

### What MIS is seeking for.

In April 2009, after several years of discussion and immense efforts by various people, Makuhari International School opened its doors - initially at the beginning of its first year, to over 150 children. Of course there are many International Schools in Japan, certainly in the Tokyo area, but none that have opened in Japan and had the unique status that Makuhari International School already does. None have had the same significance as Makuhari International School and none have perhaps caused similar excitement and interest as this school has.

MIS (Makuhari International School) is distinctive for several reasons. Firstly, it is one of only a very few International Schools in the area and indeed the only 'recognised' such school in the whole of Chiba Prefecture. This is particularly interesting as we are only thirty minutes away from Tokyo and an almost equal distance away from Narita Airport – thus being in the heart of things, yet within Chiba Prefecture. Secondly, unlike other International Schools in Japan, Makuhari is approved by the Ministry of Education as an 'Article One' school – having the same status as normal state schools. Indeed, it is the first and currently the only International School in Japan to have such special standing. Other International Schools unfortunately find themselves lumped together as 'Article 83' schools – under the rather sombre title of 'Miscellaneous Schools' - along with Driving Centres, Hair Dressing Training Schools, English Language Centres and such like. (Among other things, our special status allows children to transfer between other schools within Japan with much greater ease. There are other benefits as well – notably in regards to status, recognition and cost discrimination which I will touch on more later.) Thirdly, as an Article One school, MIS is an International school which bases its education totally around the Japanese Curriculum, (apart from adding 'Literacy' to the list of subjects covered) whilst catering for a wide range of Japanese returnee, dual nationality and International children. A school which teaches *in* English and not a school which predominantly *teaches* English. Lastly, MIS is new, and the positive opportunity to start a new International School cannot be stressed enough.

It is difficult to over exaggerate the importance of gaining Article One Status as an International School. For many years International Schools have craved not only the financial benefits of such standing but also the respect that this position engenders. In the past, International School Heads have met lawyers, petitioned the Diet and met frequently with other International School Heads to devise ways to persuade the appropriate authorities that International Schools warrant the same significance as 'normal' Japanese educational establishments. Part of the reason perhaps being, that Article One status comes with benefits as

well as responsibilities. The benefits are clear. For example, Article One schools get financial advantages from the subsidies received for children enrolled at the school. They also warrant tax redemption on donations given to the school. In other ways they also profit. Children who have graduated from Grade 6, for example, are legally said to have graduated from Japanese Elementary School and cannot therefore be barred from entering Public Junior High School. As I have said, there are responsibilities as well for such a school as MIS. One of the main areas of accountability is in ensuring strict coverage of the Japanese Curriculum. This means in all year groups and in all subjects throughout the school. MIS is probably the first such school to have endeavoured to have successfully translated and moulded the Japanese Curriculum to suit children from varying backgrounds into a successful and vibrant syllabus that not only suits those children but positively allows them to grow as individuals; socially, spiritually, intellectually and of course educationally.

As a global parent, (or perhaps even a Japanese parent considering enrolling my child in an International School), if I were reading this article, one of the first things I might consider is; ‘how can an International School, teach international/global children using the Japanese Curriculum?’ (At the same time, I might also wonder perhaps, how it is possible using an American Curriculum or the National Curriculum for England and Wales.) To answer this, a clearer understanding of what a curriculum is would be useful.

All countries have curricula – some indeed have more than one. A group of educators sit down and compile and add to, lists of skills and objectives that they believe children need to learn. These tend, to a large extent, to reflect the country’s aspirations and identities, but there are also broad similarities between countries. For example, most countries want their children to learn how to add and subtract numbers, how to find information from different types of resources, or understand the difference between mass and weight. Most countries want their children to know that a river is different at the beginning of its life compared to when it enters the sea.

In reality, in placing one curriculum down next to another, there are often far more similarities than contradictions. The subject names may be different, the time allocations perhaps dissimilar and the ‘topics’ used in certain areas to teach those objectives may be disparate. Certainly the individualities and uniqueness of curricula tend to be a result based more on the contents on which those objectives are ‘hung’ than the skills involved. Whether a student learns about the importance of an historical figure from Japan, Chile or Scotland (and their influence on how a society has changed) is in some ways irrelevant if we are teaching those children the skills to perform such an action and the joy to carry out such an undertaking. Once the skills and concepts are taught and the enthusiasm, independence and confidence to

follow such a learning journey established, the child is already on the road to becoming a 'life-long international learner'.

Incidentally, it is interesting to consider that a current lack of a common and unified curriculum in International Schools around the world (despite the efforts of such authorities as the Inter Baccalaureate Organisation to offer a curriculum that offers a more neutral collection of skills and programmes) does not seem to have the result of significantly damaging continuity for children. You could argue that 'international children' face a much bigger challenge educationally as they travel from one country to another, than children who do not. Where a child spends two or three years in one country and then travels to another, the likelihood of finding a complete 'match' in terms of continuity of curriculum are slim - even where two schools have been using the 'same' curriculum. However, it is interesting to see that more often than not those children, who have been travelling around the world, are often highly educated and motivated learners. With that in mind, it is hard to believe that the questions of what is taught is so all encompassing and important to a child as is often cited.

Personally, I have always approached questions regarding the type/name of a curriculum with less concern, and with a view that **what** a curriculum is in some ways less important than **how** it is taught. As a Head it is always much easier to influence how a curriculum is taught. Ultimately, to teach a child in a variety of styles and to teach them to 'learn how to learn' will always stand them in better stead in their future lives than being able to, for example, remember numerous facts (and cope well with rigorous testing) - yet not understand what they mean or how to relate to them.

So, at MIS we follow the Japanese Curriculum. We take the objectives from each year group and use those as our basis. We then add to those objectives skills and additional content from other sources until we not only have an enriched syllabus to offer the children, but also a firm belief in an enriched way of delivering that curriculum to the children in our care. (I will say more about the teaching styles we adopt and the learning styles that children may or may not follow later in this article.)

As an Article One school we are required to follow the minimum number of hours for each individual subject that a 'normal' Japanese Public School would follow. In reality we teach more than those schools. MIS uses its timetable carefully to ensure that in all areas we can offer as much teaching time as possible. This means that we teach more Japanese (Kokugo) than standard Article One schools. It means we teach more maths, science and so on. This is an important thing to be able to do – especially as our children have varying levels of English and Japanese language skills which is always the basis from which we have to begin. We not only

build on the amount of time we teach but also what we teach. For example, in mathematics, we teach the Japanese curriculum, but a year ahead of most standard state schools. This means, for example, that in Grade 1 we are teaching Grade 2 mathematics.

To go into the MIS curriculum in more detail would require more time. However, it is worth pointing out that as previously mentioned, we not only cover the same skills learnt in Japanese Article One Schools, but supplement these with extra objectives found from other curricula around the world. Therefore a simple objective in a Japanese Kindergarten such as ‘Understanding the ways of life in the kindergarten, and organising the life space of kindergarten without adult assistance’, may be enhanced with other objectives such as, ‘Working as part of a group in the class, taking turns and sharing fairly, understanding that there needs to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people, including adults and children and working together harmoniously showing awareness of space, of themselves and others’.

The content that we choose in order to give substance to those skills objectives is sometimes the same as those found in Japanese School and sometimes different. For example, when studying Social Skills in Grade 4 Japanese Schools cover, ‘Disaster and accident prevention in the local community’ as one specific area of study. At MIS we enhance this by studying about ‘Disaster and accident prevention in the local community and an appropriate International local community’.

As I have already said previously, the teaching staff at MIS believe strongly that HOW we teach is often as important as WHAT we teach. To interest the children and teach in a style that corresponds with their learning style is paramount to ensuring they are tuned into the educating that is happening around them. Staff who teach at MIS know that standing at an interactive SmartBoard for the duration of a lesson and lecturing children will mean that children don’t remember more than 20% of what is taught – however exciting the SmartBoard ‘presentation’ becomes. However, if they ask children to reinforce their understanding of knowledge and skills by sharing this with other groups of children – those children will remember much more. Teaching staff know that if they break up their lessons so there are many beginnings and many endings, children will concentrate more, remember more and be interested more. Teachers understand that children learn in different ways and so therefore they need to teach in different ways during lesson times. They also know that the concept of ONE text book for all children is an alien concept and that the text book is not the curriculum. (A text book written by one particular individual or small group of individuals may suit some children in a classroom – but naturally everyone is different.) Therefore lessons are not text book based but

skills based. Where books (as part of a range of educational resources) might be used, they are used with a range of other text/reference books.

Although MIS is a very well resourced school, our biggest resources are our teachers. Our teachers are well trained, committed and career orientated. They love children and educating children. They are flexible team-players who wish to continue learning themselves as well as educating, coaching, motivating, listening to and teaching those around them. They are educators looking to constantly improve what we offer the children as well as improve their own skills as teachers. And they are teachers who ‘think outside the box’ and emphasis the skills needed for International Children – for example, effectively communicating one's thoughts, understanding other cultures, and constructing persuasive threads of reasoning.

On a day to day basis, teaching staff follow closely the Mission Statement of the school, a statement around which everything else revolves. Part of this Mission Statement states that, ‘all children are special with unique skills and gifts’. Staff at MIS firmly believe that this is true. Our role is not only to educate children as well as we possibly can, but to make sure that children have as many opportunities as possible to explore the world around them and find out new talents and knowledge that is not always embedded in the ‘set curriculum’. This therefore involves (among other things) creating as many free, wide ranging after school clubs as we can. It means offering the children chances to leave the school and visit places that they otherwise might not ever go to. It means introducing the children to people that would otherwise be outside their sphere of contact. It means opening up the children’s eyes to different ways of learning and thinking. It means instilling in the children a love of learning and the ability to ‘learn how to learn’, that will stay with them for their entire lives and ensure they really do become ‘lifelong learners’. And lastly, it means providing in school functions that celebrate the diversity of the world around us.

As mentioned earlier, MIS is a new school. This is not a unique occurrence; all schools are new at some point. However, with beginnings come opportunities. MIS has never had an onerous history dragging it backwards. It has never had to do things the same ‘because they worked in the past’. We have had the chance to begin from the start with what we firmly believe succeeds educationally and academically. We have been able to produce school policies that work distinctly for our children from the outset. We have been able to tailor our curriculum and styles of teaching from the first day of our first term and ensure that this was the model for future teaching at the school. This has been a wonderful opportunity for all.

MIS is a developing school though. It is not perfect and it never will be. But, it is a school that is still constantly striving to improve and a school that understands that, as with all

good schools, it needs to make progress every day. This progress must never stop but be a desire for all concerned with the school. Our numbers are steadily increasing despite the huge economic downturn around the world. Our children are receiving a quality education, the parents are content with this and it is our privilege to be able to teach their children at MIS. Our aim is to become recognised as the best International School in Japan and that is the beginning of our aspirations. As our reputation grows over time let us hope that we begin to fulfil those aspirations. Watch this space!