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Weekend Beat: Japanese parents praise Tokyo's Indian Schools - 09/22/2007

‘Since they don’t speak English at home, we make them read a lot to increase their vocabulary. We can check each kid’s progress through reading and writing.’ Rani Sanku, *Director of Little Angels International Kindergarten*

BY MAYUMI SAITO STAFF WRITER

"This is my favorite book. This is about ocean and animals," 5-year-old Yuki says, presenting the book of his choice to other children in English. He explains why he likes the book and answers classmates' questions such as how many marine mammals are in the book and if he knows any animals' names.



*Rani Sanku teaches a public speaking class at Little Angels International Kindergarten
- Yuko Yamada/ Staff photographer*

During the weekly show-and-tell at Little Angels International Kindergarten, children give short speeches on their favorite books, toys and other topics. Speech training is rare in Japanese schools. "I learned the importance of public speaking from my business management experience," director Rani Sanku, 49, says.

Starting from age 3, children develop English speech skills by stating simple facts in sentences until, by the age of 5, they can explain "why" in more complicated expressions of opinion to the class, according to Sanku.

A native of India, Sanku opened the kindergarten in Mitaka, western Tokyo, in 2004. All full-time and part-time teachers are English speakers from Asian countries including India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Japan. Sanku says that because

these teachers learned English at an early age, they are best qualified to teach English as a second language.

Ninety percent of the 45 children enrolled at the school--located in what was once a single-family dwelling--are Japanese. "Since they don't speak English at home, we make them read a lot to increase their vocabulary. We can check each kid's progress through reading and writing," she says. Activities range from daily spelling quizzes, mental arithmetic and weekly computer and dance classes to field trips.

Sanku accompanied her husband to Japan in 1991. On arrival, she looked for a school for her 3-year-old son. She says she soon discovered all the Tokyo nursery schools, Japanese or international, taught only life skills instead of the academic subjects she learned in India. "It was more like play school," she says.

She taught her son herself and her second as well. She continued to home school her kids while they attended local kindergarten and elementary schools. At the same time, Sanku prepared to open her own school, picking up materials around the world during family trips.

She says no country has a perfect education system, including India. "Indian education is strictly 'teach and learn' and has no arts or music. I kept the Indian system as a base and developed a balanced curriculum, not just math and science."

Sanku has four master's degrees and work experience in the petroleum industry. She has worked at the Indian Embassy in Tokyo as a financial adviser, taught business management at graduate schools and conversational English to children. In 2002, two years before establishing the kindergarten, she started the Little Angels English Academy conversation school.

Masako Fujikura, 40, who enrolled her daughter Misuzu, 5, in the school three years ago, says she chose the school for its English education. "I checked other international schools, but their teaching is built on the premise that the kids already know English. I wanted my daughter to nurture her Japanese identity while learning English as a second language," she says.

Yoko Asai, 30, says the school's "second-home" style and small number of students is perfect for her son, Kei, 4. "I wanted a substantial place where they not only let them play, but also teach math and science. In Japan, those places are usually cram schools and not kindergartens."

Another mother, Kayoko Morimoto, 34, adds that she can see her daughter, Shion, 4, growing as a balanced person--learning many things including human relations. Her daughter speaks Japanese outside the kindergarten.

Many parents have not formed a clear educational plan for their children. "I'm more interested in international schools than Japan's compulsory education. There are things I'm uneasy about regarding Japanese elementary schools. As long as she retains her Japanese, we should give her more options for elementary schools," Morimoto says.

The parents also agree that the relatively low tuition at Sanku's kindergarten compared to other international schools is an important point.

Not surprisingly, Sanku confirms that there is a long waiting list at her school. "Four families are moving into Tokyo so their children can attend the kindergarten next year." She also plans to open Little Angels International Elementary School in April next year.

**** Indian expat schools ****

In east Tokyo, there are two schools to accommodate the growing Indian expat community's demand for Indian-style education. The first, India International School in Japan (IISJ) opened in Tokyo's Koto Ward in 2004, and moved to a new five-story neighborhood building in April this year.

Last year, Global Indian International School (GIIS) Japan opened in Tokyo's Edogawa Ward. Headquartered in Singapore, the school provides education from kindergarten through 12th grade, using India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) national curriculum as well as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program as preparation for universities worldwide. Another GIIS branch is slated to open next year in Yokohama.

India International in Koto Ward has more than 200 students from kindergarten through the 10th grade. Seven are Japanese, according to principal Nirman Jain. She says she receives inquiries from Japanese parents throughout the year.

"The biggest thing about this school is that we provide India's CBSE curriculum," she says. Malar Swami, 30, enrolled her 4-year-old son, Rithwik, in April because the "CBSE curriculum is supposed to be one of the best in the world."

All classes are given in English except for the Hindi language classes. Computer education starts from the first grade, as well as debate, acting and public speaking classes, according to Jain.

On the day this reporter visited the school, third-grade students were learning logo programming language in computer class. Kids type "turtle" code in English into their computers, which then, for example, draws on-screen geometric shapes. Meanwhile, eighth-graders in the math class were studying how compound interest works, using a loan to a salaried employee as an example.

Rajinder Sahni's daughter, Amanjyot Kaur, is an eighth-grader at the school. A Tokyo resident for 30 years, Sahni, 54, says that she was happy with local nursery and elementary schools. But she and her husband decided her daughter should attend the Indian school once it was built so she could learn English. "These days if you can't speak English, you get left behind," she says.

The mathematics taught at India International is at a higher level than any other international school in Tokyo, Trupti Gandhi, 35, says. Math, English and science are very important for her children, Heman, 10, and Tanvi, 7, she says. "Today's world is very stressful. Because of the competition and deadlines, they learn how to handle stress early in life."

Keiko Furui, 35, enrolled her son Shusei, 3, in India International's kindergarten in April. She says she learned about the strength of the English and math programs at Indian educational institutions after reading education-related magazines.

Furui says she never became fluent in English despite majoring in English literature in college and studying in England for six months afterward.

"If you speak English, your world expands," she says. Her Japanese husband, who also struggled to learn English, agreed that they should give their son an international education, she says.

Addressing the fact that international schools are not formally accredited by the government, she says Shusei can study at India International up until the 10th grade and then they will look for a private high school. "And if he doesn't fit in at the Japanese school, he can go international," she says.

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