the methodology which I employ. My initial questions have been informed by existing studies on international school choice and are guided by the theory and concepts explicated in Chapter 2. Further analysis, and the core of this endeavour, is the interpretive analysis of the perspectives derived from those who participate in this research, and it will be informed by the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. The following section provides my rationale for a qualitative study, outlines the design of the research, and defines hermeneutic phenomenology.

A Qualitative Approach

My goal is an in-depth exploration of Malaysian parents’ experiences: their perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the decision of selecting an international
school. Therefore, my research design must afford participants the opportunity to give in-depth responses about their experiences. Qualitative research methods allow both for the deeper evaluation of phenomena in terms of the meanings that people assign to them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), and for insight into the events, beliefs, and attitudes which shape a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). My research is underscored by the theoretical assumption that individual acts are both influenced by and have an influence on their social contexts. Choosing a qualitative research design which incorporates both an open-ended survey instrument and semi-structured interviews allows for the individual meanings behind the social act of educational choice to emerge.

Qualitative surveys and interviews are particularly appropriate for research that is poised to understand and explore an issue (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In their discussion of the richness and diversity of overall design studies in qualitative research, Marshall and Rossman (2006) speak to the study of individual lived experience as a qualitative genre which uses interviews as the main strategy but may incorporate other forms of data to supplement the inquiry. To understand Malaysian parents’ experiences in choosing an international school, my research design incorporates two components: survey and interview.

**Research Design**

**Setting and Participants**

The focus of a phenomenological study is on understanding either a concept or a phenomenon through the experiences of individuals who lived through the phenomenon. Being present in Malaysia was essential for my study and being connected to and familiar with the context was also important in engaging a potential research population.
One international school was selected as the locale for the study. The primary consideration for site selection was that the school had a sufficient population of Malaysian enrolments to support the collection of data. The school selected was a good candidate in this regard because it had reached the government-imposed 40% Malaysian enrolment quota, and of the 650 students at the school, there were approximately 130 Malaysian families. An additional consideration for the location was the researcher’s established relationship of cooperation with school management, understanding of the school administrative processes, and connections to the school’s parent information network. While this familiarity was essential for my access to the school and to the parent population, it is also important that I reveal my personal connection to the research environment in order to enhance authenticity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

**Feeling my Way Forward in the Inquiry**

Within the domain of qualitative research, the importance of flexibility is recognized. A qualitative paradigm allows for the research design to be clarified and shaped by initial experiences in the field. With this in mind, I decided to conduct a pilot interview before I began my official data collection. Just after my arrival in Kuala Lumpur, I enlisted the assistance of a parent known to me who agreed to participate in a mock interview and complete the survey. She chose the pseudonym Kathy.

Kathy’s children are both Malaysian. She sent one of her children to an international school and another to a government school. We met at her home where she participated in the interview with the understanding that her contribution to the study would be to assist me in modifying and refining my interview approach and questions. I had created an initial interview protocol prior to the pilot, and refined it following my
interview with Kathy. Although I find the term pilot study inadequate to describe the learning that this experience offered me in my research journey, I use the term here for the purpose of familiarity and simplicity. For the refined interview guide see Appendix A.

In addition to helping me refine the interview approach, the interview with Kathy was a significant experience for me as a novice researcher. It helped me find my way forward in the inquiry. Prior to my arrival in Kuala Lumpur, I had prepared the survey and the initial interview questions based on the literature I had read and the research questions I had proposed. In interviewing Kathy, I realized that the survey questions were relevant but peripheral to my main purpose. By sitting down and speaking with her, by listening to and hearing the complexity of her experiences, it became apparent in a tangible way that the essence of my study would be contained in the interviews. Immediately after my interview with Kathy, I considered conducting the research through interviews exclusively, which would have been completely acceptable in a phenomenological study. In the next 24 hours I did a great deal of thinking about whether I should proceed with the survey, about whether it was necessary. I was nearly at the end of my first week in Malaysia, and with only three weeks left I needed to make a decision. After much consideration in a short space of time, I decided to proceed with the survey as planned, especially since it was designed in such a way that it served the dual purpose of data collection instrument and invitation to participate in the interview portion of the research. The final question of the survey asked if parents would be willing to participate in an interview and provided my contact information. From the standpoint of transparency and trustworthiness, I also felt it was important that all parents at the
research site should have equal knowledge of and opportunity to contribute to the research. By distributing the surveys to all parents at the school, I hoped to provide greater equality of opportunity for participation than if I had recruited interview participants through snowball sampling exclusively. Other considerations included the flexibility of having selected a qualitative paradigm, which allows for the adoption of diverse data collection methods in order to illuminate a phenomenon.

**Principles of Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

*From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings.*

(van Manen, 1997, p. 5)

In phenomenology, understanding emerges from the study of lived experience. In choosing phenomenology, the researcher attempts to examine a phenomenon and the meaning it holds for individuals. For the purposes of this study, I turn to the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology as reflected in the work of van Manen (1997). According to van Manen, description, interpretation and critical analysis are essential to understanding how human beings exist in the world. He also acknowledges that “every interpretation can be called into question; every inquiry we can begin anew; every hermeneutic phenomenological conversation is unending” (p. xv).

In my analysis, I abide by van Manen’s definition of hermeneutic phenomenology as a human science that attempts to be both descriptive (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic) in its methodology. According to van Manen, human science is the study of the structures of meaning of the lived human world, and can take the form of “descriptive-interpretive studies of patterns, structures and levels” of experiential

van Manen presents hermeneutic phenomenology as a combination of research activities that allow for inventiveness and insight rather than a strict procedural script that dictates the process. I have adapted the six research activities that are at the core of van Manen’s human science. My study involves the dynamic interplay of these research activities:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests me
2. investigating the experiences of those who have lived the phenomenon
3. reflecting on the themes which characterize the phenomenon
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
5. maintaining a strong pedagogical orientation to the subject
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole

(adapted from van Manen, 1997, pp. 30–31)

Reaching into the Inquiry

Ethics Review

In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines and Queen’s ethics policies, ethical approval for this study was received from the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at Queen’s University in April, 2009, prior to the collection of data (Appendix B). Informed consent was indicated as part of the survey itself in both the online and paper-based versions (see Appendices C and D). A Letter of Information and two copies of a Consent Form were distributed to participants who were interviewed (see Appendix E).
Criteria for Inclusion

The experiences of parents of Malaysian children are at the core of this study. Therefore, only survey responses from parents of Malaysian children are eligible for inclusion in this research, and interviews were conducted exclusively with parents of Malaysian children. Further clarification about the criteria for inclusion in the study are detailed in the data collection section of this chapter.

Data Collection

Two data sources were used during the data collection period: (a) survey, and (b) semi-structured interviews with focal participants. A research journal was also kept to record the data collection process and my observations and reflections as the research progressed. On-site research was conducted over a one-month period in the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Prior to my departure from Canada, I sent an initial outline of my research and a draft of the survey to the school principal and obtained from the school administration informal consent for conducting the research at the school. Upon my arrival in Kuala Lumpur I met with school administrators to discuss the final iteration of the survey and to confirm that a link to the online version could be posted on the school website. The school administration generously confirmed their willingness to host me during the course of my research, but respectfully declined my request to provide a link on the school website. I therefore set up a website which parents could access independently and the website address was provided on the paper-based copy of the survey which I distributed at the school. By going to the website, parents could access the link to the survey (See Appendices B and C) and complete it online if they were not able or willing to return the paper-based version of the survey.
**Language of Inquiry**

In various informal and formal discussions with other members of the academic community, from students to faculty members, I found myself being asked whether the survey would need to be translated into another language, whether I would conduct the interviews in English, whether I would need a translator, and “what language do they speak there?” All participants spoke two or more languages and were very comfortable communicating in English. For all participants, English was identified as a common academic language: it had been part of their schooling. All of the participants identified English as being a language used at home, in business, socially, or other aspects of daily communication. In the recordings of the three interviews which were conducted at food and beverage establishments, the listener can detect various background conversations in English, and note that all communication with wait-staff occurred in English as well. English is commonly used in Malaysia, especially in Kuala Lumpur, and certainly within the target population for this study. Accordingly, all data sources were prepared and collected in English.

**Survey**

During the data collection phase, 650 paper-based surveys (see Appendix C) and accompanying Recruitment Letters (see Appendices D and E) were distributed at one international school in Kuala Lumpur. Surveys were distributed to all students at the daily assembly of each of the three divisions of the school: Lower Primary, Primary, and Secondary. At each of the assemblies, I spoke to the children using a standard protocol that told them about my research and requested them to take the surveys home to their parents. All surveys were enclosed in identical blank envelopes. Respondents had the
option to complete the paper-based version or access the online survey, which was hosted at surveymonkey.com. In both instances, responses were reported anonymously.

I distributed surveys to all children at the school, even though not all families would meet the criteria for inclusion. Several factors were taken into account in my decision to approach the survey distribution in this way: (1) the administrative difficulty of identifying, isolating, and distributing surveys to only those students who are Malaysian nationals, (2) the potential for mass-distribution to expedite the distribution process, (3) the concern that isolating one segment of the school population would seem exclusionary, especially to younger students who would not understand why their parents were not being given the chance to participate, (4) I knew from prior experience that not all children in a family necessarily hold the same nationality, (5) through my experience as a teacher I understand that distributing forms to all siblings increases the possibility that perhaps one of the forms will reach the family, and (6) my personal discretion and professional conversations assured me that parents would link a higher sample size to a higher relative assurance of anonymity, and therefore be more likely to submit their responses. Anecdotal indications from discussions I had with Malaysian teachers and academics, as well as evidence from other research conducted in Malaysia (i.e. Lian & Marnoch, 1999), suggested that obtaining a high number of survey responses might be difficult because it’s just not the culture here. After seeking the advice of Malaysian researchers at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, who were more familiar with the culture, context, and acceptable practice, I was assured that mass distribution would be both acceptable and advisable given the context of my research. I therefore distributed the
surveys to all children at the school. For this text, only the responses from parents of Malaysian children are included.

Seventy-seven surveys were completed and returned; six of these were completed via the online medium and seventy-one were paper-based submissions. Of the total surveys returned, 43 were completed by parents of Malaysian children and therefore eligible for inclusion in this thesis. Paper-based responses were returned to the school and submitted via a drop-box which I placed in the school’s parent-run bookshop. Online responses were hosted by surveymonkey.com. Completed surveys were collected daily from the drop-box and stored in a secure location until the end of the research period. Many of the surveys were submitted in the days immediately following my initial recruitment announcements at the school assemblies. Submission experienced a lull in the weeks after, and peaked again after a repeat of the initial request for participation and a reminder of the approaching deadline for submission.

The survey design included a combination of closed and open-ended questions and took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Initial questions were used to obtain demographic information about the participants, including gender, nationality, language spoken at home, educational background, and number of children in school. The next section asked parents to identify factors which were important to their decision. Lastly, open form questions about the selection considerations, the decision-making experience, the role of the 2006 policy shift in their decision, and parents’ experiences gaining government approval for their children to study at an international school generated considerable additional qualitative data for analysis. The final survey question asked if
parents would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, and my Queen’s email address was given to allow interested participants to contact me and arrange an interview.

**Interviews**

The process of collecting information within the qualitative tradition hinges on in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998). Accordingly, the second phase of data collection, and the core of this study, resides in the interviews. Seven interviews were conducted with eight parents (one couple was interviewed together) who volunteered to participate. I responded to those who were interested in participating in the order in which they contacted me by email. We arranged mutually convenient interview times at a location of their choice. Any subsequent contact after the initial email occurred through email, phone, text messaging (SMS), or a combination, depending on the preference of the participant. A ninth volunteer contacted me at the end of the research period, but too late before my return to Canada to schedule an interview.

The criteria for inclusion in the interview portion of the study consisted of two segments: required and additional. The required criteria were threefold and consisted of the following: the participant (1) is a Malaysian citizen, (2) is the parent of a child who is a Malaysian citizen, (3) elected to send the child to an international school rather than a local school. For the purpose of this research, and taking into consideration the geographical and time constraints, the two additional criteria were not considered imperative if an individual expressed willingness to participate in an interview. The additional criteria were (4) the parent will have removed the child from a local Malaysian public school, and (5) the parent made the decision to enrol the child in an international school in Malaysia after the 2006 policy shift.
I conducted in-depth interviews based on principles of phenomenology and the four spheres of influence outlined in Chapter 2. The overarching goal of the interviews was to fully explore parents’ experiences through questions that relate specifically to my initial research questions. A loosely structured interview guide was prepared (see Appendix A). Seidman (2006) cautions researchers not to depend too heavily on an interview guide, reminding us that in-depth interviewing is designed to explore meaning rather than to test hypotheses. The interview guide approach was useful for my study because it simultaneously provided structure and freedom. While my thinking was guided by the literature I had read in preparation for my data collection, I acknowledge that the complexity of meaning emerges through the unexpected, the unanticipated, and the unpredictable. Through a prepared set of open-ended questions which allowed me to focus on the research questions, I was also able to probe for deeper understanding, through the flexibility of establishing a conversational style on a predetermined set of issues (Patton, 2002). Flexibility in the interviewing process is important, and in my interviews I encountered issues that were not on my original interview guide but which I subsequently explored after they were raised by initial participants. This ability to let participants speak to their experiences freely, and to go beyond preconceived notions of a phenomenon is essential in a phenomenological inquiry. The length of the interviews ranged from one hour and two minutes in length to one hour and twenty-three minutes. In the interviews, I clearly explained that my interest in this topic arose during my time as a teacher and administrator, but I was conducting this study as a university researcher and not a school employee. It was important to me and for the study that parents have no reservations about being honest and forthright in their responses.
Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Findings from the survey were analysed question by question using descriptive statistics. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), descriptive statistics are used to summarize, reduce, and organize large numbers of observations. No inferential statistics were used in the analysis of responses in this study.

In the sections on (a) demographic background, closed-form questions provided categories for parents to indicate their parental status (i.e. mother, father, step-mother, step-father, guardian, or other), nationality, and language(s) spoken. Similarly, the section on (b) educational background provided closed-form questions on the location, type, level, and language of parents’ schooling. Straight counts of all closed-form responses were taken and reported in frequencies and percentages.

In section (c) factors of influence, a variety of question types were used to explore what factors might have influenced parents’ decision to send their children to an international school. I derived my questions from those asked in the other studies of international school choice (Ezra, 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2003; Potter & Hayden, 2004). In the first question, 14 factors were presented and responses were indicated on a five-point Likert scale. The response scale included the following: not important, slightly important, important, extremely important, and no opinion. Responses were ranked according to a rating average with the category of “extremely important” given the most weight. The next question in this section asked parents to indicate, in rank order, the top three factors which influenced their decision. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize findings. These findings are presented in
Chapter 4. The open-form questions at the end of the survey invite parents to provide narrative responses about their experiences across the decision of sending their children to an international school. The responses to these final questions provided additional qualitative insights which appear in Chapter 5 as supporting quotations for the themes which emerged from the interviews.

**Qualitative Analysis**

I digitally recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them verbatim, making notes as I transcribed. In my notes, I indicated passages that were said with particular emotion or emphasis, inserting reminders for me to go back and examine particular sections of the transcript during the analysis. For each transcript, I used my initials to indicate which words were mine, and prefaced the words of participants by the initial of the pseudonym they chose and ascending numbers. For example, I recorded Grace’s response to my first question as G1, and the next time she spoke I began a new line and typed G2 to indicate that Grace was speaking a second time. I used my initials, MLI, to indicate when I was speaking (see Appendix F). After I transcribed all of the interviews, I read and re-read the transcripts to immerse myself in the words of the participants. I made notes in the margins as I went along.

From this immersion in their experiences, I developed an overall sense of what was common to the group and unique to each participant. In reaching this understanding, I followed the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology and approached the analysis reflectively, by analyzing the structural and thematic aspects of the experience (van Manen, 1997). Meaningful statements from each transcript were selected based on their significance to the individual’s expression of the experience. These meaningful
statements were then grouped according to headings, and subsequently cross-grouped and compared to the corresponding meaning statements of other participants. In arriving at the overall themes to be expressed in the findings, I considered the frequency and intensity of meaning statements as they were expressed individually and collectively across the experience of selecting an international school. van Manen calls this interpretation of meaning “a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure” (1997, p. 79). Out of this examination of meaningful statements, this process of gaining and discovering insight, themes emerged.

**Approaches Used to Enhance Trustworthiness**

Rigorous qualitative research demands that the role of the researcher is critically self-examined. Although qualitative research allows for and encourages researchers to “become immersed in the situations and the phenomena studied” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 316), at the same time they must be conscious of and clear about their subjectivity (Peshkin, 1987).

Reliable research is achieved through the systematic process of collecting and logically analyzing data. Within the field of research, objectivity is not simply a lack of subjectivity. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), objectivity refers to the procedures used to collect and analyse data, the quality of the data produced, and the reasonable interpretations that can be made from that data. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that knowledge is “not value neutral and neither are the epistemological assumptions and methods meant to produce it” (Swartz, 2007, p. 2). Although the standpoint epistemology of a researcher informs the nature and process of any research question, qualitative research acknowledges and accounts for how epistemological
underpinnings inform the work. Trustworthiness is achieved through extensive reflexivity and the disciplined subjectivity which is present in the rigor of qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Swartz, 2007). At each stage of the data collection, I endeavored to be rigorously reflexive in order to ensure dependability, which is an aspect of trustworthiness (Berg, 2001; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is parallel to reliability, and shows that the process of inquiry is logical, traceable, and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility.** This researcher was the sole interviewer and transcriber. The verbatim comments in the description and analysis of the findings are used to enhance credibility. Credibility, which is parallel to the quantitative requirement for internal validity, provides assurances of the correspondence between respondents’ views of their experiences and the researcher’s reconstructions and representation of the data (Patton, 2002). Additionally, alternative themes, divergent patterns, and rival explanations have been considered in the selection and interpretation of meaning statements and their separation into themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Rigorous and reflexive qualitative methods were used in my efforts to understand this phenomenon in greater depth, and to allow the perspectives of Malaysian parents to be heard in the global discourse surrounding the nature of parental intentions relating to international school choice. The research design of this study allowed for survey responses that could be considered in light of previous studies, for narrative responses from participants who did not participate in interviews, and for interviews that offered greater exploration of the nuanced experiences surrounding individuals’ choices than a survey alone could provide. The research design permitted a deepened, complex
understanding of the topic to emerge, or crystallize. The notion of crystallization is important in qualitative research because it recognizes and appreciates that researchers can be embedded in our research, and that what “we see depends upon our angle of repose” (Richardson, 1994, p. 522).

**Reciprocity.** According to Seidman (2006), reciprocity involves the concern that the researcher gains more from the research than the participants; what do the participants gain in return? In the case of my research, participants were offered no material incentive or reward for participation. Why, then, would they agree to be interviewed? What would they have to gain? When I asked individuals about their reasons for participating, I found that their motivations were characteristic of the generosity of Malaysians, especially in regards to hosting a foreigner. One parent wanted to be an example for his younger children, and had explained to them that:

*Che Che [older sister] is going to face the same concerns as a lot of researchers in Malaysia: that is to get people to spend the time to extend their support to research. So I said in another one or two month’s time, Che Che will have to do all these things for one whole year: questionnaire, sample size, getting people to participate. So we must do our part.*

Another parent said *if I can contribute anything, I don’t mind, to help in any way to just improve the system.* Most parents expressed that education was *just so important* to them, they *wanted to contribute* something, or in the words of one mother, *educational issues with children are just very close to my heart.*

**Equity.** Seidman (2006) reminds researchers that “issues of equity in an interviewing relationship are affected by the social identities that participants and
interviewers bring to the interview” (p. 99). Researchers must be reflexive in their work, and it is important for me to acknowledge the complexity of the racial, ethnic, and class dynamics at play in this research process. Social, racial and ethnic identities in Malaysia are built on the historical realities of large-scale migration and colonialism, and as a white woman pursuing academic research in Malaysia, there is a strong potential for me to have been regarded according to the dominant stereotypes associated with both my race and my position as a researcher from Queen’s University. Conversely, in some instances I was interviewing participants from economically, socially, and academically privileged backgrounds whose lived experiences and socio-economic status are significantly different from my own rural, working class upbringing and single-parent graduate student status.

Although there is recognizable imbalance between the position of interviewer and participant, striving for equity is both an ethical and methodological imperative (Seidman, 2006). “Being equitable in interviewing research means infusing a research methodology with respect for the dignity of those interviewed” (p. 110). Adherence to ethical guidelines, careful explanation of the purpose and processes involved in this research, scheduling of interviews at times and places convenient to the participants, and valuing the words of the participant were principles which guided this research. Seidman also purports that equity can be a matter of the interviewer “going out of his or her way to get the stories of people whose stories are not usually heard” (Seidman, p. 110). With this in mind, I humbly hope that my research meets this criteria: I left my two children in the care of a friend whilst I travelled from Ontario to Kuala Lumpur, where I spent a month
recording the voices of individuals whose aspirations and frustrations do not yet appear in the academic literature.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I express the selection of a methodological paradigm as the process of submitting to a view. By connecting the literature and theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 to the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, I have shown how hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology is positioned in relation to this inquiry into the experiences of Malaysian parents who have selected an international school for their children. I have provided a picture of my research journey, through a description of the methods used to collect and analyze data. I have also detailed the approaches used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. In the next chapter, I begin to illuminate the findings of this research by sharing the results of the data obtained from the surveys and the interviews.
Like I said earlier, different people have different thinking. There are those who think, like me, that as long as you can afford, you should try and expose them. Not just at the tertiary level. Almost all our friends, their children will have their tertiary education overseas, so it’s a question of secondary level, and primary, where they are. And that’s where the difference is. Some will feel you should spend the money and put them into international school, or at least the private government school but there are some who feel it’s not necessary, the important stage is at the tertiary level and so long as they get to go overseas to do full time that’s fine. So it’s better, some will think, in terms of—save money now, and just put them in government school. And some will think it’s not a question of money, but expose them to the real situation of Malaysian society, and that’s where the public school is. You see the bulk of Malaysian students are all in the public school. Some people they feel like that’s the real world, put them in the real world, in the real public system. So again you see, one step before that is the thinking of parents. Some parents feel that well, we will provide the best and leave the child to decide where he or she wants to work or stay eventually, you know? So we’re very open to that way of thinking. But there will be another group of parents that will think, no, no, I want my kids to come back. That’s where they start thinking public school is better, so they are more street...not to say street smart, but they’re more aware of the local conditions, the networking, because they’re going to come back.
CHAPTER 4
SURVEY STORIES AND INTERVIEW VOICES

The purpose of this study was to understand Malaysian parents’ reasons for sending their children to an international school. The data are reported over the next two chapters, beginning with the findings derived from the surveys and followed by the eight participants who elected to participate in the in-depth interviews.

The first section provides results of the analysis of the survey data, and is reported using descriptive statistics. These have been organized by (a) demographic background (b) educational background and (c) factors of influence. Next, the eight participants are presented individually through narrative vignettes to give the reader a sense of who is speaking to the purpose of this study. Each vignette will provide a narrative introduction to the interview participants. In Chapter 5, the core themes which emerged from the interviews are presented and provide further insight into Malaysian parents’ decision to send their children to an international school.

Survey Stories

Demographic Background

The majority of respondents were mothers, Malaysians, and parents of children in primary school. Of the 43 surveys completed by parents of Malaysian children, 33 (76.7%) were completed by mothers and 10 (23.00%) were completed by fathers. Malaysian mothers formed the majority of the respondents (60.46%) and only nine non-Malaysian respondents whose children are Malaysians completed the survey (20.9 %). Some respondents indicated whether they, the other parent, or one of their children held
another nationality or dual-nationality. Those who included this information noted the following nationalities: British, American, German, Filipino, Indonesian, Singaporean, Australian, Swiss, and Dutch. Of the families who responded, most have two children, and the majority of families have primary-aged children enrolled at international school.

All respondents reported that they, the other parent, and their children speak English. In addition to English, a majority of respondents also speak another language, with Malay and Chinese being the most common. However, respondents indicated that their partners are less likely to speak either Malay or Chinese. Children overall are found to be even less likely to speak any language other than English. The findings from this question suggest that children at this international school do not reproduce their parents’ linguistic heritage. For example, the parents who are Tamil speakers (11%) report that none of their children speak Tamil.

**Educational Background**

The majority of respondents had completed both their primary and secondary schooling in local government schools but completed their post-secondary education in a country other than Malaysia. Amongst respondents who indicated that their tertiary education was in a country other than Malaysia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America were listed most frequently. Other countries included Singapore, Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Switzerland. Responses to the question about language of instruction in primary school saw greater distribution than the responses in the secondary or tertiary category. Specifically, nearly equal numbers of parents selected either English or Malay as the language of instruction for primary school, but fewer respondents indicated that Chinese was the language of instruction in
primary. The number of respondents for whom the language of instruction was Malay in secondary school is slightly higher, as is the number who report being schooled in English. When viewed in light of the decrease in number of respondents who indicate that they received their secondary education in Chinese, this could be explained by the structure of the Malaysian education system. Prior to the 1970s public secondary education was almost exclusively in English, and a period of transition to the national language meant that by 1982 the language of instruction at the secondary level was Malay. After secondary school, however, there is a clear indication that the majority of parents received their education in English. No parents attended a post-secondary institution in which Chinese was the language of instruction, few received their tertiary education in Malay, and most report that English was the language of instruction at the post-secondary level. Spanish, German, and Indonesian were listed by respondents who indicated that their education was in another language. The results of this question are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Language of School Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors of Influence

Few studies have been conducted in the realm of international school choice. This question presented factors that have been selected from the surveys of similar studies (Ezra, 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2003; Potter & Hayden, 2004). Fourteen factors were listed in random order on a five-point Likert scale. The question asked respondents to
indicate the degree of importance attached to factors involved in choosing an
international school. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), Likert-type scales
are valuable to researchers attempting to assess beliefs or opinions. In Table 2, the results
of these responses are reported in rank order and shown in percent.

Table 2

Factors of Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors of Influence</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Slightly Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of teaching staff</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum and examinations are recognized internationally</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller class sizes than local schools</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted my child(ren) to study in English</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School reputation for strong academics</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable fees</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my child to be a global citizen</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extracurricular activities available</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A desire for my child(ren) to have an international education</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This school has a good mix of children from different backgrounds</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not want my child to go to a local school</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parents recommended this school</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We live near the school</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child(ren)’s friends go to this school</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overwhelmingly, the majority of parents felt that the quality of teaching staff was an
extremely important factor in their decision. This finding is consistent with Ezra’s (2007)
research which found that Israeli parents ranked the quality of teachers as the most frequently selected survey response. Although neither MacKenzie et al. (2003) nor MacKenzie (2009) included the quality of teaching staff as a specific factor for consideration, parents surveyed across nine international schools in both Switzerland and Japan reported that a good impression when visiting the school was the second most important factor in their decision. Friends are not as important to Malaysian parents, and this finding is consistent with Reay and Ball’s assertion that for choosing families there is “generally a strong classification of 'the social' and the school” but “friendship is not a valid criterion for choice” (1998, p. 439).

Given that parents are putting the education of their children into the hands of teachers, we can infer that impressions of teachers may contribute to the overall good impression parents form and hold to be important in their decision-making. Another consideration is that in both of the studies by MacKenzie (2003, 2009), the teachers are identified as predominantly from “English-speaking countries” or the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (2003, p. 301). Initial research on international schools and the findings from this study suggest that parents may be associating quality teachers with teachers recruited from English-speaking countries. Further insight into how parents evaluate the quality of teaching staff can also be derived from the open-ended responses to Question 9, which are discussed below, and the interviews, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Question nine asks parents to rank the three most important factors in deciding to send their children to an international school, and 35 out of 43 parents responded to this question. Of the parents who selected from the 14 factors listed, equal numbers of parents
selected school reputation for strong academics (n=8) and a desire for their children to study in English (n=8) as the most important factors in their decisions. Equal numbers also ranked smaller class sizes than local schools (n=7) and internationally recognized curriculum and examinations (n=7) as the second most important factors. While only one parent specifically selected “I did not want my child to go to a local school” as a top three factor, an interesting finding in the open-ended responses reveals that several parents made direct references to the local system. Given that the purpose of this study is to explore and describe, parents were given the option to cite reasons outside the fourteen factors listed. In the “Other” category, parents noted the following reasons: not as much exam pressure, less stress, quality of teaching staff in local school poor to moderate at best, outdated local curriculum, disappointment in local school system. Additional, less direct references to dissatisfaction with the local system included: an education that stimulates my child’s interest and thinking faculties, an expansive and wide scope of education so my child has the opportunity to discover where her interests lie, and to build up and nurture own individual character without suppressing to conformity.

These responses are associated with the single most prevalent factor which parents identified in the “Other” category: of the 20 parents who chose to add their own most important factors, eight made reference to an all-round education, or a well-rounded education: a mix of academic and extra-curricular activities.

I didn’t want her to conform, I didn’t want her character to be suppressed, you know?
The tendency to associate the local system with conformity and an international school with a “well-rounded” education emerged as a theme both in the qualitative responses from the surveys and the interviews as well and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

My initial questions about why Malaysian parents enroll their children at an international school can be traced to the day of the 2006 policy announcement. Accordingly, three survey questions explored whether the policy shift was a factor in parents’ decision-making.

Q. 11. Did you register your child in an international school after the Malaysian government changed the restrictions on Malaysian enrolments at international schools in 2006?

Q. 12. Did the changes in 2006, regarding approval for Malaysians to study in an international school, have any influence on your decision?

Q. 13. If your child is Malaysian, please describe your experience gaining approval for your child to study at an international school in Malaysia.

Parents’ responses indicated that the policy shift was a minor influence in their decision. Only 30 percent of parents who responded to the survey reported that they had registered their child in an international school after the Malaysian government changed the restrictions on Malaysian enrolments in 2006. Only six percent of parents indicated that the changes had any influence on their decision. For those parents who felt that the changes were influential, the most commonly cited influence was a change to the eligibility criteria. Specifically, the new criterion which enabled them to qualify was the submission of proof of possible employment-related transfer to another country. As one
parent expressed it: “my child didn’t complete the minimum three years international school requirement to qualify for enrolment in Malaysia. [So I] got a company letter from my employer indicating there could be a need to transfer me outside Malaysia.”

Thirty-four of the 43 participants opted to provide some form of written description in response to the question about their experience gaining approval for their child to study in an international school. Although parents weren’t asked to describe which criteria they met, thirteen written responses connected the simplicity of the process to the fact that one of the parents is a foreigner. Three parents indicated that their permanent residence (PR) in another country made it easy, and an additional five respondents attributed their eligibility to relocation from overseas. Most parents described the process as being _straight forward, relatively easy, no problem, very easy, no hassle, relatively smooth._

The final survey question asked if parents would be interested in participating in an interview. Of the 41 parents who responded to this question, 33 respondents selected “no.” Nine parents responded that they would like to participate in an interview. My contact details were provided for these parents, along with a request that they email me to arrange an interview. The next section of this chapter introduces the interview participants.
Interview Results: Individual Vignettes

Eight parents contacted me by email to indicate their willingness to participate in an interview. In this section, each of the eight interview participants is introduced individually. Narrative vignettes are used to present the participants’ individual experiences as they are reflected in the four spheres of influence. Interwoven in each vignette is a consideration of the social, national, and global influences which have been highlighted in participants’ personal stories. Specific themes which emerged from the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the interviews are discussed in Chapter 5.

Jaime

Jaime is currently a partner in an advertising production house in Kuala Lumpur. She is the single mother of one son, and both she and her ex-husband are Malaysians. She grew up in a “small city, town, up north” and attended a government Chinese school where she “learned Mandarin, primary 1 to primary 6.” She grew up in a family of “11 brothers and sisters…all went to government school, Chinese or English were the choices at the time.” In describing her own educational background, Jaime refers to her parents’ decision of where to send their 11 children to school:

My parents are Chinese, so for them the first choice will be “Chinese must learn Chinese,” hence out of the 11 brothers and sisters I’d say 50% go to the Chinese school, 50% would go to the English school. I think mum and dad must have drawn out from the hat! Mum was from China, Dad… Malaysian.

Jaime’s parents did “not go to university, I think they’d also hardly done the basic (education)” but they knew the importance of education, “if not, they would not have sent us to study.” Jaime studied accountancy “in what is now called Metropolitan University,
in London” and refers to others of her generation who were also sent overseas for their university education. She says, “If I take a sample from my own secondary school, I think maybe 20-30% of the class in that year went overseas.”

In sharing her educational experiences, Jaime places her education in the context of her generation:

I was from Chinese (primary) school. When I progressed to the secondary school it was still a Chinese school but we only learned one subject in Mandarin, the rest are all in English and one, Bahasa Malaysia. Which means science, mathematics, geography are all in English. We were the old generation.

Jaime elaborates on the secondary school options for her generation in terms of the language of instruction: “Now they call the government school ‘kebangsaan’ (Malay) but those days at least we had a choice, Chinese medium, kebangsaan, or English.” Language is frequently mentioned in Jaime’s references to her own education and she describes her experience of studying an English curriculum in a Malaysian context:

I was educated in Malaysia, following English subjects and all that, even the content was more British-based, we did the Cambridge O level so what we studied is more international level kind of stuff. Even though the teaching method is a bit different compared to a Western school.

Jaime elaborates on the connection between her own educational experiences, her current social context, and her experience in deciding on her son’s educational path:

Even some parents now think that Chinese must learn Mandarin, but for me…Chinese school…discipline is very good, but for me the teaching method I absolutely do not like. It’s like reciting the whole book….I was from Chinese
school, in fact a lot of my friends ask “Hey, how come your son you never send to Chinese school and you’re from the Chinese school background? I mean for me that’s why I didn’t send him to Chinese school! [laughter]

Jaime also alludes to another component of her own educational experience that influenced her decision to send her son to an international school. She articulates her experiences of the Malaysian and “Western” systems as being different in terms of the teaching methods and how the “thinking process” is developed. She shares her experience of transitioning to the expectations of university overseas, and connects it to the difference in systems:

When I went to UK the first year I was a bit…struggling…suddenly I thought wow, it’s a bit of a change, I always tell friends as a joke, all my English friends will be partying in the pub, and I’ll be the first one after lectures to pop in the library, probably be kicked out by the library. And through all those three years, I only get 2nd class upper! I see some English friends…I never see them in the library, they get the same thing! Okay, maybe lower, but still!! I do think that my thinking process is not as creative or subjective, you try—really—to copy.

Throughout her discussion of her educational experiences, Jaime refers extensively to the importance she places on the “thinking process” and her feeling that the Malaysian system is not as successful in encouraging creativity.

**Jas and Sara**

Jas and Sara were the only set of parents who volunteered to be interviewed together. At their suggestion, we met at a newly opened café in Bangsar, an affluent
suburb of Kuala Lumpur. Jas and Sara are both Malaysians, have three children, and were “born here, educated in this country.” Jas shared:

Myself I was educated all the while in Malaysia. I went to school, primary and secondary, in a typical government school in Malaysia. And then I went, I came down to Kuala Lumpur, to study engineering at the University of Malaya. And that was a very long time ago, maybe 20 something years.

Like Jaime, Sara and Jas are both from Kedah, a small state in the northwest which borders Thailand and the Straits of Malacca. Although Jaime is from a town in Kedah, Jas and Sara are from rural areas in the predominantly agricultural state. Jas describes his education in relation to where he comes from:

I am from a rural area, basically in Malaysia we call it kampong, village, I’m a village boy. We used to take a bus to school about 45 minutes away, and basically all the time my education is free, I’ve never had to pay for it..uh, when you get educated at a local university it’s almost free.

Jas spoke highly of the Malaysian education system as he experienced it. He uses language of standards and prestige to describe his experiences:

During my time they followed the Cambridge system, and if I’m not wrong, even the examination is marked externally, and University Malaya was far better rated than the National University of Singapore. Do you know I have offers from National University of Singapore and an offer from University Malaya? I chose University of Malaya because it was more prestigious to be in University Malaya compared to going to National University of Singapore, can you believe? That was the standards of education in Malaysia, it was very very good, and high.
Sara framed her educational background in terms of language, highlighting that she went to school locally but at another time, when the language of instruction was no longer English.

I was also educated locally, similarly like him, but I’m much younger, so my, uh, the language was…my time it was already in Malay….I had no choice…I had to go to a local university because I had no money to further my education, you know? Any other way? So that’s why I got a place in University Malaya, same university. So, and I did Bachelor of Economics there. Otherwise, same background like my husband. Also from a kampong, take a bus, go to school…it was the same.

Although her schooling was in Malay at the primary and secondary levels, at university Sara describes her experience in a system where “it’s compulsory that we have to answer the papers in Malay, but most of the facts and books are all written in English. Yeah. We basically do the translation when we are answering the questions.”

For Sara and Jas, like many Malaysians, language is a complex aspect of their individual and educational experiences. Sara’s mother tongue is Tamil, her parents did not speak much English, and her school experiences were a combination of Malay at primary and secondary and Malay and English at the university level. In the case of Jas, his educational experiences were in English and his family spoke English at home, but he shares that “my mother tongue is Punjabi. However because I come from the village, if you speak to an outsider outside the home normally you speak Malay, because I come from Kedah.”

Both Sara and Jas spoke of their own educational and social experiences as
components of their decision to send their children to international school. They now “have multiple businesses” and “both are business people.” Although now they speak only English at home and have established a life in which they are frequently functioning in the global sphere, this was not always the case. Both Sara and Jas expressed their transition into the business world in terms of anxiety because it meant interacting with foreigners. Sara says:

If you put (your kids) in government school, you know the fear? They can only mix around with themselves….my kids they’re exposed, they know students, Japanese, Korean, Europeans, and they can talk—they don’t have the fear.

Malaysian kids they see foreigners, they can’t talk.

Jas agrees, and says “Let me tell you I was like that….When I came out from the university, 24 years old, and if I have to speak to so-called white people, my hand will shiver. I can’t.” He says “That in itself took me two, three years to get through that barrier.” Sara agrees, “When we go into our working life, corporate sector, we have to talk to all these people and it takes time, you know. It’s kind of like fear factor for us [laughs].” By reflecting on their own experiences, how they were “so scared” and “worried about the slang” and whether or not they would be able to understand others, Sara and Jas connect their own experiences of transitioning from the national to the global: the “business world is…from all over the world.” Jas agrees; before working he had never travelled outside. It so happened that when I started work, for whatever reason, I had the opportunity to do business in thirty-something countries, and my business was all over the world. So when I saw the world, I had so much trouble
to get to know the world, you know. I only wish in my earlier part I could have met so many people.

Jas speaks at length about the global component of his current world, but describes it as a process, and one that was made difficult by his own lack of early experience with others outside his local sphere. He goes on to speak of his belief that an international education will allow his own children to avoid the difficulties he faced.

To me that’s the most beautiful part of this whole education, ah? I mean that is the single most important thing, that is to have friends from all over the world. So you see, you need to decide whether you want to be a citizen of Malaysia or a citizen of the world. For me, yes, you know, you are a citizen of Malaysia but more on top you’re a citizen of the world, so you got the whole world. You know you can go anywhere that you want.

For Sara and Jas, moving from their educational to their professional worlds also meant moving beyond localized experience. In this sense, the decision to send their children to an international school is situated in their own experiences of bridging national and global spheres.

For Sara and Jas, the decision to send their three children to an international school can also be read as a desire for their children to experience a social and educational environment that is not edged with the struggles and difficulties they faced. Like Jaime, who did not want her son to attend Chinese school in part because of her own experience with the system, Sara and Jas refer to their educational experiences as an example of what they do not want for their children. “We, us, ourselves, we earn money, we went through difficult times, do we really want…to put our children through all these
things?” Sara continues, “Actually, we work for them, so I believe that we should give them a reasonable life.”

Lau

Lau is the father of “four children, two boys, two girls.” Both he and his wife are Malaysians, and three of their children are at an international school. He “grew up in Penang, you know Penang? It’s another state here, so I did my primary, secondary, as well as my basic degree in Penang.” When asked to describe his educational background, Lau also frames his discussion in terms of language. He recounts:

So in primary, it’s a government school, so of course I’m fifty-f…past fifty years old, so in my time the language of instruction is English, so we study in all the subjects in English and then we have Chinese as a subject, Malay as a subject. Likewise, the same as secondary, it was all in English. Then I entered the local university for my Bachelor’s degree, and it’s like 80% in English and 20% in Malay.

Like Jas and Sara, Lau was a top student who remembers his school days fondly. He also frames his recollections in terms of standards.

You see when we were younger it was better. During my time, I remember my…I was in this school in Penang, Penang Free School. When I entered that school, my principal was a British man, you know. We still have all these British people, teachers, and you know, there’s discipline, there’s standards, there’s…well you can’t find them now.

Lau would have liked for his children to attend local schools, as he did. He says:
I would like my kids to also really grow up in the mainstream like I did, where my friends come from all walks of life. Really all Malaysians, you know, so it’s good for my kids, they’re more exposed to that. But on the other hand, on a wider perspective, I would also like to groom them to have a more international outlook. So if you have them just in a Malaysian school, again their thinking is just very Malaysian.

Lau’s comments reflect his wish that his children could have a positive educational experience in the national system, like he did. He also acknowledges that other influences are at play, and that considerations within and beyond the national sphere were important in his decision-making. For his children, as for him, their individual educational experiences intersect and overlap national and global spheres. Lau did his Masters in Australia, where his eldest child is currently studying. Although his children attended government Chinese schools until the end of their primary education, he intends to send all of his children overseas for their education and wants them to be prepared for their international experiences, for “what happens when you’re an adult in the outside world.”

**Fiona**

Fiona is forty-three. She has four children who were in a government Chinese school before she moved them to an international school. She was “educated in the local government system” and describes herself as a “typical Chinese Malaysian mother” who is “quite competitive.” Fiona went to a Chinese government school in Kuala Lumpur. Her five older sisters “were all educated in English-medium, they were all speaking in English. During those days it’s British, right?” Ten years younger than the fifth sister, Fiona “hated Mandarin, because my sisters, they went to an English school. I was put in a
Mandarin school.” By the time she reached secondary she went to a “Malay government school, because at that time it was no longer British curriculum.” Although she wanted to study, her “father was from China, very very traditional upbringing, girls are not allowed to be educated.” Although two of her sisters were sent to the UK to study when her father’s business was doing well, when they returned they “worked one or two years, got married” and like her other sisters “became housewives, so all my four sisters were bad examples for me!” Her fifth sister “didn’t want to study, so she worked as a secretary so my dad didn’t have to finance her, became a housewife. Fiona’s spoke of her own educational experiences in terms of familial and social barriers:

I was stuck in Malaysia, but I wanted to study…I did my A level without my dad knowing—he thought I was doing a secretarial class. So with my A level, then I worked a little, then with some money I did my ICSA, onward, with some money I did my MBA. Unfortunately I didn’t finish my MBA, with Strathclyde, UK, a twinning program. Unfortunately, I was then 26 years old and my dad, from China, said ‘look, you get yourself married.’ And then, my character, I’m quite a good daughter so then I met my husband, my husband very Chinese, brought up in a very Chinese way, say ‘okay let’s get married’. So I didn’t finish my thesis. He said get married and do the thesis a year later. A year later I got pregnant [she laughs] and so, life’s been, a comfortable life for me, married a good man and he comes back every night…[laughs] yeah, so that’s my life story.

Fiona explained to me that she and her husband made the decision together to send their children to an international school. She connects their decision to her husband’s educational and professional experiences. Her husband’s education was “local
but British, because he’s 14 years older than I am, so during his years they were all in British curriculum, studied in English.” He went on to complete his doctorate in the UK, and now runs his own business. She says her husband’s “views are quite macro, more international. We felt that we want to expose our children more to the outside, you know? Ya, expose them to what is available outside.”

Fiona also clarified that before the 2006 policy shift their decision was clear but impossible because “being Malaysians, both parents, during those days you actually are not allowed to send them to an international school unless you fulfil the government requirements. The conditions were that one parent is an expatriate.” Prior to the policy shift “we had no choice but to send them to a local school” but once “the window was opened” they were able to act. “There was a very small criteria where we were supposed to give them a proof letter to say that we do have business overseas, so we managed to fulfil that criteria.” Fiona highlights how important it was to them that their children receive an education which met their expectations: “At that time, we were actually thinking about going to Singapore, if we couldn’t get an international school. I’m so glad I didn’t fall into that problem.” For Fiona and her family, the shift in policy influenced how they bridged their lives within national and international spheres.

**Rosie**

Rosie has two primary-age children. She is Malay, thirty-eight years old, and a practicing lawyer. At the time of the interview, she was in the process of moving her children from a local school to an international school. She saw my survey while her children were participating in an entrance assessment and volunteered to participate because “educational issues with children are very close to my heart.” Her own
educational background is varied: “I did elementary school in America and then I did secondary school in Malaysia, which is a bit of a shock to the system, and then I read my law in England. A bit colourful, right? So I had sort of a taste of everything.”

An emphasis on the importance of education was part of Rosie’s familial experience. As the daughter of academics who earned their PhDs in America and returned to work in the civil service, Rosie says “I came from a home where they placed great importance in intellectual stuff. Not to say that we’re all very highly intellectual, but you know, we knew the importance because that was our parents’ emphasis and that was their passion so… we see it.” Rosie also traced her family’s focus on education back to “my mum’s side, my granddad on my mum’s side strongly believes that education is the way to go for anybody in the world anywhere, anytime, so he made sure that all his kids, he had eight kids, my mother was the fourth, all eight kids he saw through college.” She recalls how her grandfather who was “a civil servant during the British colonial times” spoke in English to his children. “He brought back home the language from his workplace and made sure all his children read English books.”

As a child, English was the language spoken in Rosie’s home. Her mother had grown up speaking English, and her father, a kampung boy who was selected to go to the Royal Malay College\(^5\) at the age of nine, began learning English at the elite boarding school. Rosie’s paternal grandparents “were in the cottage industry, you know? They did whatever little thing they could do in the village.” Although they “couldn’t afford to send him for further education if they wanted” in primary school Rosie’s father was identified as a “student with potential and then they assessed him and took him in.” Like her parents, Rosie and her husband speak English at home. When I asked her if she felt that

\(^5\) See Loh, 1975 for more information on this institution.
her education abroad has had an influence on that, or family background, she said “It’s a bit of both actually. I think it’s more the latter, because we think in English.”

Rosie and her husband speak English with their children, but initially decided to send their children to the local government school, or sekolah kebangsaan. In their discussions about how to educate their children, Rosie says “my husband said, you know, you’ve had an American education, you’ve taken a look in, so why don’t you put both our monsters inside an American school? So I said no, let’s give this national system a try.” Rosie spoke earnestly of her eagerness for their children to participate in the national system, but was genuinely disheartened by the Ministry of Education’s decision to reverse the PPSMI policy of teaching mathematics and science in English. “I think that was what actually broke the camel’s back, enough is enough. I am not going to risk my children. Well, I feel it’s a risk, because I feel that the way to go is to learn it in English. That is the language of knowledge in those particular streams or fields.”

Rosie feels that “It’s no longer the industrial revolution, it’s the information revolution. Everything is in English…on the internet…and I don’t know how we can live with ourselves if we rob our kids of the opportunity to learn.” Rosie is passionate about the need for the nation to retain the policy, and a strong advocate for all Malaysian children to have linguistic access to global knowledge beyond the national sphere.

Grace

Grace heads the customer service department at a prominent international insurance company. She has one child, a daughter, in primary school. “I got married very late in life. My daughter is 10 years old and I’m quite old, I only got married when I was 32…33. I had my daughter when I was 36.” Grace “studied in Assunta Primary School,
both Primary and Secondary, then I did my Grade 13 in Toronto, then I went on to York.”

She told me that “the education system at that time was different, ours was the last year in
English. If someone started Standard One after me, everything was in Bahasa. I was that
last batch.”

Grace frequently referred to language when describing her educational and
familial experiences. Her parents were civil servants who “were educated in English.
Because at that time, everything was in English.” Her parents and grandmother spoke

English with Grace and her sister.

I mean if you look at my parents themselves, all them speak English, including
my grandmother, which is very unusual because most Chinese families at that
time would have had grandparents or even some of their parents only speaking
Chinese. I mean, you’ll find that my Chinese is quite bad. My English is better.

Grace’s made several references to her grandmother, who spoke English “because
she was a nurse.” It was Grace’s grandmother who helped finance her post-secondary
education. “My grandmother was the one who supported my fees. And I had a grant
which put me through university, because my mother worked for a minister at that time,
and so because--financially they’re not very rich--so we got a grant for me for fees, and at
that time in Canada the fees were only like a thousand Canadian dollars for a year, you
know…it was cheaper to study in Canada than it would have been in the UK.”

For Grace, there was no familial or social pressure or expectation regarding her
post-secondary education. It was her individual decision to go abroad to study and her
parents and grandmother who made it possible. Her sister “never went away, she stayed
on here,” but “I wanted to go and live overseas….My parents didn’t have an issue with that, they said ‘Fine, if that’s what I wanted.’”

Grace spoke of her experience and outlook as being different from those in the social sphere of her youth. She felt that her family was unusual in comparison to other Chinese families because they spoke English at home. She also says: “The thing is that, I don’t know whether it’s good or bad, I’m very Westernized.” Grace felt that her interaction when she went abroad was also unlike that of her Malaysian peers:

I didn’t join the Malaysian-Singapore association as most Malaysians would, although in Grade 13 I mixed a lot with the Asians as well, and the Trinidadians, because that’s what they had in the school. When I went to university I just didn’t mix around with a lot of Asians. Maybe what happened is that I had a Trinidadian boyfriend so maybe that made the difference! Haha.

Grace articulated a strong sense of difference, saying “I look at things differently, and I felt that if I was overseas I don’t want to just mix with people of my own culture and all that. You’re there, you should get to learn about someone else’s culture and people. So I did that.”

After completing her Honours degree in Economics, Grace returned to Malaysia, began her work life, and eventually met her European husband who “was working here and then we got married here.” When their daughter reached school age, Grace says “we were never undecided about anything. We knew that we would never send her to a local school. I think partly because of the stories we hear… and I think the level of education.”
For Grace and her husband, deciding on an international school for their daughter was a choice based on their experiences and expectations. Grace’s husband also went to an international school, but for him,

_Husband_: I don’t think I had a choice. I didn’t, because I lived in Hong Kong. So international school it was or nothing.

_Grace_: Could be a local Hong Kong school…

_Husband_: I don’t think anybody sent their kids to local Hong Kong schools, not then. I went to an American Primary School and an English secondary school. So the curriculum was the same as what [our daughter] is doing now.

Grace connects her individual experiences and perceptions, and the experiences and perceptions related by her husband and others in their social sphere, as interrelated in her decision to send her daughter to an international school.

**Adrika**

Adrika is thirty-eight years old and has three children. Like Rosie, Adrika’s educational background is varied, and she also spent part of her primary education abroad because her “parents were pursuing a PhD and Masters so we went sort of as a student family.” In speaking of her parents, Adrika shared that “both are British educated and the language at home is English. Well they are both Malaysian now. One became a Malaysian, but she is not a Malaysian by birth. She made the decision to become Malaysian.”

“Born a Hindu,” Adrika’s early education began in Malaysia at a “Baptist kindergarten then we were off to the UK where I went to a Catholic school down the road from the house. I had a couple of years there…then came back to Malaysia and was put
into a local kindergarten, until the government school year began here in Malaysia, then I started the government school, from which there were a lot of memories.”

The government school that Adrika attended was near her family home, in a suburb which “would be considered affluent now” and during her youth “would have been moderately comfortable, middle class.” The students in her class were from all races “Malay, Chinese, Indian. Mixed groups, racially, all sort of moderately to possibly very comfortable in terms of wealth.” This was in the late 1970s.

When I went to government school, government schools were at a crossroads between making the shift from complete English and into complete Malay. So whilst a lot of our books were in Malay, a lot of the instructions given were actually given in English, so we were working in a bilingual situation.

For Adrika, language was a deciding factor in the educational experiences of her and her siblings. Adrika’s younger brother was having difficulty in the local government school: “he could not cope…He couldn’t speak Malay.” Although Adrika was doing fine in the local system, her brother was not:

we had to leave the government system because of my brother. It was evident that he could not cope, so our parents felt that it was necessary for him to be moved to go to a school that worked in his first language, which was English, and since he was going to be given the benefit of an international education they thought it was necessary that I should be accorded the same privilege, but in reality, I would have survived, probably quite well in the government system.

Adrika’s recollection of her government school experiences are very vivid, “but they’re only childhood memories, so they’re not always the most positive memories. I
remember having to sit and take a racial count.” Adrika explained “You have to stick your hand up so that you’re identified as belonging to one of the groups.” She remembers a mix of Malays, Chinese, and Indians in her class: “if I think back to the times when they had to do the racial counts, and you had to stick your hand up in the air to identify what kind of race you were, it had all, with the smallest group being the ‘others’…”

*MLI: How did you have to identify yourself?*

*Adrika: Indian.*

Adrika speaks of racial identity as a signifier of social and group belonging. She points to the importance of race in Malaysian society:

you’re always being asked where do you come from and what are you made up of. Whereas in the West you’d never consider asking that kind of question because it’s considered invasion of privacy, here it is the norm. And if you don’t answer, people think you’re strange, so you have to put on a big smile and say this is what I am and this is where I come from and this is where my great great great grandfather came from and everybody is happy.

Adrika’s lived experience as a Malaysian who does not visibly fit into the racial category by which she identifies is a strong memory from her own government school experience: “I remember being questioned about my race and being told that I was wrong.” In her late teens and early adulthood, Adrika studied in the UK, and points to social identity and experiences as a factor in her return to Malaysia: “I worked over there too for a while, before I came back here. But whilst I may look European, I’m culturally out of step with European ways, and I was never comfortable so the desire to come back was always very strong.”
MLI: So you’d say you have a strong sense of Malaysian identity.

Adrika: Oh I am a Malaysian, there’s no question about that. It’s just trying to convince the rest of the world that’s what I am but yes, I am Malaysian.

While Adrika’s racial identity puts her between groups both internationally and nationally, she expresses a strong sense of being Malaysian. As a minority herself, she feels strongly about not wanting her children to feel marginalized: “I don’t want my daughters to have to go in [to government school] and listen to people saying to them, so what are you? But for a lot of mixed children of course that’s going to be a problem…if you go to a government school they end up becoming the minority, and when you’re the minority you tend to be nudged out onto the side. Whereas in an international setting, there is no such thing as a minority group.” For Adrika, choosing an international school reflects her desire for her children to find a comfortable educational space within the national sphere, a place where they feel a sense of belonging and where they can be happy: “I would want them to think back and think oh I had a happy school time. I don’t know if you can do that with a government school, think back and say I had a good time.”

Reflection on the vignettes

All of the eight interview participants are Malaysian parents who elected to send their children to an international school. Of the participants, four are Chinese, three identify as Indian, and one is Malay. Their ages range from 38 to 55. Two participants are single parents, and one is married to a foreigner. Two of the participants are from rural areas and six grew up in suburban or urban centres. Four participants are from Kuala Lumpur, three are from Kedah, and one is from Penang. In total, they have seventeen children: ten girls and seven boys. Of their children, one is at university in Australia, one
is attending a local private school; ten are in the primary section and five are in the secondary section of the same international school. Six mothers and two fathers participated in the interviews. All of the participants have post-secondary education, five completed degrees overseas, and three have worked overseas. Of the eight participants, all of them speak English at home.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have presented the quantitative survey data and introduced the eight interview participants. In the next chapter, I present the core themes that emerged from the qualitative responses to the surveys and the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the individual interviews.
Figure 2. Excerpt from the interview with Grace

I think it’s not so much the academics, but the well-rounded education, I keep stressing on that because for me that’s important. Like I told a friend before, I said I don’t think that an international school you know has the best graduates who will be the most successful in life. I think that happens in any school—it could be a local school, it could be a local private school, it could be an international school. You also have lazy kids who don’t turn out well and they could go to the best international school but they don’t achieve anything in life. So I don’t think that the school that you go to determines how successful you’ll be in life. I just think for me I want to build a child who is well-rounded, you know, that gives her a good chance but whether or not she achieves that is up to her. I mean at the end of the day, I just want to give her that foundation that gives her a better stepping stone or sets her up at a better level than someone else. And that’s it, you know? ‘Cause someone asked me ‘Why would you send her to an international school? I mean even the local schools they’ve got really great people who came out of the local schools,’ and I don’t dispute that, you know. It’s just that for me, that’s what I wanted for my daughter.
The purpose of this study is to explore why Malaysian parents elect to send their children to an international school rather than a local school. By choosing to explore my research questions through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology I acknowledge that my interpretation of the “data” I collect is as unique as the individuals who have participated in this research. In my attempt to structure the patterns and meanings of the experiences of others, I have pursued the personal against a backdrop of the contextual, by conceptualizing consciously articulated individual experience within the spheres of global, national and social influences.

The concept of connected experience emerged throughout the interviews as a dominant and connecting thread. In the interviews, parents referred to particular components of their individual, social, national and global experiences which they linked to their decision-making for their children. As parents described their own educational experiences and the process of decision making regarding their children’s education, the complex interplay of factors which informed their decisions was revealed. As I listened and remembered, as I consulted my notes and read their stories again and again, I interpreted their words. Using hermeneutic phenomenological principles as my guide, I selected, highlighted, grouped, regrouped, sought meaning, rediscovered meaning, and structured meaning. From this analytical journey, three overarching themes emerged: aspirational priorities, discouraging influences, and enabling factors. Each of these themes spoke to a corresponding sphere of influence.
Aspirational Priorities: The Global Sphere

This theme emerged out of the clearly articulated desires which parents expressed as part of their decision-making. Parents frequently described specific factors which had
influenced their decisions, and drew connections between personal priorities and their choice of an international school as the venue for fulfilling these desires. In keeping with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, I let the words of parents themselves, their repetitive patterns, expressions, and phrases, structure my interpretation. By giving the label *aspirational priorities* to this theme, I attempt to capture both the rational and emotional components of stories that were rich in their expression of what parents wanted and hoped for their children. Fiona’s words *It’s always about academic and social* led me to understand that parents’ considerations were frequently expressed in academic and social dimensions that I could further delineate into the following strands: balance, recognition, exposure, mobility, and belonging.

**Balance**

All parents expressed a desire for their children to have a balanced school experience in which scholarly pursuits are complemented with extra-curricular activities. Parents did not feel this balance is characteristic of the national system; they had to look beyond the national sphere in order to attain it. Sara says: “One thing I like about international school, they are not too academic, they’re still academic but …very balanced.” Jas expressed this as well: “I believe that… there must be a balance. Of course to me even in the international school, academic is very important, but there’s got to be a balance.” Adrika explains that balance is something she feels Malaysian parents are looking for when choosing an international school:

that your children would have access to an all-round education, it’s not all just academics, because it’s a full-day school rather than split shift which is what happens in the government schools. The kids will come in in the morning and
have the rest of the day to do all the non-academic activities, and so what you’re getting is an all-round package rather than just one where the child is always centred on getting 80, 90, 100%, you know.

Grace articulates this desire for balance as well: “what we wanted was a well-rounded education for our daughter.” According to Grace, “I think a lot of Malaysian parents want their kids to achieve well academically, you know. I mean for me I think it’s more important to be well-rounded because I think in tomorrow’s world academics alone just wouldn’t do it for you. I mean for me education is important, but I think education and having fun is just as important, alright?”

Parents desired a balanced environment in which both academic and extra-curricular activities are available. While parents stated that they wanted their children to have fun, to enjoy their school life and to be happy, parents also expressed that they had carefully considered the academic aspects of choice and that the curriculum was also important. This dimension is explored in the next section: recognition.

**Recognition**

This dimension illuminates how parents frame their decisions about the academic curriculum and credentials available at an international school. Whether parents had gone to school when Malaysia still followed the British system, studied in the UK for their higher education, or taken a course which was offered by a British university, all of the parents interviewed had some connection to what they frequently referred to as the British system.

This connection to the British system was a consideration in choice-making. Jaime explains that when first considering what school her son would attend she
narrowed her search to schools offering “more of the British system” because “obviously the choice of curriculum” will be a factor. Lau also shared that “we prefer the UK syllabus, British syllabus” and stressed that “we prefer the British curriculum rather than the American or Canadian one, so we were quite sure that we prefer the British curriculum, and we needed a place that’s got a strong curriculum.” Fiona also wanted a “more British” education for her children; she felt that “the syllabus is more innovative, more applicable to real life. Easier for the child to proceed on to university or post-degree, and more recognizable in that sense.” Rosie said that she and her husband had also considered the British syllabus “maybe because we’re all British graduates, I’m not sure.” Rosie’s comment indicates that in the course of reflecting on her own education, she began to recognize a connection between elements of educational experience and choice.

Fiona’s use of the word recognizable led me to identify this dimension as recognition. In listening to the data I found that parents either expressed recognition that a British education is important to them individually, or as a qualification recognized in the rest of the world. As Adrika expressed it:

there will be less questioning about the qualifications in another country, you know, you don’t have to convert. If you slap out a certificate issued by the British educational authority and you say well these are my IGCSEs and I got A, A, A, they go, ‘Ok that’s fine, we understand these.’

International recognition of educational qualifications is a concern for these parents, who articulated their intention to send their children overseas for their higher education. Jaime feels that an international school “It’s grooming you more to the tertiary
level” and “I just want him to have a good foundation, education to prepare him to go overseas.” Jaime is keen to “send my son preferably to England or second choice would be Australia.” Jas says that “if the mind is just to educate the children locally, there’s no need to go to international school” and he and Sara believe that international school parents have thought about their children’s tertiary education:

Jas: Most international school parents already decided that I’m going to educate my kid in Australia or New Zealand or somewhere.
Sara: They already know.
Jas: Most of them are like that.

Lau, whose eldest daughter is already studying overseas, says that “Almost all our friends, their children will have their tertiary education overseas.” Likewise, Fiona shares that:

We do have the intention of sending them overseas to further their education, and I feel that since I already have that intention I might as well start them young. So the way they approach their projects, or the way they approach socially and… I’ll feel more comfortable if they can merge into the overseas environment easier.

Embedded in Fiona’s commentary is another important aspect of the aspirational priorities which arose throughout the data: the social component. I frequently heard parents expressing meaningful statements that referred to international schools as offering their children greater exposure. I have used this term, derived verbatim from parents’ commentary, to illuminate this dimension of the theme aspirational priorities.

Exposure

The parents interviewed expressed the desire to send their children overseas for tertiary education. Parents referred to both experiences—studying at an international school and studying overseas—as opportunities for exposure. The dimension of exposure
encompasses both a realm of experience which parents want their children to have access to, and the development of certain qualities or characteristics which parents feel this realm of experience will promote.

Fiona talks about the social aspect of this dimension as exposure to different people and ways of being:

We felt that we want to expose our children more to the outside, you know? Expose them to what is available outside and the different people; just a mix you know, rather than just Malaysians. So we give them the option of being able to socialize in a comfortable way with different groups of people, ya.

Adrika also feels that “international schools would in theory expose your child to a wider range of nations, children from all over the world.” The experience of social and cultural exposure is perceived to be a benefit of an international education. Jaime illustrates this perception in her commentary on her son’s experience in a private local school:

At private school he was exposed only to the local kids. But now he’s exposed to the international school kids who have all sorts of backgrounds—Korea, England, Africa—and they socialize outside of the school, which I encourage. He gets to meet new friends… gets to know about life there. I think it’s a mind-opening mindset.

Jaime feels that “to mix with foreign students, I think it’s a good thing. Cultural mix, it’s a good thing!” For Jaime, she feels her son is “lucky” to go into an international environment “a few years earlier before he goes overseas” and that it will “prepare his mindset.”
The parents in this study feel that there is an individual and social benefit to being exposed to people from different races, nations and cultures. Rosie shares that for her and her husband, being exposed to a mix of people from different backgrounds was important; they wanted to ensure that their children are exposed “because we have a mixed set of friends and family.” Exposure was not a word suggested in my interview protocol, but it was a term that came up repeatedly amongst participants. As I heard the term again and again, I selected it as a hermeneutic tool for understanding parents’ experience.

Jas and Sara initially considered a local private school for their children, but then thought “why don’t we consider international school then, because they get a better exposure in terms of friends and culture. For me that is more important.” Jas elaborates:

So we find that the people of tomorrow, the people who’s going to be most, in my view lah⁶, the most successful, is the one who knows more culture, who is able to make people comfortable, very good interpersonal skill, and of course, be able to use Google, you know, technology.

Jas suggests exposure as linked to the development of skills. Lau makes a similar comment in which he explains exposure as an advantage for his children: “I think the exposure of international school and education overseas will probably put them in a better position….Because their thinking, their outlook, their communicative skills will be better.” Participants identified the development of skills as something that would set their children apart, make them different, or give them an advantage. Parents identified these skills as being advantageous both in the national and global spheres:

⁶ A particle frequently used in Malaysian English, most often at the end of phrases or sentences.
It’s good for kids. Even say Joshua goes and studies for four years and comes back, at least his mindset is open, mixing with different cultures, backgrounds; it’s all added value, too. It’s not just going for the education actually, it’s everything. Everything actually, to me. I want my son to see the world aspect of things, not just studying.

It was evident that most parents felt that their children would need to be aware of and prepared for the world aspect of things, or for what is out there. As Jaime says “we’ve been out there and we know.” In reflecting on what they hoped their children would gain from the international school experience, parents who were interviewed identified the acquisition of specific skills as being advantageous for successful transition to and acculturation in the global sphere. Communicative, analytical, creative, and interpersonal skills were emphasized.

Communicative. Amongst parents who were interviewed, fluency in English emerged as a desirable skill. All of the parents interviewed identified English as their home language, and most expressed a preference for their children to be taught in English as well.

I think our preferred choice would have been a school where the children will be taught in English. But the Malaysian public schools are all taught largely in Malay and there are some that are purely in Chinese. So we were quite set in our mind that we would like to put them all in English-based schools here.

As Adrika says, many parents “want their children to be native speakers because it is global and Malay we can learn at home or on the weekends.” Grace agrees, and feels
that many parents aspire to send their children to an international school “because the language of instruction is English.”

However, most parents also confirmed that while being educated in English was important, it was neither the singular nor the paramount reason for their decision. Lau clarifies this feeling that school is not language learning alone: “Being at an “international school is more about character-building than learning in English;” children will gain “interaction skills by learning with people of different cultures” and, by virtue of being in an international school, “you have that exposure much earlier.”

Analytical and creative skills. In addition to language, parents identified a desire for their children to become thinkers. “You want to develop thinkers, right? Not just textbook scholars, right? You want some creativity in your learning.” Rosie comments on children who have attended international schools: “My perception is that they can actually articulate better and they’re confident and they’re thinkers, and that’s what I want.” Rosie connects this skill directly to students’ exposure: “So I do see a difference, so it’s all about exposure. It doesn’t matter whether it’s in Canada or Malaysia but it’s all about exposure, I think. And also making your child know that he can actually think.” Jaime also referred to the importance of the ability to think, “For me they have to be taught how to think, the thinking process is very important. Adrika’s commentary below further illuminates what many parents had to say about their aspirational priorities in relation to the analytical and creative dimension of an international education:

I would hope that if I gave my child an international education that they would be independent, and analyse for themselves, or problem-solve without constantly having to turn around and seek confirmation that they are right or wrong. That
they would certainly be far more aware of the world around them as a whole as opposed to just the insular issues of the country. Self-assured, confident, outspoken at the appropriate time. All-round development. Wouldn’t be seeking a straight-A child but would hope that the international school would get across the idea that you have to work to be good at what you do, and work is not a bad thing but at the same time be able to enjoy yourself with the fun things.

*Interpersonal skills.* Adrika’s commentary also identifies independence and confidence as traits which she hopes her children would develop at an international school. Other parents referred to the development of confidence as an aspirational priority as well. Like Adrika, Grace mentions the development of confidence in relation to an all-round education and gives us further insight into what parents mean by an all-round education:

> what we wanted was a well-rounded education for our daughter. I mean you see a lot of Westerners, you see them stand up and make presentations and they have no qualms, you know, there’s no issues, they’re always very confident. They know what they’re talking about. So that was another thing I wanted for my daughter, you know, that confidence, the ability to just stand up and speak, be able to speak her mind and you know, present, and stuff like that. So we wanted something that was more well-rounded, we wanted her to be involved in sports as well as academics.

Grace touches on another attribute identified as important for all the parents who were interviewed: *the ability to just stand up and speak, be able to speak her mind, talk without fear.* Lau connects his daughter’s development of these attributes to her
international school experience, where she had exposure to those who with communicative confidence: “people from different races, because their mother tongue is entirely in English, so therefore they are very fluent. They are able to express their opinions much more clearly so she could see the difference.” The difference Lau spoke of was frequently referred to by parents as the difference between a Malaysian way of interacting at school and what parents perceived as a more “Western” approach. Lau hints that communicative confidence is related to a Western approach, and that a level of confidence can be acquired by exposure to a more Western cultural stance. Lau explains that: “culturally too, because there would be British, there will be all sorts of people,” his daughter could “see the difference in the way they approach the teachers and the way they treat each other, [the way] they respond to questions in class, you know the small little things.” Lau recounts how his daughter characterized Westerners as *more open, less afraid*, and *less reserved*, “whereas the Asians, or the Chinese, Malaysian Chinese they tend to be more reserved, less open in the way they interact with others.” Lau describes how his daughter, who attended a government Chinese school before her enrolment at the international school, was initially quite self-conscious, but became more *outspoken* after the move. He explained that there was a “difference from the days when she was in a Chinese school,” where “you don’t question much and you’re not supposed to challenge. You don’t think so much. You don’t think and speak so much as to be a follower. So after coming to international school we do notice that she’s more outspoken in the house.” Lau outlines his daughter’s acquisition of the communicative confidence most parents referred to, and assured me that “the whole purpose, the whole thrust of sending her to an international school is to achieve that” confidence, that ability to think and to challenge.
“It’s something that we looked forward to her acquiring.” Fiona also maintained that her children had become more *outspoken* since moving to the international school, and that she also perceived this to be a “benefit.”

Parents frequently connected their desire to send their children for an international education to the concept of exposure, and outlined the benefits they hoped their children would gain from greater exposure to diverse people and ideas. These benefits included communicative, analytical, interpersonal, and creative skills. Parents felt that acquiring these skills is important in preparing their children for *the world aspect of things*, for moving beyond the national sphere, for interaction in the *out there*—the global sphere.

**Mobility**

The option for global mobility and a desire for a global perspective came to the fore in parents’ discussions about the decision to send their children to an international school. As Jas says, “We want our kids to be international people, people of the world, where they can go and adapt and live anywhere they want. For us this is more important than getting 5 As or being top student.”

Fiona confirms that she will send her children overseas “so they would be able to work anywhere in the world that they want to.” Global mobility is a strong consideration for these parents, who see living and working in Malaysia as an option for their children, but for whom accessibility to the global sphere is also a primary consideration. When I asked Lau if he felt that his daughter would be likely to come back to Malaysia to live and practice medicine once she had finished her degree in Australia, he replied:

Spend the rest of her life here? I don’t know, we leave the choice to her, but we equip her to be able to either stay back here or go elsewhere. If she stays back
here to study, then she has no choice, it’s all here. But if she goes overseas to study, she has the choice of coming back.

All parents expressed the feeling that the decision to send their children to an international school would give their children greater options than a Malaysian education would offer. Global mobility was one of those options. Parents consistently expressed a desire to expose their children to an international education so they could develop a sense of belonging in the global sphere.

**Belonging**

The idea of belonging emerged in parents’ discussions of their decision. Parents expressed a desire not only for their children to be exposed to other cultures and ways of being, but for their children to feel at home in diversity. Parents related a sense that the diverse student population at the international school would enable all children to feel included. This sense was especially strong amongst parents whose children were of mixed descent.

Grace explained that at this school, “a lot of the children have the mix.” She referred to more expensive international schools in the city, saying “I think there’s a lot more” in this school “than probably in those international schools, yeah.” Rosie shares that she has friends and family who send their children to an international school “because they intermarried. Their husbands are Irish or their wives are Canadians or Australians.”

The idea of feeling at home in diversity extended to those who felt that their children would benefit from being in an environment of openness and acceptance. One
parent shared how she feared that her daughter would be excluded if she were not in an international school:

She’s got spunk and she voices her thoughts and she will tell you that “Actually I’ve thought about it, and this is why I’ve come to this conclusion, and….‖ This type of thing. Which is why, if I send her to a stereotypical school, she might be ousted and classified as weird. This girl is so weird, right?

This parent’s concerns surfaced in many of the interviews, and were echoed in Grace’s recollection of the difficulty her friend’s children experienced in a local school. Grace told me how she has a friend whose “husband is English and she’s Chinese like me. And she sent her kids to [a local private school] But I think, because her kids are what you call bananas you know, I mean really bananas.” Grace explained the term, and continued with her story:

yellow on the outside and white on the inside you know? And I think the kids got bullied in the school, because they were the exception rather than the norm. But I guess in the international school you won’t see that, I mean, they don’t care. In the local school…she was very unhappy because one of her daughters was bullied, because she was different. So she took her kids out and sent them to an international school.

Adrika feels that parents of mixed children “want them to feel as if they are part of the community, the whole community, so if mum is Indian and Dad is European or if Dad is Chinese and mum is an Indian national for example, the child looks different, the child clearly looks mixed. And if you go to a government school they end up becoming
the minority…whereas in an international setting, there is no such thing as a minority group… you are treated like everybody else.”

While parents believed that diversity was more accepted and promoted in an international school, they recognized that cultural borders still had to be negotiated—either by them or by their children. This was particularly noticeable for Fiona and Lau, whose children had attended local Chinese schools before moving to the international school. Lau describes the adjustment his daughter had to make in order to find her own sense of belonging in the international school:

the difficulty was more culture. Because she comes very much from a Chinese based kind of school you know, in Singapore as well as in the Chinese school here. So when she entered the international school, you have people from different races, different cultures here, it took a while for her to adjust.

In Fiona’s case, she felt that her children had no problem making the transition; rather, she was the one who experienced “culture shock” because of the differences between the Chinese school and the international school. Fiona felt that her children were happy to be in a system which meant fewer hours at after-school tuition centers and offered greater chances to socialize. Fiona felt that the social advantages extended to her as well. She says that before her children moved to the international school, Fiona’s circle of friends was mostly Chinese, but “now I have a lot of other friends who are non-Chinese and yeah, I understand them better as well. So even to me…I’m opening up myself.” Another Chinese parent shared a similar experience: “Now, through the international school, I came to know some Malay families and we became friends!” All
parents indicated that at an international school, they and their children had experienced greater opportunities for interaction with Malaysians from different races.

None of the parents interviewed felt as if their own cultural values were being eroded or displaced by enrolling their children at an international school. Rather, they felt that by being exposed to different races and cultures, their children’s lives—and their own—were being enriched. When asked if they thought their children’s sense of culture would be affected by attending an international school, parents were clear about the role of the family in creating a sense of cultural identity. Religion, language, and food were commonly cited as cultural aspects which their children had been immersed in and would continue to value. In response to questions about whether an international education had the potential to alter one’s cultural or religious identity, parents felt “at the end of the day, I think it starts from home. That part of education is not just the school’s responsibility, you know. It doesn’t start there and it’s not just there. It should start from home.” Lau says that’s not an issue, it’s not a religious school, or a Catholic based school, there’s no catechism they don’t preach religion here, there’s no issue, no. I don’t see my children having any problem with that, because we’re Buddhist and ya, they all go to the Buddhist Sunday Schools, so they’re quite steeped in that in their own way. Jas explains that “in terms of culture, even though we send the children to international school, our culture is still there. We still go to temple, celebrate Deepavali.” Sara agrees, saying we “celebrate and teach them what’s our religion. They know all that, so I don’t think they will forget everything. They still pray at home you know, and the food—the Asian touch it’s still there.” Jas and Sara felt that their children’s attachment to their
culture “will always be there. Because they have grandparents, they have cousins, you
know, the attachment will be still there.” Parents felt strongly that culture was something
established at home and maintained through family, and that through exposure to others
from diverse national, racial, and cultural backgrounds, their children would experience
an enriched sense of feeling at home in diversity. There was also a consistent sense
among parents that their children might not be able to establish the same sense of
belonging in national schools, and these concerns are expressed in the next theme,

discouraging influences.

Discouraging Influences: The National Sphere

Of all the things I heard in the interviews, through all the seriousness and the
laughter and the determination and the uncertainty in the intonations of voices straining
to be heard, the following words were the hardest for me to hear.

A tale told with tears

I feel that....
okay, I mean, for me?
I want her to go away and not come back here... okay?
Because, um,
I feel that Malaysia has changed over the years,
and um,
it’s sad,
and...
um...

I think that there’s no future for our kids.
I mean for at least...
and that’s what I tell some of my friends.
And some of them say
yeah that’s true.
if they could go away and not come back...
--they wouldn’t come back7.

7 This quote from one of the mothers I interviewed has been arranged in poetic form. With this
arrangement, I attempt to approximate her cadences and pauses as she struggled to express her deeply
In the middle of a busy café, a mother’s tears welled and fell as my heart echoed the chamber of sadness in her voice. Her earnest wish—for her daughter to find a place in the world—is coupled with the painful understanding of how difficult it will be for her daughter to be successful in the country of her citizenship. For some of the parents I interviewed, their complicated relationship with the country of their birth was revealed in terms of their frustration with the national education system. In some instances, parents carefully and tactfully articulated their concerns about the local school system, initially glossing over their dissatisfaction and then circling back to it time and again. On occasion, parents asked me not record or comment on particular sections of their discontent. Sometimes their frustration was openly expressed.

With laughter.
In resignation.
Through tears.

Parallel to parents’ aspirational considerations for their children’s education were the discouraging influences behind their decision not to select the local system. There was a strong unwillingness on the part of the Malaysian parents to indicate on the survey that they did not want their children to go to a local school. In interviews, however, this was a frequent and dominant feeling, sometimes expressed in highly emotional terms, sometimes felt through its emotional experience in words.

I don’t know, wherever she wants to go. I mean she can still come back here if she wanted to, um…but if you look at the political situation, if you look at the...I guess if she was really good she could still succeed here, but for me I don’t think that’s her future.
absence. Phenomenology “requires that we be sensitively attentive to the silence around the words by means of which we attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world” (van Manen, 1997, p. 131). Whether tacitly or implicitly, parents frequently related their selection of an international school to their feeling that the national system was not the best option for their children. Frequently, parents’ aspirational priorities were framed within discussions of how those priorities were unlikely to be met in the national system. This theme is also expressed in academic and social dimensions that are collected under the headings standards, and imbalance.

Standards

That means I’m criticizing the local system...but that must be one of the reasons why I’m sending my son to international school right? (Jaime)

Overwhelmingly, parents expressed concern about the standards of education in the Malaysian public system. Their opinions were influenced by their own experiences with the national system, their discussions with others, and their interactions with students from local schools.

Parents expressed a strong lack of confidence in all aspects of the local system, with disappointment in the teachers and the curriculum articulated most strongly. In some instances, parents drew comparisons to their experiences in the local system and felt that the teaching standards were higher when they were in school. Jaime says her teachers “were good! A different calibre. The teachers were older, experienced, and dedicated.” Lau connected the “lack of confidence in the public school system” to a:

lack of meritocracy, you see, in the society. So you know, they’re not getting the best people to be teachers, and not getting the best teachers to be administrators of
schools. So there’s a whole lot of implications for the quality and standards of schools here. You see when we were younger it was better.

Good schools were never seen in separation from good teachers, and parents relayed the necessity for knowledgeable, confident, and dedicated teachers. Older teachers who went through the education system at the same time as parents in their forties and fifties were regarded as true educators, but parents felt there are few of those teachers left in the system. Fiona shares how in the government Chinese school her daughter attended, “only in the top three classes were the teachers there all the time.” She explains how these teachers were older, and had been “with the Chinese school for many years. They are very experienced. They are able to handle 50 children in a class.” In local schools, grades determine what class you’re in. The best teachers are assigned to the higher achieving classes. For those children who are not in the “top classes” teachers are frequently absent and inexperienced:

in the last few classes it’s always temporary teachers, yeah. Whereas the temporary teachers? No way, they are young. So as a mother you want your children to be in the top 3 classes. You have to be the top 150 position to enjoy the benefits of a good Chinese school.

Fiona equated experienced, capable teachers with the benefits of a good education.

Rosie was also adamant that “good teachers actually count. I think they’re the assets in the world” and that it is difficult to get good teachers in the current system because of “the salary band.” Many parents agreed that the low salary government teachers receive is an impediment to staffing local schools with those “who have a
Another constraint parents mentioned was the streaming system in place. Students who attain places at local universities are sometimes “assigned to an area of study based on your grades” with students who have higher grades streamed into science and those with lower marks moving into arts. As one parent reflected: “You don’t always have a choice;” perhaps that’s why “the passion for their job might not be there.” Another parent agreed that low pay was an influence, “because I don’t think we pay teachers very well actually. But I think a lot of times at least in the government schools, teaching is something like a last resort—I can’t do anything else and therefore I will go and teach. You know, take a diploma and teach.” Parents wanted their children to have teachers who they deemed to be true educators, teachers with passion and commitment for the profession. In the local system, however “I see a lot of teachers who are in the profession because they didn’t get enough As to go to med school. It’s not that they are educators. So the level of dedication and commitment is very different.” Parents referred to high levels of teacher absenteeism as a significant difficulty for children enrolled in local schools, connecting teachers’ lack of enthusiasm to low pay rates, large class sizes, and the potential to make more money by focusing on giving extra tuition classes after school. As one parent expressed it:

Teachers don’t enjoy their job and they don’t turn up for work. Now—the teachers locally—they’re all more focused on giving the students tuition than teaching in the school. They just go and pass the time, 7:30 to 1, then they come back and focus on tuition to get more money because they are paid so poorly; you can’t blame them.
A lack of passionate, dedicated, and committed teachers was cited by many parents as a contributing factor in their decision not to send their children to a local school.

Another consideration was parents’ perceptions of whether teachers in local schools were well-trained, experienced and knowledgeable. Parents felt that the teachers are “really young, all very young. You’ve got to have good quality teachers and I don’t think we have that, honestly speaking. I think you can ask 10 parents and they will tell you the same. All the old teachers are gone.” Parents connected teachers’ age and inexperience to a feeling that today’s Malaysian teachers are not prepared to teach mathematics and science in English. In reference to the level of English in government schools today, Sara said that teachers “themselves cannot understand the language. My time, still was not bad, you know.” Jaime expressed her concern that while teachers in local schools have been expected to teach mathematics and science in English since 2003, they were not well-prepared for the task, and this affected her son’s education:

I mean I can’t blame them for not being able to speak fluent English, but how can I expect them to teach my son in good English, from a teacher who can barely speak English? That’s my issue as well. And to me, okay, like it or not I feel like English is the most important subject.

There was concern that teachers who only go “through local training” have limited exposure and are not fluent in English. “And those people who come back from overseas? Nobody wants to teach in a government school. They will all be in a private school or in the colleges anyway, teaching in English.” One mother expressed her displeasure quite clearly:
Teacher training is damn important. Getting good quality teachers? The future of the country is based on the next generation. They have to be educated properly! So? Totally something wrong with our system, if you were to ask me. Very wrong. And it’s so unfortunate, because to me, education is very important.

Parents frequently connected being knowledgeable to having an ability to speak English well. There was a consistent sense that, for these parents, part of being well-educated means being fluent in English. For example:

Well you hear stories about teachers who don’t speak very good English, you know. And it’s different from the teachers previously. They all spoke very good English. They were very knowledgeable. But the teachers now, they don’t speak good English. And I have friends who send their kids to local schools, and they tell me “Oh, the teachers are not very good.”

The ability to speak English well is important to these parents, for whom English is not only their home language but also the language they anticipate their children will need to use in their world beyond school. Parents asserted that their children will require English for tertiary education and professional lives—no matter where they choose to live. “It’s the international language. The moment we walk out of this country, Bahasa is of no use.” All parents indicated that even within the national sphere, English is required for daily interaction in the professional and private sector. According to parents, the level of English amongst students from local schools and universities is not up to standard. Five parents referred specifically to their professional experiences to illustrate their personal assessment of local graduates. One parent said there
was a batch of government school students exposed, whether locally or
internationally, to education and to ways to solve problems, and they’re good. But
I also find…this batch of students who were completely Malay medium have this
problem of expression in English. Because sometimes I conduct interviews to hire
more prosecuting officers in the department and they can’t express a simple
opinion in English, you know?

Just as parents expressed the idea of strong communicative and analytical skills as
something they desired for their children, parents also connected these skills to what they
saw as lacking in a local education. Several parents expressed their disappointment that
students from the local system have to be so focused on their examination results that
creativity and analysis are undervalued, and that memorization is the primary focus. As
Rosie said:

They’re very structured. So what I see is that they can regurgitate very well. A+
for memory, but you want something more, you know? It’s a bit worrying.
Because I don’t need a string of As to help me in court, I just need your opinion. I
just want to see your thought process and the flow, and they’re unable to do that,
and that’s so sad I feel.

Grace also articulated her observations about local graduates and their lack of preparation
for the corporate sector. She also used to term thought process in relation to graduates’
analytical skills:

I look after customer service, so I’ve been interviewing graduates for years, you
know. I interview a lot of graduates for my customer service positions and when
you look at them and you interview them, you find they have poor communication
skills. A lot of them do not speak English very well. You can’t find people who can write good English, you know? I think for me, I think the thought process isn’t there, the ability to analyse things and all that. So in that sense I knew I was never going to send my daughter to a local government school. Because if you look at the local graduates, okay, the fact that they don’t speak very well, they’re not very good at communicating--I mean that tells you the quality of the education, okay?

**Imbalance**

For these parents, who are successful in their professional worlds and want their children to have the skills to be successful, the local system does not meet their expectations for quality or standards. *Language, writing skills, presentation skills, the ability to use the knowledge around you, confidence, exposure, being proactive* were all described as important. It doesn’t matter if you have a “first class honours from one of the better universities in the city”—if you don’t “have the social skills” you won’t be successful: “just being academically good isn’t good enough, you know?” Parents supported their personal experiences with statistics from newspaper reports indicating that “the unemployment rate for local graduates is higher” and expressed their feelings that students educated overseas are at an advantage when they return to the national sphere. Parents felt that the local system focuses too much on academic conformity and not enough on skills, independent thinking, or character development. “You can get 100% on your test papers and have absolutely no personality. Or for that matter no day to day living skills, you’re like a robot.” Conversely, parents believed that at an international school, their children would be “taught a certain level of independence, free
thinking, be able to analyse, and make informed decisions.” Parents perceived the local schools as imbalanced, with too much emphasis on conformity and not enough space for creativity or critical thinking.

Another consideration was parents’ perceptions of whether there was a diverse range of students and teachers whose backgrounds were representative of a variety of racial, religious, or socio-economic identities. One parent reflected on the difference in levels of *exposure* between the teachers and children at the government school in the neighborhood where her children had started their schooling:

They’re different, because I think the affluent live there. So the affluent will live their affluent lives, which will trickle down to the kids. So when they go to school…most of the students there have been around to more places than any of the teachers, you know what I mean? And they’re correcting the teachers sometimes.

An Indian mother felt that there used to be many teachers from other races, “My teachers when I was in Form 5—that means like O Levels, right—my Chemistry teacher, Biology teacher, Physics teachers, all those teachers were Chinese. But now Chinese they don’t want to be teachers…the non-Malays don’t want to choose teaching as their profession.” A Chinese parent said that now “90% of the school teachers are Malay.” A Malay parent reflected that when she was in school, there was “definitely” much more racial diversity amongst her teachers. Now, at the government school her son attends, “there’s one Indian teacher and two Chinese teachers and the rest are Malays. Not to say that’s a bad thing, but maybe it has something to do with the level of competition or the level of exposure or the values, maybe.”
The issue of race in Malaysia is complex. In a country with three main racial groups who have co-existed mostly peacefully, there are still strong undercurrents of discontent and division. Rather than speak of inequality, most parents framed their discontent in guarded terms of difference. One parent referred to a “lack of meritocracy”; another referred to the “political situation.” This mother expressed her feelings openly:

If the government system had been a little fairer, and there wasn’t a two-tier standard, the system that we’ve got here, I may very well have picked the local program over the UK program, because I don’t think that a state-run school in the United Kingdom is any better than a state-run school in this country. In fact there are a tremendous number of similarities between them and I would be just as unhappy to send my child to a state-run school in the UK as I would be here. But for a couple of reasons that make the Malaysian schools a little harder to take. The racial divide between Malaysians now is greater now than it ever was when I was my daughter’s age of seven.

This mother’s comment echoes a sentiment articulated by all parents interviewed, that there is an increased racial divide in contemporary Malaysian schools. One non-Chinese parent noted that “you find less and less Chinese kids in national schools” and that this was a concern for her since “my husband and I are conscious that our children are exposed to all the races, because we have a mixed set of friends and family.”

Fiona confirmed that there is little intermingling in local schools, and that her daughter had had “no Malay friends” before she switched her to the international school. Another Malay parent explained that in the national schools, “Malays tend to stick to the Malays, Chinese tend to stick to the Chinese. But in the international school, [my son]
has all kinds of friends, you know, I think he made more Malay friends in the international school! He’s got a good mix of friends.”

When parents spoke of the racial divide in the national schools, they also referred to concerns about the increased presence of religion, which is closely associated with race. One parent was frank in her assessment: “One of the biggest factors really are the racial problems that you encounter in school. The slamming of religion down one’s throat when it’s not your religion.” Another parent refers to how her young son has experienced an increased awareness of racial and religious stereotypes:

in the national school as it is now I can see he’s beginning to understand Muslims and non-Muslims, I mean it’s good to know the difference but it should not have any bearing on how you judge people, so I’m a bit concerned with that. And that all comes back, to me, to the teaching profession. Because it’s the teaching profession who exposes the children to all this. So there is a difference you know, from before, from my time.

The theme of discouraging influences emerged out of parents’ commentary on their perceptions of the negative aspects of the local system. Parents were careful about unequivocally denouncing the public system, especially since education is closely tied to the racially charged political situation in Malaysia. Some admitted that they were being cautious about how they framed their comments, stated that some of the areas they were talking about were touchy! and told me they were aware their views might be contentious. As one parent said to me toward the end of her interview:

We try to put it politely, but sometimes the data may be offensive to certain quarters, you know? The data that you’ll get, especially when we say “No, no,
no…international school is the way to go, because most parents feel that the national schools are a bit inferior.” Wah! I’m sure that will raise a lot of emotions! But that’s what the parents feel. That’s the perception of the parents.

Parents felt that the local system did not meet their expectations in terms of curriculum, teachers, or overall standards. They also expressed concern that creativity and difference are unlikely to be recognized in a system where conformity is emphasized.

**Enabling Factors: The Social Sphere**

All of the parents interviewed expressed their views about what kind of education they want for their children, what kind of education they feel the local system offers, and how their past experiences and current situation have contributed to their decision to enroll their children in an international school. When parents referred to the practical aspects of their decision-making, they referred to several components of the experience that are influenced by social context. Notably, prior experience of studying abroad, professional and social contacts, relationship with English, and income level emerged as enabling factors in their both their thinking about and ability to make the decision.

**Education Abroad**

With the exception of one couple, all parents interviewed indicated that either they or their spouse had gone abroad to study at the tertiary level. Parents considered their dissatisfaction with the local system to be common amongst those with this realm of experience. As Jaime says, “Parents, friends, most of the parents I spoke to have been overseas as well, and we are not happy at all with our education system. And it’s the same thing that I mentioned to you, it’s not just the subject content, it’s the thinking
process, it’s all that.” Jaime speaks of parents whose own education abroad has had an influence on their own social mobility and current social sphere.

**Professional and Social Contacts**

Many of those who comprise Malaysia’s professional class have gone overseas for their higher education. Participants’ comments indicated that this experience and conversations amongst parents from the professions may have influenced their decision to send their children to an international school. Awareness through the social networking of professionals educated abroad appeared to be a factor in parents’ decision-making. Jaime says “Certain things affected me—my (business) partner already has 2 girls there” and Grace explains that “most of the parents who send their kids” to an international kindergarten are “professionals” but that “basically because if you didn’t know about it, you wouldn’t want to send your child to an international school kindergarten.”

It was evident from parents’ reflections on their conversations with friends and colleagues that the idea of sending your child to an international school would not occur to those who form the majority of Malaysian society. Grace stated that “most Malaysian parents would not know about it and would not have thought about sending their kid to an international school because it would be very expensive.” As Jaime says, “if you can’t afford then you don’t think about it.” However, for those parents who can afford it and who associate with one another in their professional and social relationships, schooling is a topic of discussion. Jaime’s comments on her interactions with other parents from her professional and social circle illustrate the role of social networking in parents’ consideration of an international school for their children. She told me how she had
“spoken to quite a few parents” who were curious about her experience sending her son to an international school, and whether they should consider it for their children. “They ask me and I encourage them. I may be biased but parents are already thinking about that, they just need some assurance you know? Especially they see your son is already there, they want to know. Just like my partner I asked him– ‘How is it?’--before I sent my son.”

**Parents’ Relationship with English**

Many parents interviewed attended local schools when English was the primary language of instruction or was just in the process of being phased out of local schools. Most parents attended university in English. All indicated that English is spoken at home, in their professional lives, and in their social circle: “English! My generation, all English. Even my family. Even ones who didn’t go overseas.” For these parents, having their children educated in English makes sense. They are familiar with the language, and with the British system of public examinations. They can help their children with their homework and guide them through the process.

Within parents’ professional and social networks, the role and importance of English emerged as a strong influence. Lau explains that English is important to professional parents, and connects it to the role of English in Malaysian society: “English is the medium or the language of knowledge, of business, of professional practices. That’s how society is structured.” Parents’ concern about the level of English in Malaysian public schools was another discouraging influence which had a role in their rejection of the local system. Rosie described her involvement with a group of Malaysian parents who had organized because of their concerns about the future of Malaysian education. This group was comprised of parents who are professionals: *remisiers,*
accountants, economists, engineers, and their particular goal was to convince the
government to retain the PPSMI policy of teaching mathematics and science in English.
They had taken their concerns to the Minister of Education, but were unsuccessful in
convincing the government not to “revert it…back to Bahasa Malaysia.” For Rosie, as for
many other parents, the level of English in local schools was a determining factor in her
decision to send her child to an international school.

**Income Level**

*First of all before you think that you must think of the affordability element. That is the common denominator.*

*If you cannot afford it you can’t even think. You agree?*(Jas)

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that language is closely tied to class, and
that the language spoken in the professional and business world is English, and the
language spoken within social circles “depends on the neighbourhood that you’re in.”
English is the social language of those in the higher income bracket, those who live in
certain neighborhoods, gated communities and condominiums. One parent expands on
this distinction amongst classes:

I guess if you’re in a more…if you’re out in a more public playground then I think
you’ll see them mix the Chinese, the English, and the Malay, because the kids that
play there have a different…different levels of society. That’s in a public
playground, everybody goes there, right? But because I live in a condo they play
in the swimming pool so everybody who lives in the condo goes to the swimming pool. So they tend to be…I mean you’ll hear some Chinese and English, or some
Mandarin actually, but mostly to communicate with each other it will be in
English.
Parents’ comments reveal a hierarchy of language that is evident on playgrounds and in homes, where middle and upper class working professionals frequently employ maids from other countries to attend to domestic chores and assist with child-rearing. An interesting reflection of the hierarchy of language in Malaysian society is the fact that English-speaking maids from the Philippines are more expensive to employ than Malay-speaking helpers from Indonesia. Another reflection on the role of language in the class dynamic is this Malay parent’s hope that her foreign maid would give her children greater exposure to the national language:

we have employed an Indonesian helper, with this real great hope that she will also speak the language so our kids will be more exposed to the language. The Malay language. But she’s taken up English! So now she speaks perfect English, so I’m back to square one.

Another parent recalls the positioning of language in her recollections of school, telling me that children and teachers at the local school in her middle-class neighbourhood all spoke English. “On the playground it was English, you used Malay really with workers, you know. For example if you wanted to go to the canteen to get your plate of rice or noodles, you would have used the Malay then, but if I had stopped a teacher in the corridor to ask a question, the question would have been in English.”

In today’s private local schools, the situation is similar. Lau explains that in local private schools, the language of conversation amongst students and teachers “is largely English” and children “have very little contact with Malay.” He presents this as a positive element of local private schools, indicating that “the benefit of sending to a private school is that instructions, day to day communications with teachers and friends are largely in
English.” According to parents in this study, English is an important aspect of their social and professional lives, and Malay is not a priority, not necessary for success, not part of daily life, you can survive without it. As Jas puts it, “If you do not know Malay, besides understanding the news or reading the Malay newspaper I don’t think you miss out on quite a lot.” Throughout the interviews parents asserted that English is the language of business and Malay is the language of government, if you need to deal with the government you can write in English first then give to the secretary and ask her to convert, you just get your staff to translate, or you get interpreters...they only charge 50 dollars [laughs].

The findings from this study reveal that parents associate language with class, level of education, income group, and professional status. Parents noted that children who are “more conversant in English than those in government schools” come from a “higher income group, higher educated family background, where English is more important and emphasized.” The parents who send their children to an international school are those who can afford to exit the local system in favor of an English language education for their children. There is an indication that language of instruction is one component of parents’ decision-making when acting on their desire to give their children the best education.

~I mean, we always want to offer our kids the best, right?~

~If I can afford it, I’ll give him the best from young. That’s what I’m doing here.~

Summary

Parents who were interviewed expressed the acquisition of specific skills as important for their children to make a smooth transition to tertiary education and beyond. Parents felt that it was important for their children to have options beyond the national
sphere once they had completed their tertiary education and were considering employment. Global mobility emerged as an option parents wanted for their children, and the globally recognized credentials offered by the international school were considered by parents as being of a higher standard than those offered locally. Parents’ dissatisfaction with the standards of the local system stemmed from their comparisons to the level of education when they were in school, and their feelings that the local system currently lacks dedicated, knowledgeable teachers, does not provide a balanced education, and does not produce graduates with high levels of communicative and analytical skills. Parents articulated their feelings that a range of skills is important for attaining success and connected their choice of an international education to their perception that a well-rounded education was not available at local schools. Parents’ concerns that government schools were not able to meet the needs of their children were reflected in their feeling that the teachers are inexperienced, are not fluent in English, and are lacking exposure. Quality of teaching staff emerged as a significant factor of influence in both the survey and interview portions of the research journey. Parents felt that local standards of education have declined, that teachers are inexperienced and poorly paid, and that overall there is a lack of passion in the teaching profession. The increasing racial homogenization in schools was a concern for parents; they felt their children would have a greater chance of establishing a sense of belonging in the diversity of an international school.

In this chapter I have presented the analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study. Included in this analysis were the narrative responses to the open-form questions on the survey, and the experiences participants shared during the interviews. Through a
hermeneutic phenomenological analysis that involved listening attentively and interpreting sensitively, I have structured the meaningful statements of experience that parents shared with me in the interview. Across the realm of the individual experiences that participants described, whether in writing or through speech, three overarching themes emerged: aspirational priorities, discouraging influences, and enabling factors. These themes have been expressed within the concept of connected experience, which acknowledges that my interpretation of these experiences arises out of the ontological assumption that the individual experience of educational choice is connected to, and informed by, relations with social, national, and global spheres of influence.
CHAPTER 6
CONNECTING AND CONCLUDING

The purpose of this study was to understand why Malaysian parents decide to send their children to an international school. Through a qualitative interpretive study, which employed the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, I conducted both a survey and interviews in my exploration of this phenomenon. I hoped to explore whether parents’ own educational experiences had informed their decision, what other factors might be involved, whether parents’ cultural or self-identities were reflected in the experience of making this decision, and what aspects of commonality or divergence can be found across the experience of Malaysians who decided to send their children to an international school.

Revisiting the Research Questions

*The heritage of the past often constrains the future...*
~Hirschman, 1972~

*Elements of Individual Experience*

With the first question posed in this study, I aimed to discover what elements of Malaysian parents’ own educational experiences were influential in their decision. While parents’ own educational experiences were diverse—they had been educated in various states, decades, and languages—across the interviews and survey data there was a unifying indication that parents had at some point been educated in English, studied in Britain, or received a British qualification. Through my initial readings on and informal knowledge of the Malaysian school system I was peripherally aware of the British colonial influence on the nation’s educational history. The findings of this study brought
this awareness into sharper focus. In discussing their experiences, parents described educational histories that spoke to the role of English during the British system of colonial times, the shift away from the language during the nation’s post-independent phase, and the renewed imperative for English fluency in the current global context. Considering the frequency and intensity of these findings, I will discuss the role of English in each of these contexts.

**Colonial Role of English**

Parents’ consistently referenced an educational relationship with English that is difficult to separate from its colonial roots. In considering this component of parents’ educational experiences, I turn first to the work of Hirschman (1972, 1979, 1986), and O’Brien (1980) who researched the educational system of colonial and post-independence Malaysia. In 1972, Hirschman stated: “The effects of the colonial educational structure will continue to permeate Malayan society for a long time” (1972, p. 486). Nearly 40 years later, Hirschman’s words illuminate the findings of my research: the attitudes of parents in this study are frequently situated in relation to the colonial structures which have influenced their individual lives and social experiences.

During the colonial era, English-medium schools were available predominantly in urban centres. While the racial composition of these schools was generally mixed, there is no indication that the colonial government intended the schools as a venue for racial integration. Rather, the goal of the urban, English-medium schools was to provide clerks for the colonial bureaucracy (Hirschman, 1972) and to groom Malay elites for privileged entry into colonial administrative roles (Kandasamy & Santhiram, 1999). Regardless of race, students who attended colonial English-medium schools were poised for greater
educational, social, and economic mobility than students who attended vernacular schools.

Educational opportunities prior to independence were not equal, and location was a significant factor in creating inequality along rural and urban lines. Malays lived in predominantly rural areas and attended Malay-language primary schools. Secondary schools were mostly in urban centres, and were either English or Chinese medium; most of the secondary enrollment was in English language schools (Hirschman, 1972). The geographical divide contributed to cleavages along ethnic lines, since most Malays were agricultural and non-Malays were more likely to live in towns. Hirschman’s study concludes that “the colonial education structure which offered secondary education only in urban English schools resulted in a situation where geographic and language barriers kept most Malay students from higher educational achievement” (1972, p. 500). In the nation’s post-independent phase, policies were implemented in an effort to offset the inequalities created during colonial rule.

**Role of English in Post-Independence Malaysia**

According to Hirschman, “the post-Independence era in Peninsular Malaysia was one of major reductions in educational inequality between regions, ethnic communities, and the sexes” (1979, p. 82). Initially, English was retained as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, and the addition of a Malay secondary stream eliminated the Malay disadvantage in entering secondary schools, where formerly the sole language of instruction was English. In 1979, Hirschman noted the ethnic antagonisms that accompanied growing Malay participation in education; the Chinese and Indian populations felt that they were being disadvantaged. Parents in this study referenced
similar frustrations. Contained in the theme of *discouraging influences* were attitudes that revealed non-Malay dissatisfaction with the assimilationist post-independence policies such as the 1967 Language Act. This act stipulated that the changeover from English to Malay be complete in primary schools by 1976 and in secondary schools by 1982. When the national system became unilingual, demand for Chinese primary schools surged (Azirah Hashim, 2009). The dissatisfaction of parents in this study can be traced to the nationalist policies meant to counterbalance the systemic inequalities of colonialism. In the years following the implementation of the Malay-medium policy, the Malaysian government alternately rejected English as a colonial legacy and promoted it as an international necessity. As Azira Hashim points out, “in Malaysia, as in other countries that were colonized, there has been the constant need to promote national languages for national and ethnic unity, and at the same time the need to have English for communication in a globalized world” (Azirah Hashim, 2009, p. 40). The parents in this study expressed frustration with the repeated flip-flopping of the government, identifying the government’s indecision about the language of instruction for mathematics and science as a significant reason for not selecting a local school for their children. Parents’ concerns about the reversion to Malay for mathematics and science are reflected in Azirah Hashim’s commentary (p. 48):

> Enforcing a national language as the sole medium of instruction makes sense as long as it is practicable and as long as the goal is a common identity and social integration. Otherwise, enforcing such a language will quickly appear to be a chauvinistic attempt at ignoring other languages which will then result in social disintegration instead.
The fears raised by parents in my research are confirmed by recent figures indicating that the division amongst races has worsened and the “races” are increasingly self-segregating (Azirah Hashim, 2009, p. 39). Her proposal that the education system has led more to diversity than unity, and that it needs to be reviewed, is also echoed in the words of parents in this study.

**English in the Global Context**

International schools in Malaysia today are similarly positioned to the English-medium schools of the colonial era: they are institutions available predominantly to urban elites. In the months after data collection for this study was completed, the government announced that it would reverse the PPSMI policy, and with effect from 2012, English will no longer be the language of instruction for mathematics and science. In light of these findings and current developments, it will be interesting to observe whether increased numbers of urban Malaysians choose to exit the local system in favor of international schools. If those parents who can afford to exit the national system are doing so in favour of an international, English-language curriculum which they believe will present their children with an advantage, what are the implications for students seemingly “left behind” in the government schools, in an environment of heightened racial, religious, and linguistic homogeneity? In the eyes of parents in this study, children in local schools might have greater opportunities nationally, such as for government jobs and scholarships, but they may not have the same advantages for success in both the national and global spheres.
Other Influential Factors

The second purpose of this research was to identify other influential factors which impacted parents’ decision-making. In this section, I return to the findings from the surveys and interviews. The survey findings are discussed in relation to the existing studies on international school choice, and the three themes which emerged from the findings are considered in relation to relevant literature on school choice in national and international contexts.

Malaysia in the Realm of International School Choice

Within the limited body of international school choice literature, parents’ selection of an international school for their children has been expressed through an exploration of specific factors. The addition of Malaysian perspectives to this growing field of research reveals that there are patterns emerging across countries and continents. In Israel, Switzerland, Japan, Argentina, and now Malaysia, parents who choose an international school for their children have consistently identified specific factors as important to their decision to send their children to an international school. By incorporating the results from my research it is possible to synthesize the top-ranked factors of the survey portions of existing studies and summarize them thus: parents who have selected an international school for their children want highly qualified teachers, an internationally recognized curriculum, an English-language education, a school with high academic standards, and for their children to be happy at a school that makes a good impression when visited (Ezra, 2007; MacKenzie et al., 2003; MacKenzie, 2009; Potter & Hayden, 2004). This congruence of desires amongst diverse groups of parents suggests
that the markers of cultural capital, such as values and aspirations in regards to education, could be homogenizing on a global scale.

**Returning to the Three Themes**

**Aspirational Priorities**

When examined within the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2, Malaysian parents’ expression of aspirational priorities for their children’s education can be perceived to be an articulation of their desire for their children to acquire social and cultural capital.

The social behaviours, language skills, and inter-cultural attitudes which parents linked to *exposure* in this study can be linked to a form of capital which Weenink (2008) expresses as cosmopolitan capital. According to Weenink, cosmopolitan capital is “a propensity to engage in globalizing social areas” and that it “comprises bodily and mental predispositions and competencies (savoir faire) which help to engage confidently in such arenas. Moreover, it provides a competitive edge, a head start” (2008, p. 1092). In his study of Dutch parents whose children attend an internationalized stream of education within the public national system, Weenink identifies two types of cosmopolitans: dedicated and pragmatic. Dedicated cosmopolitans are those who have experienced foreign cultures, believe in the importance of an open mind, and want to transfer this value to their children. Flexibility and an ability to feel at ease with foreign cultural contexts were traits valued by the parents whom Weenink categorized as dedicated cosmopolitans. Pragmatic cosmopolitans were those who framed the advantages of an international education in terms of the future academic and professional benefits an international education might afford their children. Particularly the benefits of an
English-language education were stressed by pragmatic cosmopolitans. Both groups expressed an awareness of the impact of globalization on national social arenas and were ambitious for their children.

The findings from my study provide an interesting source for discussion within Weenink’s conceptualization of cosmopolitanism. All of the Malaysian parents I interviewed had some connection, whether through their educational or professional experiences, to the global sphere, and wanted their children to have exposure. Parents saw exposure as key in the development of open-mindedness, confidence in inter-cultural groups, and adaptability. Parents like Jas, who hoped his children would be citizens of the world, fit the definition of dedicated cosmopolitans; they expect their children to employ acquired cosmopolitan competencies in the global sphere. Malaysian parents who valued the transferable academic qualifications and English language proficiency offered by an international education would be considered more pragmatic cosmopolitans. According to Weenink’s conceptualization, the aspirational priorities voiced by Malaysian parents can be interpreted as a desire to provide their children with the cosmopolitan capital required for upward social mobility in a competitive and globalizing environment.

Discouraging Influences

Weenink suggests that we “regard cosmopolitanism as an expression of agency, which is acted out when people are forced to cope with the cosmopolitan condition when it enters their personal lives” (Weenink, 2008, p. 1103). He also suggests that cosmopolitan capital “may take various forms, depending on the social arena in which it is activated” (p. 1103). Contained in the theme of discouraging influences which emerged from the findings of this study is parents’ feeling of being disconnected from various
aspects of the local educational system. The incongruous relationship between parents’
own experiences and the values embedded in the current local system was a contributing
influence in parents’ decision to select an international education for their children. In
this way, their decision to opt-out of the national system can be interpreted as an
expression of agency. For ethnic minority families, this decision is particularly laden with
meaning. Once their children reach secondary school in the national system, they are
obliged to pursue their education in the national language, Malay. For these families, the
ability to actively select an education in English can be considered an act of agency or
even resistance in a country where their own languages are considered peripheral.

**Enabling Factors**

*In the end, parental choice cannot be separated from the experiences,
relationships, and environments that constitute and constrain the lives and
opportunities of different groups of parents and their families.*

*(Robenstine, 2001, p. 241)*

The emergence of this theme is unsurprising when examined in light of the work
of school choice scholars in various national contexts. In the UK, researchers have noted
the importance of knowledge amongst peers and social networks in relation to secondary
school choice (Ball & Vincent, 1998) and framed such personal recommendations and
knowledge as “cultural and social capital embedded in the upper echelons of the middle
classes” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 153). In the US, studies indicate that middle and upper
middle class parents use a variety of sources of information in making their decisions,
including recommendations from family and peers (Bulman, 2004). Social context
emerged as an enabling factor in Malaysian parents’ experience of making the decision to
send their children to an international school. Like choosers in the UK and US studies,
Malaysian parents “shopped for options” by taking advice from those in their social and professional networks, consulting the internet, visiting schools, and considering schools which were “affordable” to them and which matched their values and preferences. Ogawa and Dutton (1994) found that for US parents, dissatisfaction with their children’s school played a role in their decision to exercise school choice. Malaysian parents in this study also expressed dissatisfaction as a shared motivation for their choice. As business people and professionals who tend to associate within social and professional circles, professional status and level of income were suggested as indicators of whether parents would be aware of or considering an international school. Various forms of capital enable people to envision and make choices, while for those in limited social networks “improbable practices are rejected as unthinkable and only a limited range of practices is possible” (Reay et al., 2005, p. 24).

If you can’t afford, Grace says, then you don’t think about it.

If you cannot afford it, Jas says, you can’t even think about it.

Certainly, discussions amongst parents within their social and professional networks were influential in their consideration of an international school for their children. This privileging of certain forms of knowledge and the circulation of information within exclusive social spheres reinforces the notion that school choice is a reproductive act, frequently enacted by those who are capable of activating and deploying advantageous forms of cultural and social capital. Within a framework of reproduction, choice can be interpreted as an act of reproduction or rejection: individuals may be consciously or unconsciously reproducing or rejecting their own educational histories.

**Cultural and Self-Identities**
In the third research question I considered how parents’ cultural or self-identities were reflected in the experience of making this decision. Hermeneutic phenomenology was essential across the study, but especially in the exploration of parents’ cultural identities in relation to their lived experience of making this decision. The individual histories of the parents in this study were complex. I spoke to men and women of similar economic means, but who were from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, a range of age groups, and diverse religious, social, and class origins. They came from different parts of the country: large cities, small towns, suburbs, and villages. Those who disclosed their religious associations declared that they had been raised or were raising their children in various religious traditions: Hindus, Catholics, Buddhists, and Muslims.

Considering the diversity of the parental population who participated in this research, I was intrigued by the unified stance their common decision might symbolize. Perhaps it is best expressed by Lowe, who states that “national culture and identity are likely to take second place to economic advantage when individuals make educational decisions” (Lowe, 1999, p. 328).

Based on the results of my research, I came to understand that notions of culture in the minds of the Malaysian parents with whom I spoke were embodied in reified forms of specific family rituals, dietary habits, and religion. Parents did not feel that their children’s cultural heritage would be compromised by an international education. When asked about culture, Malaysian parents did not consider an international school to be representative of cultural forms that might disrupt their children’s own sense of culture and identity. Rather, parents indicated that the habits of culture and identity that they felt to be important would be taken care of at home and were separate from an international
education. Parents did not directly associate the forms of cultural capital embodied in their aspirational priorities for their children with their own definitions of cultural forms or identity. The cosmopolitan behaviours and skills they hoped their children would acquire were not deemed to be incompatible with their own sense of being Malaysian.

As with MacKenzie’s findings in Japan, while “there is often much hand-wringing on the part of those who work in international schools as they fret that the ‘international education’ they offer is too Western, too American, too European” this may not be a concern that parents share: “an hour spent talking to each of the mothers quoted above left the present writer in little doubt that an education that is Western or American or European is precisely what they wanted for their children” (MacKenzie, 2009, pp. 335). Similarly, other studies (e.g. Ezra, 2004; Potter & Hayden, 2004) indicate host national parents’ perceptions that the confines of identity are less porous in a national system, and that identities can be established in more fluid terms in the international sphere. Malaysian parents constructed their decision in reference to a perceived lack of meritocracy in the local system and saw the international system as offering a level playing field. As Dehli points out: “Within unequally structured material and social conditions parents draw on and construct different cultural scripts to constitute their identities and community memberships and to make claims on schools” (1996, p. 85). In Malaysia, ethnic pluralism, educational duality, and global influences exert pressures on parents in complicated ways.

**Connecting the Cultural to the Social, National and Global Spheres**

Bulman defines culture as the “lens through which people make sense of the social world” (2004, p. 493). Arguably, the cultural lens of contemporary Malaysians is
still affected by colonialism. In the colonial era, children who attended English schools “were educated in the language in which the realities of the colonial economy and society were transmitted” (O’Brien, 1980, p. 58). “Those from the most privileged socio-economic backgrounds were the most likely to attend schools using this medium, and were thus the most well equipped for participation in the colonial economy. Privilege was thus transferred from one generation to the next” (O’Brien, 1980, p. 57). The decision of Malaysian parents, for whom an English language education may have conferred individual or familial advantage, should be considered in light of and perhaps also directly linked to Britain’s colonial enterprise. In view of Bulman’s findings on the role of culture in school choice, and his assertion that the specific lived experiences of parents play a role in their school choices, there seems to be a strong argument for the connection of contemporary choices to a culturally colonial past.

Hirschman asserts that the majority of the adult population in Malaysia in 1972 had been “conditioned by their educational experiences during the colonial era” (1972, p. 486). Some of the parents in this study recalled having British teachers; others were the children of parents educated during the colonial era; many indicated that their teachers were British or colonial-educated. During the colonial era “English-medium schools were the primary avenue of social mobility” and “English was the basic language of colonial administration during British rule” (1979, p. 69). One could easily rewrite these thoughts in contemporary terms. Parents in this study continue to regard English-medium schools as an avenue for social mobility and prosperity in an economy dominated by neoliberal policies and globalizing forces. While globalization has been referenced as a determining factor in school choice (e.g. Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008), the findings of my study
also suggest the reproductive power of historical influence. I understand the reproductive component of this relationship to be the enduring power of an English-medium education to confer advantage on those with financial resources. But as Bulman (2004) points out, choice cannot be explained solely by access to financial resources; the role of culture is deeply embedded in the decision-making process. Economic capital is a source of power for individuals within and across societies; however, social and cultural capital influence the degree to which that economic capital is mobilized.

Connections and Divergence

In the early iterations of this research, I made assumptions about the role of the 2006 policy shift on the increased numbers of Malaysians at international schools. I connected the public excitement to the promise the announcement contained: the prestigious pull of an internationally recognized credential. Lowe (2000) examines trends of credentialism in English-medium international education and acknowledges the global intensification of individual competition for prestigious educational credentials. Prestigious qualifications are those which are not available to everyone; it is the inaccessibility which heightens the prestige. The greater the prestige, the more privilege and advantage the credential offers. As institutions attempt to elevate their status amongst consumers, and their market competitiveness, they frequently follow the path of accreditation. Accreditation models provide benchmarks and standards by which quality can be measured and assured (Lowe, 2000). By conforming to standards which define what they are, and simultaneously distancing themselves from what they are not, international schools are able to establish a niche for themselves in an expanding and competitive market. International school qualifications are prized because they are
globally recognized, and facilitate the global credentialism which grants access to prestigious institutions (Lowe, 2000). To some extent, this assumption has been borne out in the findings: parents articulated the strand of recognition as a component of their decision. However, the data suggests that local push factors, or discouraging influences, are more strongly associated with the decision to send their children to an international school. For the parents in this study, the desire for an education that fulfilled specific aspirational priorities for their children was present prior to the 2006 policy shift that relaxed government approval criteria. The shift in policy was not a motivation for their decision, but an enabling factor that allowed parents to animate their desire.

Within the discourse around public schooling and choice in Malaysia are claims similar to those in the United States and the United Kingdom. According to Robenstine (2001), proponents of school choice policies have asserted that contemporary public schooling in America is ineffective and inefficient, reform is needed, and school choice reform is the best way of ensuring that parents and children have access to the education they value. Frequently cited in the American school choice literature is the work of Chubb and Moe (1990) who present market-driven school choice policies as a solution to inequity and inefficiency. In Malaysia, the children who attend international schools comprise a unique segment of the Malaysian population. Their parents are both financially able and ideologically willing to enact the right to choose, as embodied in the International Covenant on Human Rights, and to make a choice which enhances social prestige—an English-medium education. The United Nations 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights gives all parents the right to choose the kind of education they want for their children (Stromquist, 2005). In theory, the
Covenant supports the essential freedom of parental choice, but in practice it could also serve to further segment educational systems into two spheres: public and private. As Forsey, Davies and Walford (2008) point out, school choice policies often are not benign; significant gaps tend to emerge between rhetoric and practice. These gaps can be read as the deepening of inequalities between individuals who do and do not have the economic capital to improve their educational status through access to “quality” education.

Dehli (1996) observes that school choice policies are mobile, but are manifest differently across locales and groups:

Today, more privileged groups of parents, whose access to good jobs and comfortable lifestyles were closely linked to education, feel threatened. Thus it is not surprising that the schools have become a battleground for precisely these groups. Nor is it surprising that many of their claims make use of notions such as local democracy and accountability, while framing their criticism and proposals in terms of transnational market discourses. (p. 83)

My findings indicate that Malaysian parents in this study are also similar to the Ontario middle-class and professional parents in Dehli’s study, “who advocate for choice based on individual and competitive forms of consumption and have “adopted a cultural script of consumer democracy in relation to education” (p. 83). The commodification of education, fueled by competitive neoliberal choice policies, has produced global imperatives for the acquisition of credentials deemed prestigious by market-driven notions of a quality education.

The findings from this study suggest that not only do Malaysian parents have individual reasons for making this decision, but that shared experiences are common
amongst this group. Parents who make the choice share certain characteristics, such as (1) they have frequently been educated abroad (2) they speak English as a home, social or professional language (3) they are professionals or business people, and (4) they can afford the fees. It is not the intention of this study to identify causality or make claims that the findings are generalizable beyond the context of this particular phenomenon. Neither can I make claims that the sample-size of my study is representative of all Malaysian parents who exercise international school choice. However, given the consistent nature of the findings across all data sources, their relationship to the broader spectrum of school choice literature, and the consistent quantitative indications that enrolments in Malaysian international schools are increasing, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that neither are the findings of this study aberrant or isolated. This study offers an introductory exploration of the factors of influence, and further research into this phenomenon would be necessary to ascertain more about the scope and extent of this relationship.

**Directions for Future Research**

One might ask the question whether choosing an international school education both values and sustains global neoliberal ideals, and simultaneously dismisses and devalues local educational and cultural contexts. One might also ask the question whether the local education system in Malaysia truly represents the ideals of all Malaysians. Based on the findings from this study, certain individuals and groups expressed a sense that they are being excluded from full participation in the national system and feel that they have no choice but to look outside the national sphere to accommodate their educational needs and desires. Several potential directions for further investigation are
suggested by the findings from this study.

The voices not heard are those who did not make the choice. This raises an important opportunity for further investigation, especially in light of the theory of reproduction. People are unlikely to choose what they do not know, what they cannot access, or what they do not value. Another counterpoint to this study would be an examination of the perceptions of Malaysian parents who are financially able but not ideologically in favour of an international education, and who have actively elected not to exit the local system. Other perspectives for consideration would be those of Malaysian children who have attended both a local and an international school: how do they articulate their experiences? Finally, parents in this study equated the offerings of the local system as incompatible with their definition of a quality education, and this raises concerns about the future directions of Malaysian national education in a globalizing world.

**Concluding Thoughts**

What are the implications when parents who can afford to remove their children from Malaysian public schools and place them in a private international system? In many cases across the globe, choice has meant seeking privately funded alternatives to publicly funded education. Stratification and inequality are not absent in the Malaysian public system\(^8\), but the results from this study raise questions about how further inequities may be perpetuated as parents who have the means to opt out of the public system are electing to do so. This study provides evidence of perceived discord between the values that are dominant in national schools and the values held by those who are mobilizing their means.

in pursuit of an international education. Those who are in a financial position to make the choice presented a picture of international schools as promoting open-mindedness, and national schools as emphasizing the promotion of the national language and narrow political interests. Parents whose children are from ethnic minorities or are racially mixed articulate feeling sidelined by the national system. That the economic stratification in the country is associated with racial and religious lines highlights additional reasons for considering the long-term implications of what this study reveals.

The epistemological assumptions which underpin my understanding of this phenomenon are embedded in the notion that an individual’s lived experience is constantly informed and reformed by the society in which one lives, and that society is also informed and reformed by the cumulative response of individual experiences and reactions. In many contexts, education is an orchestrated, ubiquitous, and instrumental social influence; Malaysia is no exception. By asking participants about their own educational background I hoped to unravel whether participants’ individual educational experiences were in any way influential in their decision to send their own children to an international school. As the findings reveal, parents repeatedly connected their individual values and educational experiences to their aspirations for their children.

In summary, Malaysian parents keen to investigate their school choice options can be perceived to be acting on experiences forged in each of the four spheres of influence: individual, social, national, and global. Parents’ individual experiences of being educated in English either locally or abroad, their experiences of feeling socially excluded from the values being upheld in the national system, and their closer affinity to the cosmopolitan values of exposure and open-mindedness are those being promoted on a larger scale, in a
context highly influenced by the forces of globalization and the demand for prestigious credentials in a competitive global market. For the Malaysian parents in this study, the decision to send their children to an international school is fraught with the complexity of individual experience, social history, national pressure and global aspirations.
REFERENCES


Fernandez Kelly, P. (2002). Commentary: Uses and misuses of social capital in studying school attainment. In B. Fuller & E. Hannum (Eds.), *Schooling and social capital in diverse cultures* (pp. 73—83). New York: JAI.


schools. *International Schools Journal, 20*(2), 57—64.


APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

**Warming up**

How many children do you have?
Are all of your children in an international school?
How old were they when you first enrolled them?

**Realms of influence & experience:**

How much discussion did you have about whether you would send your child to an international school?
What kinds of conversations did you have about where you would send your child to school?
Of the two of you, you and your partner, who felt more strongly about which school would be better?
Who else, if anyone, influenced your decision to send your child to an international school?
What factors were important to you in deciding to put your child in an international school?

**Educational Experiences**

We’ve been talking about your children’s education. With your permission, I’d like to ask you about your own educational background.
Where did you receive your education?
How would you describe your own education?
Was your education similar to those of your generation and geographical location?
In what way might your own educational background have influenced your decision to send your child to an international school?

**Social influences and experiences**

Thank you for your answers about your educational background. I’d like to turn now to the perception of international schools in Malaysia.
What do you think is the general perception of international schools is in Malaysia?
What kinds of things do your friends or family members have to say about international schools in general?
Would you say that most of your friends’ children are in local schools or international schools?
How about your children’s cousins or other family members?
Do your friends or family comment about the fact that your children are in international school?
APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

continued

In your experience, why do you think people choose to remove their children from local schools and put them in an international school?

Issues of Culture

How has the fact that your child is studying at an international school influenced the kinds of friends that he/she has?
Some people have said that international schools produce different types of students than local schools. Is this your experience?
I have heard some people say that they have had things said to them, concerns about maintaining their religion, or language, or culture, because their children are in an international school. Have you experienced that? To what extent?

Final Questions

Suppose I was a parent with children in a local school, and I asked you whether I should move my children to an international school. What would you tell me about the experience of making such a choice?
Is there anything we haven’t touched on today that you would like to add?
What should I have asked you that I didn’t think to ask?
APPENDIX B

Ethical Approval

April 2, 2009

Marcia Ingersoll
Master’s Student
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University

GREB Ref #  GEDUC-438-09
Title: “Understanding Parental Intentions Relating to International School Choice in Malaysia”

Dear Ms. Ingersoll:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a delegated board review, has cleared your proposal entitled “Understanding Parental Intentions Relating to International School Choice in Malaysia” for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen’s ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to the E-REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (details available on webpage www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addrforms.htm#Adverse ). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures on the Ethics Change Form that can be found at http://www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/addrforms.htm#Change. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRIDL@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will forward your request for protocol changes to the appropriate GREB reviewers and / or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

JS/If

copies: Chair E-REB: Don Klinger
Faculty Supervisor: Sheryl Bond
Graduate Studies & Bureau of Research: Celina Freitas
**APPENDIX C: SURVEY**

**Letter of Information: please read then move to the next page.**

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education program at Queen's University, Ontario, Canada. The purpose of my study is to examine the reasons Malaysian parents have for choosing an international school over a local school, and whether these personal reasons are connected to larger social and global influences. My research begins in May 2009 and ends April 2010. There are two options for participation: 1) Survey only or 2) Survey & Interview.

Option 1. SURVEY: Survey responses will be entirely anonymous and cannot be traced back to individual respondents. Option 2. SURVEY & INTERVIEWS: If you agree to participate in both portions of the research, you may complete the survey as well as an interview of approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is mutually convenient, in May 2009, in Kuala Lumpur. If you are not available for interview in May, Skype, video conference, or any other type of communication that allows for both voice and picture may be arranged. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed by me. The time required for your participation in this research should not exceed 2 hours: 30 minutes survey and 90 minutes interview. None of the data collected for this study will contain your name, or the identity of the school to which you have decided to send your child. The school will be identified using a pseudonym only. I will take the necessary measures to ensure confidentiality. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. The data will be used for research purposes and will not be used to evaluate you in any way. Data will be kept confidential and will be accessible only to the researcher and to the thesis supervisor. Survey responses, data files and transcripts will be stored securely at all times. Paper responses will be stored in my personal secure locker at Queen's University. Electronic files with data will be held on the researcher's personal computer and be password-protected. All data will be deleted after 5 years. I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. You are not obligated to answer any question you find objectionable or that you are uncomfortable with, and you are assured that no information collected will be available to anyone other than me and my thesis supervisor. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study without any reasons at any point. Because survey responses are anonymous, once submitted they cannot be removed from the data because there is no way to connect responses to particular individuals. For interview data, you may contact the researcher by email to request removal of all or part of your interview data at any time. This research may result in the formulation of a master's thesis, in publications of various types, including journal articles, and conference presentations. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide, neither will your name or the identity of the school be known to anyone analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board. If you agree to participate in Option 1, your decision to submit the survey will be interpreted as an indication of your consent. If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Marcia Ingersoll, at (1) 613-533-6000 ext. 75952 (marcia.ingersoll@queensu.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Sheryl Bond, at (1) 613-533-6000 ext. 36269 (shrb@queensu.ca). If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

1. Please indicate that you have read the above letter of information and understand that by completing the survey you consent for your responses to be included in this research. Your responses are completely anonymous and cannot be traced back to you.

   - [ ] Check to Continue

---

**Survey for parents of children at an international school in Malaysia.**

Please answer questions as fully as possible. If you do not want to answer, you may leave the question blank. Your answers are entirely anonymous.

2. I am the child's

   - [ ] Mother
   - [ ] Father
   - [ ] Step-mother
   - [ ] Step-father
   - [ ] Guardian
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

3. What is the nationality of

   - [ ] Malaysian
   - [ ] Non-Malaysian

   - [ ] You
   - [ ] Other parent/guardian
   - [ ] Your child or
   - [ ] children

If non-Malaysian, what nationality?
4. How many children do you have?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Local school- Government or Private (Primary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Local school- Government or Private (Secondary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In International School (Primary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In International School (Secondary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In college or university in Malaysia?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In college or university overseas?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. What language(s) do you speak? Check all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Myself</th>
<th>Other parent</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Other languages (please list)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Tamil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents' Educational Background

The information in this section helps me to understand more about parents who choose an international school for their children.

6. Your educational background (Check all that apply):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Local/government/public school</th>
<th>Private fee-paying school</th>
<th>International School</th>
<th>In Malaysia</th>
<th>In another country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary/Tertiary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please add any information not covered above (e.g. homeschooling/ country you studied in)

7. What was the language of instruction when you were at school? Check all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary/Tertiary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other (please give details)

Choosing an International School

This section asks why you chose an international school for your child or children.
8. How important were these factors in choosing an international school for your child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Slightly Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School reputation for strong academics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A desire for my child(ren) to have an international education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not want my child to go to a local school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parents recommended this school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum and examinations are recognized internationally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want my child to be a global citizen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable fees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of teaching staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller class sizes than local schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extracurricular activities available</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We live near the school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted my child(ren) to study in English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child(ren)’s friends go to this school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This school has a good mix of children from different backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please comment on anything not covered above

9. Please select THREE factors which were the MOST IMPORTANT for you in your decision to send your child to an international school.

Most Important Factors

1. 
2. 
3.

Other (please specify)
10. Please describe your experience in making the decision to send your child to an international school in Malaysia.

11. Did you register your child in an international school after the Malaysian government changed the restrictions on Malaysian enrolments at international schools in 2006?
   - Yes
   - No

12. Did the changes in 2006, regarding approval for Malaysians to study in an international school, have any influence on your decision?
   - Yes
   - No

13. If your child is Malaysian, please describe your experience gaining approval for your child to study at an international school in Malaysia.
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

15. I would like to interview parents of Malaysian children. Are you willing to participate in an interview about your decision to enrol your child in an international school? Your responses would be entirely confidential.

☐ Yes
☐ No

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, please contact me at Marcea.Ingersoll@queensu.ca or fill out the form at www.surveymalaysia.webs.com

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.
APPENDIX D

Recruitment Letter

Dear Parents,

My name is Marcea Ingersoll and I am currently a graduate student in the Master of Education program at Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada. I am looking for participants for my thesis research, which will begin in May 2009. I am writing to inform you about my research and to request your participation. The purpose of my study is to understand why parents of Malaysian children decide to send their children to an international school. To do this, I would like to conduct a survey and interviews.

**Surveys: 30 minutes**
*Your responses will be completely anonymous.* There are two ways to complete the survey:

1. **Online at:** [http://surveymalaysia.webs.com](http://surveymalaysia.webs.com)
   
   or

2. **Paper:** Complete the attached survey. Please seal the survey in the envelope provided. In order to protect the confidentiality of your responses, please do not put your name on the survey. Please put the survey in the drop box marked “Surveys” in the school bookshop.

**Interviews: 90 minutes**
I would like to conduct confidential interviews with parents of Malaysian children attending an international school. If you are interested in being an interview participant, please email me at marcea.ingersoll@queensu.ca or complete the Interview Contact Form at [http://surveymalaysia.webs.com](http://surveymalaysia.webs.com)

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I thank you in advance for your participation.

Yours sincerely,

Marcea Ingersoll
APPENDIX E

Letter of Information and Consent

May 1, 2009

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Understanding Parental Intentions Relating to International School Choice in Malaysia

Dear Parents,

My name is Marcea Ingersoll and I am currently a graduate student in the Master of Education program at Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada. I am looking for participants for my thesis research, which will begin in May 2009. I am writing to inform you about my research and to request your participation.

The purpose of my study is to examine the reasons Malaysian parents have for choosing an international school over a local school, and whether these personal reasons are connected to larger social and global influences. My research will take place over the course of one year beginning in May 2009 and ending in April 2010.

To gather the necessary data, I will first conduct a brief survey and then conduct interviews. There are two options for participation: (1) Survey only or (2) Survey & Interview

Option 1. SURVEY: If you agree to participate in the survey portion of this research, you may complete either a web-based version of the survey or a paper format. Your survey responses will be entirely anonymous. Survey responses cannot be traced back to individual respondents. The survey will take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey is available at:
http:// surveymalaysia.webs.com OR
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=JX_2frm4FYvZOQ6nxymTTdLg_3d_3d

Option 2. SURVEY & INTERVIEWS: If you agree to participate in both portions of the research, you will complete the survey, as described above, as well as an interview of approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is mutually convenient. In-person interviews can be arranged in May 2009, in Kuala Lumpur. If you are not available for in-person interviews in May, Skype, video conference, or any other type of communication that allows for both voice and picture may be arranged. The interviews will be audio-taped. In addition, I will take brief notes consisting of key words so that I do not distract the interviewee. The taped interviews
will be transcribed by me, and the audio-tape will be destroyed five years after the research has ended. If you elect for Option 2, the time required for your participation in this research should not exceed 2 hours: 30 minutes survey and 90 minutes interview.

None of the data collected for this study will contain your name, or the identity of the school to which you have decided to send your child. The school will be identified using a pseudonym only. I will take the necessary measures to ensure confidentiality. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. The data will be used for research purposes and will not be used to evaluate you in any way. Data will be kept confidential and will be accessible only to the researcher and to the thesis supervisor. Survey responses, data files and transcripts will be stored securely at all times. Paper responses will be stored in the researcher’s personal secure locker at the Queen’s Faculty of Education. Only the researcher has access to this locker. Electronic files with data will be held on the researcher’s personal computer and be password-protected. All transcripts will be destroyed and all electronic files will be deleted after 5 years.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. You are not obligated to answer any question you find objectionable or that you are uncomfortable with, and you are assured that no information collected will be available to anyone other than me and my thesis supervisor. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study without any reasons at any point. Because survey responses are anonymous, once submitted they cannot be removed from the data because there is no way to connect responses to particular individuals. For interview data, you may contact the researcher by email to request removal of all or part of your interview data at any time.

This research may result in the formulation of a master’s thesis, in publications of various types, including journal articles, and conference presentations. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide, neither will your name or the identity of the school be known to anyone analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed.

This research has been cleared by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board. If you agree to participate in Option 1, your decision to submit the survey will be interpreted as an indication of your consent. If you agree to participate in Option 2, please sign the attached consent form, and return it to me at your earliest convenience.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Marcea Ingersoll, at (1) 613-533-6000 ext. 75952 (marcea.ingersoll@queensu.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Sheryl Bond,(1) 613-533-6000 ext. 36260 (slb2@queensu.ca). If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at er eb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Marcea Ingersoll
CONSENT FORM

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the study *Understanding Parental Intentions Relating to International School Choice in Malaysia* and agree to participate in the study. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study. I understand that the purpose of the study is to understand why parents choose to enroll their children in an international school in Malaysia rather than a local school. I understand that there are no known risks, discomforts or inconveniences associated with participation in the research study. I understand that confidentiality will be protected by appropriate storage of and access to data and by the use of pseudonyms. I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and request removal of all or part of my data, without consequences.

I am aware that I can contact the researcher, Marcea Ingersoll at 613-533-6000 ext. 75952 (6mli@queensu.ca) or her supervisor Dr. Sheryl Bond, 613-533-6000 ext. 36260 (slb2@queensu.ca) if I have any questions about this project. If I have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, I may contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I am aware that I have 2 options for participation in this study. I agree to participate in:

- **Option (1) Survey only.**
  - I am willing to participate in the survey.
  - I may complete the survey in either web-based or paper format.
  - My responses will be anonymous.
  - The time required is approximately 30 minutes.
  - I will keep this consent form for my records; I do not need to sign it.
  - My decision to complete and return the survey will be interpreted as an indication of my consent to participate in Option 1.

- **Option (2) Survey & Interview:**
  - I am willing to participate in both the survey and the interview.
  - The interview will be held either in person, by telephone, or via Skype.
  - The interviews will take place not before May 2009 and not after April 2010.
  - I have been informed that the interviews will last approximately 90 minutes and will be audio-taped.
  - The total time required for Option 2 will be no more than 2 hours—30 minutes for the survey and 90 minutes for the interview.
If you agree to Option 2 please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Marcea Ingersoll. Retain the second copy for your records.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant’s name (Please print):
Participant’s signature: _____________________________.
Date: _____________________________.

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

******************************************************************************

To complete the survey online, go to:
http://www.surveymalaysia.webs.com
APPENDIX F

Sample Transcript

*Transcription of Interview with “Grace”*
*Date: May 23, 2009*
*Folder 10*
*Duration: 1 hour, 3 minutes, 42s*
*Location: Coffee Shop in Bangsar Village*
*Participant: Mother*
*Pseudonym: Grace*
*Interviewer: Marcea Ingersoll (MLI)*

Did not want copy of transcript. Prelude to questioning/protocol

MLI: How I have liked to start the interview is asking about parent’s educational background. Where did you start your school days?

G1: I studied in Assunta Primary School, both Primary and Secondary, then I did my Grade 13 in Toronto, then I went on to York.

MLI: So PJ, in your time, what kind of students were with you in primary school?

G2: I think if you look at it, at that time, I think the education system at that time was different, ours was the last year in English. That means that we had everything in English except for History, Geography, and Malay. So Maths and Science and everything was in English. The year after me, everything was in Malay.

MLI: The year after you finished?

G3: If someone started Standard one after me, everything was in Bahasa. I was that last batch.

MLI: How about your teachers at the time, were they mostly locals?

G4: All the teachers at the time are locals, I think you get a lot more Chinese and Indian teachers you know, like for Chemistry, because I went to the science stream, for Chemistry and Physics and Biology you had Chinese teachers, a lot of them were Chinese, and a lot of them spoke very good English because when they were schooling themselves, everything was in English. I mean if you look at my parents themselves, all them speak English, including my grandmother, which is very unusual because most Chinese families at that time would have had grandparents or even some of their parents only speaking Chinese.