

# A comparison of the 4th grade curriculum and daily life in a Japanese public school and an International School in Kyoto

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What are the main differences between the educational approach and the curriculum of a typical Japanese public elementary school and an international school? This crucial question, which many parents with preschool children are asking, is addressed impartially by a parent with children in both kinds of school, based on 4th grade classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and studies of 4th grade syllabi and the means used to evaluate learning.

典型的な日本の公立小学校と インター ナショナルスクールでは、教育的アプローチとカリキュラムの大きな違いは何であろう？幼稚園児の親の多くから寄せられるこの重要な質問に対し、子どもを両方の学校教育に入れている親の立場から、4年生学級の観察、教師との面談、4年生シラバスと評価方法を考査し、公平に答える。

**P**arents with pre-school age children face important decisions about the kind of elementary education they choose for their child. For parents of dual or multicultural families the decision can have implications for their children's future self-concept as well as their language and academic skills. Finding a school that suits both the family and the children can often be a matter of trial and error. The aim of this paper is to provide information about the curricula of a typical Japanese public elementary school and a small international school. The writer has children at both schools and will endeavour to provide an impartial overview, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions about the suitability of the two systems for their own family situation. The two schools are Shugakuin Shogakko, a public elementary

school of about 700 students from 6-12 years old, and Kyoto International School, an NPO of about 85 students from 3-14 years old. Kyoto International School has been in operation for about 50 years. Its mission is to provide an education in the medium of English for children of internationally-minded families. It is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and is an International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) World School with authorization to teach the Primary Years Programme (PYP). It is a member of the Japan Council of International Schools (JCIS) and the East Asia Regional Council of Overseas Schools. The school has recently been granted registered miscellaneous school status (*gakkou houjin kakushu gakko*), which will take effect from the start of the 2007-2008 academic year.

### Focus of the study

This study will focus on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum in the Japanese school and the combined 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum in the international school. There are five reasons for choosing these grade levels. First, grade 4 is the halfway stage in elementary school education. The children have mastered basic literacy skills and are able to study and research independently to some extent. The second reason is that two of my children (twins) were in 4<sup>th</sup> grade at the Japanese school, at the time of the study, so I was familiar with the curriculum and was able to obtain the permission of the head teacher and class teachers to gather data for this study. The third reason is that my older child transferred three years ago from the same Japanese school to the international school during 4<sup>th</sup> grade, so I am familiar with

the curriculum in the international school, too, and the head teacher and grade 4/5 teacher were willing to cooperate in my research. The fifth reason is related to the differences in the starting dates of the Japanese and international school year. The Japanese school year starts in April and the international school year at the end of August. This means that Japanese school 4<sup>th</sup> graders would be in both 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade in the international school, depending on whether their birthday fell before or after late August. The international school teaches grades 4 and 5 in a combined class, so this corresponds to the Japanese 4<sup>th</sup> grade closely.

### Method

The author interviewed the class teachers and students and spent more than a day observing classes in both schools. Written documentation of the curricula (syllabi, timetables, newsletters, websites) and assessment tools (reports, tests, posters, models, presentations) were studied.

### General observations on Japanese school

The first thing to strike many visitors to public Japanese elementary schools is that the classes are large. The fourth grade of Shugakuin Shogakko consists of 4 classes of about 30 students. (They can admit up to 40 students.) Most of the time, the homeroom teacher conducts all the lessons alone. There is an assistant who joins the class to help with mathematics 3 times a week. The class teacher, however, prepares all lesson plans and teaching materials, and does all marking and evaluating alone. The classroom layout is generally with the children seated at desks in rows facing

the blackboard at the front. The two teachers I observed, however, were experimenting and the 4<sup>th</sup> graders in their classes were seated in groups of 4-6 students, called *han*, and were arranged in a horseshoe facing the center of the classroom. The *han* grouping is for study and class duties (serving lunch, cleaning, etc.) The *han* are changed every 2-3 months. Some class teachers let the students choose the members of their *han* themselves. In general, however, the teachers select the members of each *han* with the aim of creating a balance of genders, personalities, and academic abilities. The role of the *han* is central to the social education of the school.

The lessons I observed were almost all teacher-centred. However, the students were very responsive and were actively participating most of the time. They are supposed to raise their hands and stand when they are selected to speak, and they readily do so. Nevertheless, a lot of shouting out goes on as well when the excitement mounts. The overall atmosphere is friendly, fun, and relaxed. This is largely due to the teachers' eliciting techniques. Every student's contribution is acknowledged and is not evaluated negatively. If the student's answer is not what the teacher had expected or hoped for, the teacher asks for more suggestions from others.

A lot of emphasis is put on building up a sense of class identity and solidarity. Generally, the same students study together in grades 1 and 2, with the same teacher. The class composition is changed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year and the students stay together with their new classmates for another two years. This is repeated for the final two years of the six-year elementary education. To help build a strong sense of

class community, a class motto is created by students at the start of the new school year. For example, one class motto is: "Help each other in a friendly way. Study with passion. Voices overflowing with laughter, Class 3." A friendly rivalry between the 4 classes is encouraged by competitions such as dodge ball, jump rope, and basket ball throwing (a game where colored balls are thrown into a basket by all students; each class has its own color).

A very large amount of time is spent on learning social skills and responsibility by actually carrying out jobs around the school. Lunchtime is far more than a time to eat in a Japanese elementary school. Each week one of the *han* is responsible for fetching and serving the lunch to their classmates. The members of this *han* wear white gowns and hats and a mask over their mouth and have to carry all the food and utensils from the kitchen to their classroom without mishap. They then have to make sure that everyone is served the right amount. The teacher does not interfere; the children are expected to get on with all this by themselves in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The children also learn good manners and wait until everyone has been served and say *itadakimasu* together before they start to eat. The children have to eat at a fairly fast pace because they have to clear away everything and clean the classroom before the afternoon's classes begin. If the *han* members on lunch duty are fast and efficient, they can collect and serve the food in about 20 minutes, which gives their classmates about 20 minutes to eat and leaves another 20 minutes to clean up. Children not on lunch duty are free to play indoors or outdoors after they have eaten. Cleaning the classroom is done with surprising thoroughness and vigor. The aim is for the students to learn

cooperation and service to others, as well as the importance of cleanliness. The desks are wiped and pushed aside so that the floor can be swept then cleaned with a wet cloth. The windows and other surfaces are also wiped. Again, this work is carried out by the duty *han*, in turn.

Great emphasis is placed on the nutritional value of the meal. The school nutritionist visits the classrooms and explains the food value of the ingredients and the importance of eating a balanced meal and of eating all that is served. The meals are carefully planned in advance and the parents receive a monthly menu detailing not just the ingredients, but also the quantities and calories.

Music is very important in the curriculum. All students learn to read music, sing, and play the *kenban* harmonica and the recorder. They also listen to classical and folk music as well as learn many traditional Japanese songs.

Sports and sports day are also very important. The students learn many team games in sports classes as well as stamina, speed, and agility training through track and field and gymnastics. All schools teach swimming in the summer and most have their own pool. One of the main events of the school calendar is the *undokai*. The students spend 4-6 weeks practicing for this day. At Shugakuin Shogakko the whole school is divided into 4 teams who compete against each other in events such as running races, relays, tug-of-war, ball throwing, etc. There are also dance performances and the 4<sup>th</sup> grade performed a traditional Okinawan dance in 2006. It is a whole day event in which everyone participates, including children with disabilities, the teachers, and the parents.

A recent innovation to the elementary school curriculum has been the introduction of the Integrated Studies course. Each school has a certain amount of freedom in planning these lessons. At Shugakuin Shogakko, English is taught several times a month by a native English speaker contracted to visit the school. However, the main emphasis of the Integrated Studies classes is to reinforce 4<sup>th</sup> grade science and social studies work through study of the local flora and fauna and the local community. The children go on field trips to nearby places to study these things first-hand. However, the destinations and number of trips are limited by the large numbers of children that need to be transported and supervised.

Another innovation is the gradual introduction of Information Technology. However, the role at present is limited because there is only one computer per classroom and the 20 machines in the computer room have to be shared by over 700 children. Nevertheless, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students know how to make a simple PowerPoint presentation and did so at one of the parent open days when they presented their research on Braille.

Friday afternoon, from 14:35 – 15:20, is club activity time for all 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> graders at the Japanese school and the students choose one club to which they will belong. There is a wide range of choices including: jogging, board games, animation, art, music, racket baseball, table tennis, and more. From 4<sup>th</sup> grade, they can also join the track and field, volleyball, softball, basketball, music, or other clubs, which practice out of school hours three times a week or more. There are competitions at the local and national level which provide good opportunities for children who are very keen

on a particular sport and who are willing to spend most of their free time on one kind of activity.

The highlight of the year for many 4<sup>th</sup> graders is their first overnight school trip in the early summer. Shugakuin Shogakko sends the 4<sup>th</sup> graders to a facility in the mountains where they can take part in field athletics and other outdoor activities. The purpose is also to enhance social skills and integration as well as to enjoy the outdoors and the exercise.

### Parent-teacher communication

In spite of the large size of the classes, teachers know each student well and there is frequent communication between teachers and parents. Parent observation days are held three times a year when parents can stand at the back of the classroom and watch 2-3 designated lessons. Usually, a parent-teacher discussion is held afterwards on matters such as class atmosphere, the students' home life and any concerns the parents or teachers wish to raise. In addition to this, one-to-one parent teacher conferences take place once a semester. The teacher also visits the home of each child at the start of the school year. Specific matters can be discussed via the communication notebook that goes to and from school with the child each day. Teachers also send home a weekly newsletter and class schedule. The schedule varies from week to week in order to incorporate all the extra-curricular activities, such as sports day, field trips, and other events. Each teacher makes their own class schedule based on the number of classes they are required to teach for each subject by the Education Ministry and the needs of the class. Consequently, each 4<sup>th</sup> grade class schedule is different.

### General observations on Kyoto International School

The first obvious contrast with the Japanese school is the difference in student numbers. Grade 4/5 had 11 students at the time of the study (7 girls and 4 boys). The classroom feels far more spacious and has a carpeted area with a sofa, cushions, and bookshelves where students can read. The students sit in groups of four at tables in the center of the room when listening to the teacher and working in groups, but use different parts of the room during the course of a typical day.

Secondly, the population in any international school class is largely transient and from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Some are native English speakers (from the USA, the UK, and New Zealand in this class), while others speak English as a second or third language, such as a student from Korea and others with one or two Japanese parents. English is the medium of instruction, but students are allowed to use their mother tongue to check understanding and for research. Four students in the class are considered in need of extra English language support and go to a specialist ESL teacher for Language Arts lessons.

The emphasis on language learning can be seen in the fact that there is a 45-minute Japanese class every day with two teachers. The four non-native Japanese speakers in the class learn basic survival Japanese, while the native Japanese speakers do free-reading, kanji practice and tests, study of poetry, and oral and written presentations. Sometimes the whole class works together on a joint class project related to their Unit of Inquiry. (For an explanation of Unit of Inquiry, please see below.)

Another clear contrast with the Japanese school is that, most of the time, students work in pairs or small groups independently of the teacher. For example, in a Language Arts lesson they take turns reading aloud in groups at different levels then write an individual response to the teacher's pre-set question. When they have finished their work, they can read quietly on the sofas or carpet. The teacher models activities, guides students in their work, monitors their progress, and evaluates their learning.

The students learn social responsibility through daily tasks, assigned on a rota basis, such as fetching the milk bottles, taking the class register to the office, and tidying the classroom. Moreover, from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, the students have a voice in the running of the school. The Student Council meets every two weeks in the Head of School's office and the representatives from each grade report to the class and bring suggestions and opinions to and from their classmates. Lunch is a far more low-key affair than in the Japanese school. It is not provided by the school, so most children bring a packed lunch. They do not always eat with their classmates. Once a week, students are scheduled to join another grade level to encourage mixing of the age groups.

In fact, there is a lot of interaction between grade levels. I observed the Grade 4/5 class visiting the Pre-Kindergarten class of four year-olds. The smaller children had just completed a Unit of Inquiry about toys and they were assigned an older child or two each to guide around their exhibition of posters and handmade toys. The same two classes meet on a regular basis for the older children to help the younger ones to learn to read. They are paired up as "reading buddies". In addition to different grade level classes

working together, every Friday afternoon is Assembly Time when the whole school meets and students in one class present some recent work to the rest of the school. The presentations are done on a rotation basis, so each class presents their work about once every five weeks.

The core of the curriculum is the Unit of Inquiry. Kyoto International School has been authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization to teach the IBO Primary Years Programme (PYP). This involves trans-disciplinary study of 6 topics throughout a school year. Each topic is called a Unit of Inquiry (UOI). The topics are mainly science and social studies but include other disciplines such as Language Arts, Mathematics, History, Geography, etc. At the time of this study the grade 4/5 topic was: "The human body and how it works." The teacher defines the central idea of the UOI. In this case it was that the human body is made up of many organs but they all work together. The students were learning how each major organ functions and how they function in relation to each other. The first stage was for the teacher to find out how much the children knew already, in this case by individual interviews recorded on the class computer. Next, they investigated the heart together by dissecting pigs' hearts. The teacher showed by example how to research and present information. The students then researched in pairs or groups and made their own models, posters, quizzes, and songs to explain the organs they had investigated. They used these materials to teach each other and other children, teachers, and parents in the school. The emphasis is on learning by teaching others. The final evaluation of their learning was to position organs correctly on a child-size paper cutout and to explain their functions and how they



are connected. The next UOI was to be the Romans, with a Social Studies and History focus.

At KIS, there is great emphasis on learning outside the classroom. For almost every UOI there is a field trip planned for all grade levels. The purpose is not only to experience the topic of study from a practical or real-life point of view, but also to learn how to behave politely as a group in public. Destinations include a wide variety of places such as factories, sewage plants, exhibitions, and museums of all kinds. The small number of children makes this possible from a practical point of view, and the educational philosophy of structured inquiry makes this essential from the pedagogical point of view.

Information Technology is of very great importance in the curriculum. The students have 3 computer classes a week from grade 1. There is a computer in each classroom, which is hooked up to the Internet. The school subscribes to the Grolier on-line children's encyclopedia and teaches the students to use search engines on the Internet. The students learn to word process and to use software such as Keynote and Pages for presentations and most of their work is done on computers. They have a class web page to post their work for their families to see.

The PE classes include games such as tennis and swimming in the summer. There is not so much emphasis on sport as there is in the Japanese school. However, the students can try out different sports in the clubs held every day after school (from 3:30 – 4:30 p.m.) There are a variety of clubs each term. At the time of the study there were Chess, French, Chinese, Aikido, Dance, Soccer, Band, Table Tennis, Reading Theatre, and Math. Children can

join a different one each day if they want, so they have a chance to experience many kinds of sports and other extra-curricular activities. Larger international schools arrange sporting competitions among international schools in the Asian region. For small schools like KIS, there are not many opportunities for a school team to play against another team. Once or twice a year, the soccer club plays a friendly match against a local public elementary school and the Middle school participates in an on-line sports competition with some other small international schools.

The school year starts off with the whole elementary school staying at the same facility in the mountains that Shugakuin Shogakko visits. First to fifth graders stay two nights, while kindergarten children stay one night. (Pre-school and Pre-kindergarten have a separate overnight stay elsewhere and the Middle School goes scuba diving and researching coral reef life.) The main purpose for this trip is for the children and the teachers to get to know each other as quickly as possible.

### Parent-teacher communication

Parents are encouraged to observe and assist in class at any time. Parent volunteers help students with reading and when extra supervision is needed, such as dissecting pigs' hearts. Teachers do not visit the students' homes at the start of the school year. Instead, a *Hopes and Dreams Conference* is held at the school in which the parents' goals for their children are discussed on a one-to-one basis with the class teacher. A parent-teacher conference is held in the first and third semester and a student-led conference takes place in the second semester. For this the students select work they

wish to show their parents and present their portfolio to their parents in the classroom on an individual basis. The teacher is present to add comments and answer questions. There is a communication book, which parents are expected to sign each day, and teachers are happy to discuss delicate matters by email, if necessary. A regular newsletter is sent home to inform the parents about what the students have been studying and are about to study.

### Comparison of curricula

The Japanese curriculum is outlined by MEXT, including the number of class hours for each subject. Teachers are expected to use selected textbooks and closely follow the curriculum for each subject, although there is a certain amount of freedom in how they actually cover the material. There is a strong focus on Japanese language. There are 200 new kanji to be learned in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. The other main academic focus is Math skills. Science and Social Studies are designed to familiarize the students with their local area in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and the Integrated Studies reinforce the work in Science and Social Studies, and provide occasional English lessons. These academic studies are balanced with knowledge and skills in Art, Calligraphy, Music, and Physical Education. There is a strong emphasis on the education of the whole child with daily routines designed to teach social skills, cooperation, responsibility, and good life habits (such as nutrition, health, and hygiene.) These are taught through Ethics classes, shared daily responsibilities, frequent changing of class groupings, school-wide events, talks at lunch time by the school nutritionist, and talks at health checks by health experts.

The learning objectives stated on the report card are:

- Children shall know about the natural environment, traditions, and culture of their neighbourhood
- Know the culture of foreign countries and enjoy friendship with foreign children
- Show high regard and politeness towards other people
- Enjoy life to the full
- Read widely

At Kyoto International School the curriculum is the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) Primary Years Programme (PYP). The IBO aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. According to IBO philosophy, there are 10 desirable attributes and dispositions that characterize successful students. Such students are inquirers, thinkers, communicators, risk-takers, knowledgeable, principled, caring, open-minded, well-balanced, and reflective. There are also twelve attitudes that lead to successful learning. These are appreciation, commitment, confidence, cooperation, creativity, curiosity, empathy, enthusiasm, independence, integrity, respect, and tolerance. Each week, the teachers highlight one of these principles and the students gain an understanding of these qualities through class discussions, posters, and stories they make. This is further reinforced through the nomination of one or more children from each grade who are given an award by their teachers for exemplifying the principle that has been highlighted that week. If no children have exemplified the principle in their



studies or behaviour that week, nobody is nominated. The award ceremony is therefore an eagerly anticipated part of the Friday Assembly Time mentioned above.

The educational philosophy of the PYP is based on structured inquiry. There are 6 organizing themes for the 6 Units of Inquiry (UOI) studied each year:

- Who we are
- Where we are in place and time
- How we express ourselves
- How the world works
- How we organize ourselves
- Sharing the planet

The PYP outlines a body of knowledge for all students in 6 subject areas: Languages, Social Studies, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Arts, Personal, Social and Physical Education. The UOI are trans-disciplinary. This is one major difference in the curricula of these two types of school.

There is little trans-disciplinary study in the Japanese school apart from the Integrated Studies classes. Another major difference is that the PYP curriculum is continually being updated and improved by all the teachers working as a team. Faculty meetings are held each week and every second week is dedicated to working on the UOI. Teachers work on each other's teaching plans, making suggestions.

### The number of school days a year

Japanese elementary schools are required to teach a minimum of 200 days a year. However, Shugakuin Shogakko needs 205

school days to cover all the curricular and extra-curricular activities. KIS teaches 180 days a year. This is the standard number of school days at most international schools.

### The length of each school day

Japanese school starts at 8:30 but finishes at different times on different days. (Mon, Thu, 14:35; Tue, Wed, Fri, 15:20.) Often the teacher keeps the students in longer to finish work. KIS starts at 8:25 and finishes at 15:20 every day, except for half days at the start and end of each term. Clubs are optional and run from 15:30 to 16:30 p.m.

### Comparison of class hours/year (class hour = 45 minute period)

KIS		Shugakuin	
Subject	Class hours/year	Subject	Class hours/year
Language arts	354	Japanese	235
Science/Social studies (UOI)	210	Math	150
Math	174	Integrated Studies	105
Japanese	174	Science	90
Computers	105	PE	90
PE	105	Social studies	85
Music	34	Music	80
Art	34	Art	60
Others	90	Ethics	35
		Lifestyle (gakkatsu)	35

In spite of the smaller number of teaching days, more class hours are spent on Language Arts in KIS than on Japanese language in the Japanese school. The same is true of Math, Science, and Social Studies (including the Integrated studies classes). Considerably more class hours are spent on Music and Art in the Japanese school as well as on Lifestyle and Ethics. Roughly the same amount of time is spent on PE but the large amount of time spent on computers in KIS has no equivalent in the Japanese school.

### The amount of homework set

Students at KIS are expected to read silently for at least 30 minutes each evening and to spend 10-15 minutes working on a written response to what they have read. There is also Math practice, but not every day, Spelling practice, again not every day, and some UOI or Language Arts work, but not every day. Students are expected to spend a total of 40-60 minutes on homework each day.

At Shugakuin Shogakko, the quantity and content of the homework depend on the teacher, but in general, students work on Kanji practice drills for 10-20 minutes most days, Math practice drills for 10-20 minutes most days, reading aloud (5 minutes), and finishing class work (sometimes). They also spend a total of about 40-60 minutes each day on homework.

### Assessment

At KIS assessment takes various forms. Students assess their own work and performance through weekly self-evaluation sheets and reflection sheets at the end of a UOI. They compile a student portfolio with selections of their work, such as a piece

that they are proud of, a piece that was very hard for them, etc. There is also peer assessment when they evaluate the written work or oral presentation of classmates and students from other classes. Teacher assessment is based on notes made from daily observation of class work. There are regular paper and pencil tests for subjects such as Math, Japanese, and Spelling. Part of the assessment for the UOI is an evaluation of the students' demonstrations and presentations. There are also annual standardized criterion referenced tests from Grade 3 called the International Schools Assessment. These tests are designed for students at international schools worldwide and are administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

At Shugakuin Shogakko, there is some informal self and peer assessment (depending on the teacher) but most assessment is carried out by the teacher. There are weekly paper and pencil Kanji and Math tests and final paper and pencil tests at end of each semester. The teacher also carries out daily class work and notebook checks. There are no standardized tests administered by the national or local education boards.

### Progress reports at KIS

The items on report cards are:

- Language Arts (13 sub-categories e.g. Recognizes and reads frequently-used words)
- Math (7 sub-categories e.g. Computes accurately)
- UOI (3 sub-categories e.g. Understands concepts)
- Social Skills & Work Habits (12 sub-categories e.g. Stays on task)

- Comments from teachers of Japanese, Music, Art, Computer, PE (Not class teacher)
- General comment from class teacher

All categories graded on a scale of 1 – 4:

1 = Not at this time; 2 = Some of the time;  
3 = Most of the time; 4 = Consistently well

The report card is mailed to the parents' home. Parents are encouraged to discuss the report with their children and the students write a reflection on it at the start of the new term.

### Progress reports at Shugakuin Shogakko

The items on report card are:

- Japanese language (6 sub-categories e.g. Reading ability, Writing ability)
- Social studies (4 sub-categories e.g. Understands social/global concepts)
- Math (4 sub-categories e.g. Ability to grasp mathematical concepts)
- Science (4 sub-categories e.g. Shows interest in researching natural phenomena)
- Music (6 sub-categories e.g. Plays with feeling)
- Art, P.E (both 4 sub-categories)
- Integrated Studies and Social events – comments written by class teacher
- All assessment is by the one class teacher

All categories graded on a scale of 1 – 3:

95% + = Can do this well (*yoku dekiru*); 75%+ = Can do this (*dekiru*); Below 75% = Try harder (*ganbarou*)

For each item, an overall score out of 3 is given. This is based on the average score of the sub-categories. The teacher explains to each child the grades they got for each subject and why they got them. The teacher takes care to point out that the report card shows only one aspect of the child's overall abilities. The children take home the report card and the parent stamps it with a seal to show it has been read.

### Conclusion

The Japanese school is a busy, noisy, crowded place with lots of chances to make lots of friends. The children learn to be part of a large community and to find their place in their local Japanese community. The international school is a smaller place with more chances for children of different ages and different cultural backgrounds to interact. The children learn to be part of a global community. They also have a voice in the running of the school through the Student Council. The children in the Japanese school learn mostly by being taught in a traditional teacher-centred way, whereas the children at the International school learn mostly by researching and teaching each other. Parents are expected to play an active role in the education of their children and to participate in school life in both kinds of school.

I have tried to remain impartial throughout the researching and writing of this report. It is unwise to generalize about which system is better because each child is different and even siblings like my own often feel more at home

in different school environments. As a parent, I would recommend looking realistically at your family and financial situation before embarking on an international school route. (I have not mentioned school fees as up to date information is easily obtained from all international school websites.) If you expect your family to be living in Japan on a long-term basis, and are not unduly worried about your children being equally competent in the languages used in your family, then a Japanese school would give your children firm roots in their local community. My own children have experienced both school systems and so I am leaving the closing remarks to them.

In their opinion, the greatest advantage of being at a small international school is that it is possible for the school to organize frequent class trips to interesting places because the number of children is much smaller. A second good point, also related to the size of the school population, is that children can join many different clubs each day after school at KIS, but they can only join one club at the Japanese school. The popular clubs are hard to get into and many miss out on doing what they really want to because joining the club is decided by *janken* (the paper, scissors, stone game). On the other hand, the good points of being part of a large school are that there is a lot of space to play at school and there are lots of children with whom to make friends and these friends live in the neighbourhood. The children who go to the international school often live very far from each other. Although the recess and lunch breaks are shorter and there are more lessons each day at KIS, my eldest son prefers this and appreciates the regular schedule. He says that knowing what classes he will have every day is helpful

and that it provides a good balance. To my surprise, all three children said that they thought too much time was spent on practicing for *undokai* at the Japanese school in the autumn. They didn't like this disruption to the balance of the schedule and they enjoyed the spontaneous approach and fun egg and spoon type of races at KIS sports day more. Another surprise for me was that they all prefer to eat their mother's packed lunch rather than the school lunch. On probing further, I found that the reason is not related to my culinary skills, but to the fact that their mother only gives them things she knows they will eat. For Japanese school lunch they are expected to eat everything, whether they like it or not.

These observations underline some differences in priorities for children and their parents. I hope that readers about to embark on this journey will bear in mind their children's preferences as well as their own and that this information will help you to make a more informed decision about which school will suit your family and your children.

### Resources

- Australian Council for Educational Research <[www.acer.edu.au/tests/school/isa.intro.html](http://www.acer.edu.au/tests/school/isa.intro.html)>: For details on the International Schools' Assessment (ISA) Reading literacy, Mathematical literacy, and Writing tests used at KIS and many other international schools.
- International Baccalaureate Organization <[www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org)>: For information about the IBO programmes and curricula.
- Kyoto International School <[www.kyoto-is.org](http://www.kyoto-is.org)>: For the latest information on KIS

MEXT <[www.mext.go.jp](http://www.mext.go.jp)>: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology site in Japanese

MEXT <<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/index.htm>>: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology site in English. Information about the national curriculum is provided.

Shugakuin Elementary School <[www.edu.city.kyoto.jp/hp/syugakuin-s](http://www.edu.city.kyoto.jp/hp/syugakuin-s)>: The school website is in Japanese only.