

Mixing the Best of Britain, Japan

New Int'l School Eyes Unique Study Program

By Paul ROGERS

The author, founding head at Makuhari International School in Chiba, writes about some of the differences in content and style in the education a child might expect to receive in a Japanese or British elementary school.

Makuhari International School opens its doors to around 250 children in April 2009. It will be, in some ways, a fairly unique school. It will take the objectives of the Japanese National Curriculum as well as elements of other curricula – mainly those of the National Curriculum of England and Wales and meld these into a new and fairly unique Program of Study – a syllabus designed to cater for not only Japanese children returning to Japan from an international education abroad, but also foreign and dual-nationality children already living in Japan.

To go through this fascinating process requires some understanding of how both curricula have evolved, as well as the various ways these curricula tend to be taught – or in other words the *style* of education on offer in each country. My own experiences by no means make me an expert, but having enrolled a daughter in both systems, having previously been head at an international school in Japan teaching the National Curriculum of England and Wales and having widespread professional contact with teachers and other professionals involved in both approaches to educating, this does perhaps give some insight.

Photo: Makuhari International School



Paul Rogers, Head of Makuhari International School in Makuhari, Chiba City, shakes hands with Chiba Gov. Akiko Domoto at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo in July.

Japanese System: Top-heavy on Learning Fact

As you would expect, for many people there appear to be strengths and weaknesses in each system. By and large, education in the Japanese elementary years has many admirable features as

well as perhaps some serious shortcomings. The Japanese system does a fairly good job of 'producing' children who are considerate, hard-working, energetic, knowledgeable, and often, extremely imaginative. Teachers are usually extremely dedicated to the children in their charge. On the other hand there is a widespread view that the curriculum on offer is top-heavy on learning factual information that is not always useful (rather than focused skills learning) as well as an over-emphasis on developing social skills – through not only coverage in the curriculum but also the opportunities 'created' for those social skills to be practiced. There is also the common belief that teaching can be pedestrian and repetitious at times and rarely varies in style or reaction to the diverse approaches to learning that children naturally have. Children all over the world learn more effectively in certain ways, whether this is, for example, visually, orally or kinesthetically.

British Style: Focused on Teaching & Addressing All Children

The British system also has its broad strengths and weaknesses too. If you were to ask a British class teacher what was the biggest handicap to delivering good-quality education, he would probably say it was the constant change from above. While many initiatives genuinely put the interests of children first, in reality the constant bombardment of new schemes and ideas leaves educators confused, unmotivated and lacking confidence in the Local Education Authorities who expect such proposals to be implemented. Teachers lacking enthusiasm rarely give their best. It also often leaves them floundering under a pile of paperwork that rarely seems to get smaller.

Having said that, there is a clear emphasis within the National Curriculum of England and Wales as well as via the training that teachers find themselves involved in; on the importance of planning, teaching and assessing for *all* children regardless of levels, abilities, learning styles or attitudes to learning – as well as a clear expectation that all children can and should make progress at their own levels with the right support and challenge. The success of such approaches, however, often depends more on the effort and commitment of individual teachers than anything else.

Japanese Reforms: Twists & Turns

Both systems have been and still are undergoing change. As you might expect, the changes very much reflect adjustments of opinion in societies in both countries. In Japan there was a series of curriculum reforms in the 1990s that aimed to give children more contact with the local environment and community, and encourage indepen-

dence and self-motivated learning. Teachers were told to assess children's interests and motivation, not just their achievement on tests.

The culmination of the reforms came with a revised National Curriculum published in 1998, which, among other things, introduced 'integrated studies' (focusing on cross-curricular, self-planned, and experiential learning). At the time it was claimed that the content of so-called 'conventional' subjects such as mathematics was being cut by 30%, partly to make way for new study areas, and partly because of the implementation of a five-day school week and the end of Saturday lessons – part of the government attempts to cut Japanese working hours.

These curriculum revisions touched off a storm of criticism. Not only did educators argue that children would no longer be able to cope with the simplest of mathematical problems, but sociologists argued that the reforms would widen the gap between children from motivated homes (who could study independently) and children with less fortunate backgrounds, whose achievement would drop. Educational consultants pointed to declining test results over two decades, and warned of worse to come. A variety of others interestingly looked towards Britain, where the common view was of a country which had supposedly wrecked its education systems with misguided 'progressive' reforms before reluctantly getting back to basics.

Japan's education ministry responded to these worries by stressing that the new curriculum was only a minimum, and set up a nationwide academic achievement test to monitor standards. The latest revisions include the 2011 curriculum reforms that will increase the hours for Japanese, maths, science and English, perhaps in response to previous overreactions to earlier reforms. In reality, compared to many curricula, and despite the reforms that are still ongoing, the Japanese curriculum is still remarkably sparse and generic when it comes to focused and specific 'skills' objectives. The new curriculum for 2011 does not address this issue at all.

Japanese schools' shortcomings are in some ways the mirror image of their strengths. The emphasis on community and learning together sets limits on the freedom that children can have in exploratory learning. (This is in marked contrast to the National Curriculum of England and Wales where exploratory learning is strongly advocated.)

Contrasting Differences Between Japanese & British Styles

There are also possible restrictions to children's progress in relation to the attitude to setting. It is interesting to note that until the age of 15, the Japanese public education has very little streaming or setting by academic performance. Since 2003, there have been some experiments in setting, almost entirely confined to maths and English teaching, but some of these experiments seem to have been abandoned – and even when they continue, children usually choose their set themselves, which seems to defeat the purpose and is again rooted in the desire to foster confidence and self-reliance. This is in marked contrast to the National Curriculum of England and Wales where setting is standard and considered to be not only hugely effective but a normal expectation in schools. It is an exercise administered by the teacher and not the children.

One other obviously contrasting feature between the two styles of



Architects' image of Makuhari International School

education is the expectation of achievement of individual children. The curriculum in Japan as well as the textbooks used is designed to enable all children to advance at the same pace, and classroom teaching has the same aim. At elementary school, there are many opportunities for children to take the initiative to study on their own or in small groups, but the entire class almost always comes together again after a while to discuss findings and conclusions. What helps to underpin the combination of energetic inquiry and discussion is the unremitting effort to develop a classroom community. All children take turns in leading the class, and all participate in a great variety of small groups; for organizing everything from chores (including cleaning) to fun and games. This is often very effective in developing a sense of mutual consideration and respect. But again, it is led at the same pace for all, which by necessity is at the slowest pace. Progress for children is therefore more or less led at the rate of the slowest group within that class.

This is again in marked contrast to what happens in an English school. There, planning and teaching are designed to target all children at different levels. Children who are struggling are supported, and more able children are extended rather than having to wait for others to catch up. There is not a reliance on completing textbooks that are solely based on the curriculum; which means that teachers have to know the curriculum more clearly in order to be able to often create and compile their own work for children to use.

New Curriculum: Taking the Very Best of What's Available

Of course the more you look at the two curricula, the more similarities and differences you find and the more strengths and weaknesses in both. The aim of creating a new curriculum (and stressing a vibrant and diverse approach to teaching) here at Makuhari International School is to take the very best from what is already available as well as add new thoughts and ideas.

To develop something that offers the creativity and team ethic of one system while incorporating the challenge and focus of another is an exciting journey whose end goal is to provide the very best education that we can for the mixed group of children in our care. For those interested in finding out how we get on – watch this space! **JS**

Paul Rogers is the founding head of Makuhari International School in Chiba City, scheduled to open in April 2009 as the first such school in Chiba Prefecture. It aims to attract children of international residents as well as Japanese returnee children and also children of dual nationality.