



Tanarata International School, Year One, First Term: Review/comments from a parent

My son, Zachary, just completed his first term of Year 1 at Tanarata International School about a week ago. Zachary is only five years old when he entered Year 1, and I did worry whether he would be able to cope with the more academic setting of a school versus his more playtime setting at his Beaconhouse Preschool.

Last day of the school term meant a parents-teacher talk with Zachary's teacher, Mrs. Ann. This is an important meeting, not only because Zachary's report card would be given to us, but also because we could discuss Zachary's performance with his teacher.



Zachary and his class teacher of class 1B, Mrs. Ann



The last day of the school term was the parents-teacher meeting

I am glad that Mrs. Ann, Zachary's teacher, noticed Zachary's key strengths without having us to tell her about them. She found him to be very well behaved, friendly, and has no problems with social interaction. Even Zachary's love of reading was well noticed by her. No surprise then that Zachary did exceptionally well in English. My wife and I have been promoting a strong reading habit in Zachary since he was only a month old through a daily routine of reading aloud (and picking the right children books). As Mrs. Ann mentioned to us, the ability to read and a strong vocabulary are the foundation of learning, without which a child would be severely hampered in learning. My wife and I are proud of Zachary's wide range of vocabulary and his ability to describe his experiences in his own words.

Zachary did very well overall for his subjects. He scored an A for English, Science, Maths, and Mandarin. He obtained a B in both Art and Computer. However, he scored a C in swimming which is not entirely surprising because Zachary fears dipping his head in water. This something I have to teach him to overcome.



A view of Zachary's class 1B from outside



Zachary's class Year 1B

Unlike most schools, in particular Chinese schools, Tanarata do not rank the students' performances, so there is no the best student, second best student, or, *gulp*, the worst student in the class. However, the school does give out awards for the overall best student and the most improved student in school.



Tanarata's entrance to the class
rooms for Year 1 to 6



Zachary with his report
card for the first term of
Year 1

I like this non-ranking system Tanarata practices. I know parents who are obsessed that their children sent to Chinese schools rank at least Top 3 in their class every term. I very much dislike this kiasu-system style. It places pressure on the children, not to learn, but to outrank others. Good if your child is in Top 3, but what if your child is in the mid-table or in the Bottom 3? It kills your child's confidence especially at such a young age.

In Tanarata, exams are given out to students even for those in Year 1. However, for the first two terms for Year 1, the exams are less formal although the exams are still conducted to ensure that the students complete the exams on their own, without discussion with their friends. This kind of assessment would continue until the third term of Year 1. In other words, Year 1 students are gradually eased into a more formal setting of assessment or evaluation.

The Malay language is a compulsory class for all Malaysian students. In addition to Malay, the local students can choose another language class. Tanarata offers four foreign languages: Mandarin, French, Spanish, and Hindi. Zachary opted for Mandarin. Like all international schools, the level of Mandarin taught in Tanarata is rather low. Good enough for conversations, but if you wish your child to fluent

in Mandarin, you would need to enroll your child in external Mandarin classes.

The maximum number of students per class is set at 20, and there are two classes for each year. Zachary is in class 1B (the other class is 1A - again no ranking is implied in naming the classes 1A and 1B). Both classes are split rather evenly, with 16 students in Zachary's class. More than half of Zachary's classmates are local Malaysians, and the rest are from motley of countries: Korea, India, Sudan, China, and Uzbekistan.

Tanarata has a rather low student population, and it is purposely set that way for "quality rather than quantity," as one school staff mentioned to me. The classroom size is small for more personal attention by the teachers, and the school does not feel crowded. One notable point is Tanarata is more Asian-oriented, so there are significantly less students from Western or European countries. This can be an important criterion for some parents. One parent recently told my wife and I that one reason she pulled out her son from the Australian International School was because of her son could not mix well with his classmates, most of whom were not Asians.

One strong positive of Tanarata is I did not notice any cliques among students based on race or nationality. In other words, there was no cliques of only Indian, Chinese, or foreign students. I observed that Tanarata students mixed freely among themselves. English is also widely spoken among the students in sharp contrast to other so-called international schools.

Another strong positive of Tanarata is the school welcomes parents' involvement in the school activities. This is particularly true for the Halloween party organized by the school. Parents were asked to contribute gifts as well as their time in decorating the school. I do not see this as free labour but as a good way to make the parents feel a sense of belonging to the school as well as promoting interaction between parents. Judging by the well-decorated school during the Halloween party, these parents really put in their best effort.



Zachary with Mom and the, err, disciplinary teacher during Tanarata's Halloween Party



Zachary, dressed as a vampire, for the school's Halloween Party. Here posing with Zachary and Mom are the school teachers.

Tanarata parents have also setup the Tanarata Community Club (TCC), or the "PTA" in Tanarata School. Unfortunately, my wife and I did not attend a single of their meetings as their meetings were often held when both of us were working. But it is good to know that TCC is not some dead club filled with inactive members. My wife and I were once asked by email sent by them if we had any issues or concerns to bring up to the school authorities.

Tanarata also maintains an active web social presence via Facebook that they use to post the school activities. Parents can also make comments on their Facebook and for all to read - which is a very good thing.

There was one unfortunate incident where a parent's car was stolen right out of the school parking lot! In response, the school fitted several CCTVs around the school in particular at the school entrance, driveway, and parking lot. While this crime incident raised eyebrows, I am glad that the school responded quickly and correctly by installing the extra security measures - not just to protect the cars but also to protect our precious children.

In his first term, Zachary joined two ECA (extra-curricular activities) classes: drums and dancing. I wanted him to join Speech and Drama class too, but I noticed he was too tired from the other two ECA classes, so I pulled him out from the Speech and Drama class.

Tanarata school fees for Year 1 is RM3,600 per term inclusive of the school building fund. This fee does not include ECA fees, which is a good thing because it means we can choose which ECA we want our children to participate. ECA fees can range as low as RM60 to as high as RM450. Music classes like drums cost RM450 but the dancing class, if I remember accurately, is only about RM100 per term.

Various ECA classes are offered per term. But these ECA classes can generally be grouped into three: music (like vocal, drums, guitar, and piano), physical activities (like karate, tae-kwan do, dancing, football, swimming, and badminton), and scholastic (like web design, speech and drama, chess, and magazine and photography). Most of these ECA classes are out-sourced by the school. The speech and drama class, for instance, are handled by the Helen O'Grady Drama Academy.

Zachary enjoyed his drums classes but not so much the dancing class. He was expecting less formal dance routines (something akin to Gangnam style dancing) but what he got instead was "too much stretching" dancing like he was always warming up to dance instead of doing the dancing itself. *Oh well...you won't know until you try.*

I am planning to send Zachary for the Speech and Drama class since this was what he took when he was at Beaconhouse Preschool, and he said he had lots of

fun then.



There is a closer interaction between parents here in Tanarata than in larger schools or in government schools. Part of this reason is the smaller student population in Tanarata School.



Zachary's mom talking to a parent from China whose son is Zachary's classmate

Lastly, the school canteen is satisfactory, not great, but satisfactory. The meals there are prepared well and diverse. The canteen operator also allowed pre-paid meals, meaning that I deposit some amount of money (say, RM50) which would then be deducted each time Zachary orders a meal. That way, Zachary does not have to carry money to school or work out paying for his meals. However, the school is getting a new canteen operator next term, so I will wait and see if this

operator is better than the previous one.

Overall, I am glad to report that Zachary enjoys going to school and meeting his teachers and friends. Once he was sick, and he had to miss two days of school. Since he was sick including over the weekend, he felt as if he did not attend school for over a week. To that, he once asked us, "I miss school. Is school still closed today?" This is so different from my own school experience. Being sick for me then was to be celebrated because it meant a doctor-certified excuse not to go to school.

I am overall happy with Tanarata. It is not a school for everyone. Tanarata is one of the cheapest international schools around, so their facilities may not match those from more expensive schools. This is not to say that Tanarata facilities are poor, but if you are a parent looking for Olympic-sized swimming pool, a school gymnasium the size of a shopping mall or free Wi-Fi at every school corner, then Tanarata would not be able to match your expectations.

Tanarata may have cheaper school fees, but I feel it is also selective in their student intake. This explains the low student population in the school. The green lush of vegetation and oil palm trees that surround this school makes learning here quiet, pleasant, and unique from other more concrete-based schools. Zachary's teachers are great: most of them are friendly and experienced in handling young children, and some of them, well, quite fierce. Ah, but that is only to be expected. When was the last time you had a school without at least one much-feared teacher?

I am under no illusions that Zachary's education is complete at Tanarata. Whichever school Zachary attends, my wife and I would still have to monitor closely his learning progress in school. My wife and I would still have to identify weaknesses in his learning and ensure he overcomes them. Teachers at a good school can only do so much. We, as parents, are still the most important factor in Zachary's education.

But for now, I am pleased with Tanarata, and I look forward to Zachary's second term.

Also read: Zachary's entrance examination into Tanarata.