

Behind Brains Bunch International School Success: What Did They Do?

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Abstract

International schools are competing among themselves not only of varying fees but also in terms of their teaching staffs, their orientation of its curriculum, exit examinations available to primary school leavers, flexible learning spaces, second language learning and even rebranded the school with notable brand like Apple (Saba, 2020). To remain relevant, the education business generally has to be dynamic in balancing its profitable status and fulfilling the social purpose i.e. national education mission and vision. This phenomenon raised the question on how to remain relevant and sustain in education business for international school? The suitable and in time strategies have to be actively reviewed and placed to compete in the education business market without jeopardising the social economic mission and vision. Among the important areas taken care by international school like BBIS are financial sustainability, full fledge facility, high quality teachers and teaching, interesting syllabus and curriculum, effective marketing strategy and assuring low staff turnover.

Keywords: BBIS, international schools, quality education, education business.

1. INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic development of a country is highly dependent on educational sector. A well-designed educational system could equip students with knowledge, skills advancement and human capabilities that are important for their employment readiness and character development. As such, selecting the best educational institutions and curriculum are essential among parents for their children. Of late, Malaysia is seeing an increase in demand for English-speaking education as English is classified as one of the languages that is widely spoken and commonly used around the world. Serve as one of the educational institutions that uses English as medium of instructions, the total number of students attending international schools in Malaysia has increased by 80% by which the majority are local Malaysian children. Likewise, these children's parents emphasize the importance of international and private schools' syllabus, environment and facilities (Yaacob et al., 2014).

The market demand for international schools in Malaysia is indeed encouraging. From the world's university perspective, an English-medium international schools are increasingly valued. In Canada, 70% of all international undergraduate students come from international schools. The students were described as meeting all of the Canadian University requirements; well prepared to mix and participate, have very good facility of English language, and have been exposed to internationally recognized curricula (Keeling, 2015b). Parents looking at opportunities to send their children for tertiary education abroad are seriously weighing in international school as one of the best options.

Market intelligence and data on Malaysia's international schools collected and evaluated by The International School Consultancy Group (ISC), a UK-based organization which has been researching the worldwide international school market for over 25 years shows in their latest report that there were 122 English-medium international schools in Malaysia teaching a total of 46,130 students and employing over 4,500 full time staff. Kuala Lumpur has the largest number of international schools; 27 are located in the city educating over 15,000

students. Other major centers for international schools are Penang and Iskandar (Keeling, 2015b). The number of international school has increased rapidly whereby in year 2020, ICS identified 287 international schools in Malaysia, 43% growth in just six years (Saba, 2020). Saba (2020) added that the demand has been particularly for the mid priced school.

As in ISC report, Saba (2020) reported that Malaysian students represented the largest proportion of enrollment in the international schools particularly 65% of the total enrollment in mid-market for their school fees.

International school hence has been a staple in major cities in Malaysia and are an educational option for many economically privileged families. Further, to remain relevant, the education business generally has to be dynamic in balancing its profitable status and fulfilling the social purpose i.e. national education mission and vision. This phenomenon raised the question on how to remain relevant and sustain in education business for international school?

1.1 Background of Brainy Bunch International School (BBIS)

One of the established education centers for elementary and kindergarten chosen by many parents in Malaysia is Brainy Bunch International School. It is registered as an International School with the Ministry of Education and certified as a Cambridge Exam Centre. It is the first school in Malaysia to offer both and Montessori education. Brainy Bunch is a leading education institution with a commitment to provide sought after graduates possessing the highest level of ADAB (Allah centered, Determination, Action-oriented, Benevolence) and essential life skills. Life skills subjects are offered as part of the curriculum such as Money Tree (financial literacy), Practical Life and self-defense program.

There are over 140 kindergarten branches across Malaysia, a private primary and secondary schools in Putrajaya as well as several in some states of Malaysia. BBIS since its establishment in year 2010 has received many awards, such as The World's Best Brand and Star Outstanding Business Award in 2017. BBIS also accredited by North American Montessori Center, Cambridge Assessment International Education and LEGO Education Solutions.

BBIS is now expanding its business abroad by franchising system forwarding its education business models with full support to the franchisees. With more the 50,000 alumni accumulated until recent, it is vital to carry out a study seeking to explore and understand the BBIS business model, their strengths, strategies, and challenges to sustain in the private elementary school in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the borderless world, people sought for internationalisation. There are two main aspects of growing international if education; the internationalisation of national system and the growth numbers of international schools worldwide (Hayden et al., 2011). Kraft and Vodopoviec (2003) argued that private/ international school can help mobilise resources and increase the quality and accessibility of business education. A review of the empirical research on private school choice found that private school choice delivers some benefits to participating students—particularly in the area of educational attainment (Jacob et al. 2008; Egalite and Wolf, 2016).

Indeed, parents always sought for quality/ better education and perceived that English as the medium of instruction is one of the indicators of better education which influence parents to choose private school (Herlech-Jones et al., 2005; Deepak Kumar et al., 2020). It is also still a result of family tradition whereby private education is reinforced among those parents who were also educated in the private schools (Brian Greets et al., 1990).

In addition, Handerson et al. (2020) claim that “facilitating subjects’ which were taught in private/ international school are known to be favoured by high status higher educational institution. They also found that the students enjoyed the privilege of extremely well resources compared to state schools. And they are competing among them in resource provision for the students. In adverse, Mancebón et al. (2008) claimed that in the case of Italy, the private school obtain better academic results because of their favourable background of the educational process not as the consequences of effect of more effective management.

Besides the medium of instructions, curriculum and etc., Giovanis et al. (2013) stated that price is one of the most important variables in the process of customers’ purchase decision. Implying to the school fees, the future growth of the international schools market is very much dependent on how many people can afford to pay (Keeling, 2015a). However, parents still enrolls their children if they found the school is commensurate and cost effective

to them (Winkler et al., 1996). As the international school expanded and grow rapidly, the demand goes to mid-priced schools among the parents (Saba, 2020).

In addition to the fees, Caffyn (2010) emphasizes the importance of location as it significantly influences the reactions to physical environment, local culture and clientele. Moreover, location enclave affects individual's experience and interaction in the locality which indirectly influences their behavior, satisfaction, morale and interest. International schools should be located in a strategic area and within convenient distance (Yaacob et al., 2014). There is evidence that the gap between schools' outcomes is higher in localities with higher private sector growth, providing suggestive evidence of stratification (Joshi, 2020). In addition, location enable parents and community members to involve in the reform to increase academic achievement, enabling school structure as well as academic optimism to establish a culture of success in elementary and secondary school (Waheed et al., 2016).

Awan and Zia (2015) found that five main factors emerge as important determinants of private school/international school choice. These include the socioeconomic status of the household, the degree of a school's accessibility, the cost of schooling, parents' perceptions of school quality, and their perceptions of the available employment opportunities in the region. International schools are competing among themselves not only of varying fees but also in terms of their teaching staffs, their orientation of its curriculum, exit examinations available to primary school leavers, flexible learning spaces, second language learning and even rebranded the school with notable brand like Apple (Saba, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

In a research project which explores a subject for the first time such that will be explored in this study, researchers need a qualitative stage to build understanding. A small number of in-depth interviews will give a feel for the subject, the terminology which is used, constructs that need testing, and understand how the audience sees the world (Hague et al., 2013). This is vital information for designing a questionnaire in a subsequent quantitative stage.

So, the major initial data collection for this study was carried out through interview session with Brainy Bunch International Islamic Montessori School (BBIS). During the interview, open ended questions werw asked to deeply understand their business model, pricing, their financial performance, the service they offered as well as their strengths and weaknesses to sustain in the education business.

Employing thematic analysis, the data then analysed by using Atlas.ti, latest version available.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Financial Sustainability

First of all, the clear vision as a profit oriented private school by the school's CEO makes the school highly successful and able to sustain financially. The school mainly gets the initial capital from their established chain of Brainy Bunch kindergartens across Malaysia, Singapore, Gaza and Indonesia (143 in total). In order to attract many students into the international school, the management team set the school fees as among the lowest in the region, with full facility and inclusive of accomodation and food. The school operates from 7.45 till 4.30pm where parents do not have to worry about transit school in the evening as BBIS took care of the children Islamic lesson as well. This value for money approach has attracted 740 students just after 5 years of operation, starting with only 60 students at the beginning.

“For lower elementary, we charged about RM1100. For high school, we charged about RM1,300. And for hostel is about RM1,500.. we give more, especially for Tahfiz students, in MCO, we provide with the boarding and hostel. Within charge, like a big part in the price, we adjust more on their food and accommodation. So, with the low fees, what keep us afloat and sustainable is mostly on the number... because we don't charge a lot.”

[Madam Nori, COO of BBIS]

The school also has its loyalty program and free education program where parents are given the option to pay in lump sum for their children's education fees for example, RM50,000 covering the whole education at Brainy Bunch International School (BBIS) and RM100,000 investment scheme in which the parents will get back the amount they invested after their chindren finished schooling. This loyalty program not only ensure the school can

keep the students with them without worrying that they will change to other school, but also keeps the cash flow of the school healthy by having cash to spend and develop the school more to make it more enticing for future parents.

On the other hand, in order to keep the cost low, the school have a central kitchen that caters the food for all students under Brainy Bunch. The salary of the teacher also is not too high as 99% of the teachers are locals with suitable qualification. The range of the teachers salary are from RM1800 to RM5000, lower than the more expensive expatriate international teachers. BBIS proved that they can succeed as international school even without international teachers.

4.2 Full Fledge Facility

BBIS was built on a huge plot of land (2.5 hectares) in Cyberjaya. With open plan concept, the school have a warm and welcoming atmosphere where staff, visitors and students really enjoy. They have a great hall that could accommodate 2000 packs, an auditorium that could accommodate 250 packs, football field, animal farm, horses barn, and a lake that are normally used by their Tahfiz students to go fishing. Because of the open plan and big space that they had, there are many possibilities for various activities to be carried out and these activities are the value added to the international school, as explained by Puan Nori.

“We have an auditorium that can sit about 250, 200 packs...we also had a great hall that accommodate 2000 packs. We do a lot of events there, but we also conduct a lot of classes in there. For example, we do event like Language Week, BM Week. We used auditorium probably for a movie setting, you know. Because, it does look like a cinema, but we also used it for classes, especially when we need to combine few classes. The feature of the school that I like is the open space. We have a big field, and thing just progress naturally again. When we have the big field, we have the lesson called “Advance Practical Life”. We make the student to feel like living in a small farm, and we started to include farm animals in there. And the teacher can utilise that as part of their Science lesson, Life Skills lesson, where they bring the student down to feed the animals. Somebody approach us to do horse riding courses, so we have some horses in our barn. And then, we have archery because of the space. These are the things that are not initially thought of, but because of the space. In term of our field, it is designed to accommodate a proper competition. Our field is used as a training accommodation for Sepang Football Club. So, it opens up to a lot of another possibilities. But in the end of the day, with this kind of facilities, it kind of add some value to the school, you know. And it had that atmosphere and aura that everybody like. Even the parents enjoying it, and even the teacher as well.”

[Madam Nori, COO BBIS]

4.3 High Quality Teachers and Teaching

Prior to hiring, potential teachers at the school are required to observe the classroom first to see if they can deal with the montessori system and teaching environment as they may have 20 students in the class, learning 20 different topics with different subject at the same time as it is a mixed aged classroom. Teachers are also hired not only based on their qualification, but also their personality and commitment. In the montessori system, one teacher could teach several subjects, but BBIS started hiring specialized teachers in their field for the the secondary level. Teachers of the international school are also constantly undergoing trainings to provide best teaching quality for the students.

“Because Cambridge, they do have like a periodical training. Depending on the terms, sometimes they just have ad-hoax training. We do send our teachers for Cambridge training. And for Montessori training is a little bit unique. So, like myself and Auntie Quds, we obtained our diploma in Montessori in North America Montessori Centre. Auntie Quds is assisted by two other seniors to do the training internally. So, we had training like on the job and we do have like a weekly training.”

[Mr. Fattah, Teacher and Administrator of BBIS]

4.4 Interesting Syllabus and Curriculum

BBIS adopted several syllabus and offers flexible learning plan for the students to choose their path. Mainly they start with the Montessori system, which is a non-exam based system for their elementary level. The students start at the age of 6, and by the age of 11, they have the option to go to the secondary school or they can stay for another year, afterwhitch they can also choose to join the Tahfiz program where they adopted a special method in

memorizing Al-Quran in one year. The montessori syllabus were also being adopted in their kindergartens, so when parents and students are comfortable with the system, they want continuation and hence join BBIS after their preschool. Montessori system itself is very exciting. Montessori system is about learning for knowledge and not for exam. Through the system which is close to the Islamic way of teaching, students are very self-reliance and independent. It is also very easy to incorporate Sunnah teachings, for example talk softly, and when they have their food they learn to clean their classroom. The students even started learning advance subjects such as Geography, History, Astrology, and Health Science in primary school and they learn for knowledge, which is a deep learning approach.

“Montessori, MashaAllah very amazing. Actually, very close to Islamic. When they asked about self-independent, self-reliance, Sunnah teaching we can easily incorporate. Like the Montessori way-talk softly, we teach them to behave, and low their voice when they talk. And when they have their food, they will clean their classroom. And even the subject, I think in the primary school, they started learning Geography, they learn History, Astrology, Health Science. They learn a lot of things we didn't even think of, that we teach to primary school students. They learn for knowledge.”

[Madam Nori, COO BBIS]

For the secondary level, where more exam based curriculum is needed, BBIS adopted the Cambridge system and students will take IGCSE exam at the end of their high school. BBIS is also a certified IGCSE exam centre so the exam are conducted at their own premises.

“So when we go to highschool, we can no longer stay with the Montessori system, basically because of the nature of the system itself. Because we need something yang ada exam-based, yang student can use to further their students. So, that is when we adopted the Cambridge system and we become the certified exam Cambridge centre. I think it was in 2015, if I am not wrong. So, before that...we send our students to UIA to take their IGCSE exam. But starting on 2015, when we become the certified exam centre for IGCSE, we can conduct our own exam at our premise.”

[Madam Nori, COO BBIS]

4.5 Effective Marketing Strategy

By keeping a good quality kindergarten and building strong branding and reputation from their kindergarten chain, BBIS does not have to do aggressive marketing to attract students to their international school. Most parents have already been asking what is next for their children and transitioning from Brainy Bunch Kindergarten into Brainy Bunch International School was rather a natural process. BBIS do not have a dedicated marketing team overseeing just the international school, as their focus is more on marketing their kindergarten chain. But somehow when they have a well-established kindergarten, they could market their international school as well.

“And we did not do a lot of marketing for international school actually. So, a lot of people don't know that we had international school. But, most of the students are students that have been with us for a while. And words that go around. We had the students by word of mouths.”

[Madam Nori, COO BBIS]

“The way we market ourselves is mostly through word of mouth and through the group CEO and the name Brainy Bunch itself. Like Auntie Nori said, I have never seen our advertisement for international school that much. It is mostly on the kindergarten.”

[Mr. Fatah, Teacher and Administrator of BBIS]

The school target market was on upper middle class Malay parents having income of RM10,000/month or more per household, which is those from the M40 and T20 categories in which is a realistic target where these parents could afford private education for their children. However, as being pointed earlier, the school mostly rely on their existing customers that progresses from their kindergarten into high school. Even though the marketing strategy of the school is subtle, the long-term approach in building reputation and getting the trust of their existing customers has proven to be effective for the school as it thrives even during the MCO.

4.6 Low Staff Turnover

The school's teachers work with BBIS for long period of time. Low teachers turnover means quality of teaching and the school culture can be maintained. It also means lower cost for keep training new teachers as they are already familiar with the system. Among the reason of why teachers stay at the school is because BBIS system and way of doing things is so unconventional that the teachers find it interesting to work there. One of the teachers also quoted to stayed at the school for 9 years now because of the uniqueness of Motessori system that the school adopt. They also have a good career progression opportunity and BBIS even sponsor some of the teachers to further their study and learn more about international school syllabus as well as having on the job training as mentioned previously. The school also have a flexible system, where teachers and parents are open to discuss about their children progress and learning pace in which teachers offers alternatives. The flexibility is also what keeps the teachers at the school for long period of time as explained by Mr Fatah:

"I have been with Brainy Bunch, this is my fourth or fifth year. I worked at a school before, so it is a natural progression to be a school teacher, English to be specific. One of the main reasons why I am still working with Brainy Bunch is because of its informality and its way of doing thing. Very not conventional. If you asked about how we employed teachers and everything, we do have certain standard, but we are always flexible when it comes to our staff. Say for example, high school. We have our kids; we have certain amount of subjects that they want to take for IGCSE. But in the ends, it is up to the parent, and not the kids. They feel like they can do that particular year, or not. If they do not feel like they can do that particular year, we are open for discussion. We have a lot of other possibilities. So that flexibility is one of the main reasons why I really like working with Brainy Bunch. Even though very hectic at one time even though it gets to your head a bit, but that is one of the main reasons."

[Mr Fatah, Teacher and Administrator of BBIS]

5. CONCLUSION

The international schools are growing rapidly around the world as a result of people mobility and the change in education orientations. With the dynamic growth and demand of the international schools, this education providers have to remain steadfast to cope with the current change to remain relevant and sustainable. The suitable and in time strategies have to be actively reviewed and placed to compete in the education business market without jeopardising the social economic mission and vision. Among the important areas taken care by international school like BBIS are financial sustainability, full fledge facility, high quality teachers and teaching, interesting syllabus and curriculum, effective marketing strategy and assuring low staff turnover.

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