

Made-in-Japan Teaching Method

Why Worldwide Acceptance?

By Akio TSUNODA



Kumon is an educational services provider based in Japan operating a global franchise chain of educational establishments, called Kumon Centers, providing instruction in mathematics, English and native languages with the Kumon Method,

featuring a unique learning method and worksheets. As of March 2010, children in 46 countries and regions, including Japan, are learning at Kumon Centers. The following is a brief summary of how the Japan-originated Kumon Method has been accepted throughout the world, as well as of recent activities.

Father's Love for Son Starts Kumon

The Kumon Method was built on a prototype learning method which high school teacher Toru Kumon conceived in 1954 for his elementary school son. Mr. Kumon had always believed that "an educators' duty is to help children develop their abilities on their own as much as they can."

Having watched students at his high school struggle with mathematics, Mr. Kumon realized that what his son truly needed was not so much to be directly taught by others, but individualized learning that allowed him to solve problems on his own by using examples and hints. Mr. Kumon began to make hand-written worksheets by himself based on his idea. As a result, Mr. Kumon's son, who studied with his father's worksheets, was able to do differential and integral calculus by himself when he was a sixth grader.

His son's example taught Mr. Kumon that there were some critical factors to be considered when it comes to establishing a learning method to help children develop their abilities: (1) providing individualized instruction instead of the conventional school class format; (2) providing worksheets designed with goals that are reached in

small steps so students can learn by themselves; (3) children should be encouraged to learn subjects normally taught in high school at an early age, and not be restricted to their current school grade level.

Mr. Kumon founded a company - now known as Kumon Institute of Education Co. - in 1958 with the goal of opening many Kumon Method Centers and applying his learning method to help as many children as possible unleash their potential.

Overseas Development a Challenge

The first overseas Kumon Center was opened in 1974. The mother of a child, who accompanied her husband assigned to a post in New York, wanted her child to continue studying with the Kumon Method. That led to the opening of a Kumon Center in New York.

In the beginning, Kumon had no strategic planning for overseas development as a corporate undertaking, instead opening Kumon Centers one by one by way of accommodating the requests of parents. Soon, however, local children other than Japanese youngsters started to enroll in Kumon Centers, which were established increasingly by local partners. Today, instructors and students of overseas Kumon Centers are mostly of local origin.

In the 30 years since it first went overseas, Kumon has experienced so much. Needless to say, it has experienced differences in culture, customs and perception. In Japan, it is taken for granted that schoolchildren do homework. Kumon, which advocates the importance of home education, makes homework a part of its learning cycle in an effort to foster good study habits in children. When opening Kumon Centers in countries where homework is unheard of, however, it is not easy to convince parents of the importance of homework.

Attitude to work is another area where Kumon has seen many differences between Japan and foreign countries. In Japan, where many employees stay with the same company for a long period of time, Kumon has the time to teach its employees (known as associates) about Kumon's corporate philosophy and the Kumon Method itself. In countries where people constantly change jobs, however, employees trained for a long time may just leave.

Local legal and educational systems were also major hurdles against opening overseas Kumon Centers. In India, for example, the Supreme Court handed down a ruling in April 2005 that it is illegal to conduct commercial activities in residential areas, forcing a Kumon Center out of a rented building. Kumon was surprised to learn that the business environment could drastically change as a result of a sudden change in law. Nonetheless, it learned a valuable lesson from this experience.

Important Factors in Overseas Operations

Based on these experiences, Kumon feels that the following points must be kept in mind when expanding overseas:

Photo: Kumon Institute of Education Co.



The original Kumon worksheets: handwritten by Toru Kumon for his son



Students at Kumon Centers in South Africa (left), the United States (center) & Indonesia (right)

(1) Localized Operations

It goes without saying that education serves as the foundation for any country. It is an area in which foreign companies should never act insensitively. Kumon thinks it is imperative that local Kumon Centers be headed by local people familiar with local conditions in order for Kumon, which was founded in Japan, to be accepted in the community and win local trust. Kumon always keeps in mind that in doing business abroad, it should pay respect to local cultural traditions and religious customs, adapting itself to the local environment.

(2) No Compromise on Principles of Kumon Method

Having said the above, however, Kumon never changes the Kumon Method's principles, which Kumon considers vitally important to nurture children's academic abilities, according to country or region. For example, Kumon makes it a rule for children to record the amount of time that they spend to study worksheets because it serves as a yardstick to measure their abilities. When Kumon Centers were opened in countries where people were not used to recording the time, Kumon spent much time explaining to children and parents why they needed to do so, as well as the benefits of doing so. When children did record their study times by themselves, their self-management ability improved, their attitude toward study changed, and their academic abilities steadily improved.

Kumon always puts the first priority on what is best for the child. Kumon has been making sincere efforts to keep the principles of the Kumon Method unchanged for the good of children, eventually succeeding in getting this message across and gaining trust in foreign countries.

Jointly Creating New Values

Kumon has the dream of "contributing to world peace through education." It has the vision that "all people in all countries and regions in the world will have the opportunity to learn with the Kumon Method and that each individual in the world will be enthusiastically self-learning and making efforts toward realizing his or her goals and dreams." To make Kumon's dream and vision come true, I feel it is of the utmost importance that all the instructors, who are franchisees, and company associates share the same values. With that in mind, the Kumon Group gives company associates face-to-face opportunities to share information and develop common values. These include the World Leaders' Conference on Human Capital Development for human resource development managers and the

World Public Relations Forum for public relations managers.

Particularly noteworthy are the International Instructors Conference, which is held once a year and brings together instructors and associates from around the world to share student case studies, and the Kumon Global Forum, where instructors of differing native languages can exchange information with each other.

Kumon's math worksheets have instructions printed in different languages, but the questions themselves are the same all over the world and not set according to each nation's educational curriculum, making it possible for instructors to use the Kumon worksheets as a "common language." For example, it is possible for Singaporean instructors to adopt improvements made at an American Center, and for Japanese instructors to build on Indonesian cases.

The Kumon Method serves as a common language leading to synergy across national boundaries. As a result, improvements made abroad are then reimported to Japan, the birthplace of Kumon.

In the process of opening Kumon Centers abroad, we have observed that the desire of parents for their children to receive a better education, to gain a high level of basic academic skills, and to develop the ability to self-learn is indeed universal.

We are determined to continue our efforts to further enrich the learning cycle within the Kumon Group, both in order to live up to the expectations of parents and children across the world as well as to further improve the services we offer.

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Photo: Kumon Institute of Education Co.



Instructors engage in group discussions at the Kumon Global Forum.

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