



The KUMON Way

By Masaomi Ise

KUMONSM

MATH. READING. SUCCESS.

The scene is a Kumon classroom in the outskirts of Los Angeles, California. American elementary and middle school students are working at their worksheets. Among the younger children, sitting in the last row of the classroom is a lone African-American teenager. When journalist Reiko Kinoshita approaches, she sees the student working on simple arithmetic problems.

"12 + 21, 24 + 42..." While keeping tempo with his body in a rhythmical way, the student's pen races across the paper. Big Arthur, as he proudly introduces his school nickname, tells this story through a shining white smile.

"Math has gotten to be so much fun for

me that even during my breaks from my job as a security guard I feel like getting in some work on my worksheets. I'm the most surprised of anyone at the change in me."

These were simple adding and subtracting problems, but the satisfaction of being able to whip through them shone on every aspect of Big Arthur's proud face. "I have gotten a lot faster at how long it takes me to do a whole page of problems. I want to become a registered nurse with the Army. I have to be able to pass the math and science tests to get in. I took classes at Santa Monica College but I soon realized that I lacked basic math skills. So I decided to attend Kumon."

The Kumon Method of Education begun in Japan 50 years ago has grown to exist in 46 nations and territories worldwide today, with as many as 4.14 million students. Big Arthur is one of them. Tohru Kumon, the founder of the Kumon Method, was born in 1914 in Shikoku's Kochi City. He was the second boy of eight siblings in an affluent farming family. Tohru first learned the fun of teaching himself when his fourth grade homeroom teacher told him it was OK to go ahead on his own in arithmetic with self-study in class.

He went on to a private school, Tosa Middle School, which had a philosophy of allowing gifted students to further challenge themselves through self-study. It was fun for Tohru to be able to proceed at his own pace. When he got good grades in a subject he enjoyed, he would like that subject even more. After graduating with a degree in math from Osaka Imperial University (Osaka Teikoku Daigaku), Tohru became a math teacher at Kainan Middle School in Kochi Prefecture. When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, he enlisted and shipped out for Manchuria. After returning home Tohru became the head of the math department at his alma mater Tosa High School.

After marrying and having his own children, he was astonished one day when his wife showed him the math workbook of his son who

was in second grade at the time. His son couldn't do the simple addition of $38 + 15$. Tohru decided that day to give his son math practice at home, focusing just on simple computation problems. So as not to overwhelm the child and cause him to give up, he raised the level of difficulty bit by bit as he prepared worksheets for the boy. With the help of his father's hand-written materials, the boy steadily improved his skills. Tohru's wife, observing this, suggested that the family open a math classroom upstairs in their house and invite the neighborhood kids.

Teaching his worksheets to a gathering of about 10 children, Tohru gained some reliable feedback. Children who were on a skill level of 2 (on a scale of 1 to 5) would advance to 4 after about six months, while children on a level of 4 could advance to 5 in about three months. Eventually Tohru was recommended by a high school friend to turn his home classroom into a business. After placing his first ad for instructors in a short classified newspaper ad, he got masses of applications from restless housewives with advanced educations. There were soon more than 80 Kumon classrooms, with up to 2,000 students.

Kumon Learning Center



Coax Out the Potential for Growth

As a math teacher, Tohru Kumon worked with students that complained that they were not good at arithmetic or math to find out just where the problem lay for them, and found that for most the problem originated in insufficient computation skills. If children stumbled at the basic foundation layer of adding and subtracting, they would be also unable to do word problems. Tohru felt that students that were not good at high school math should if necessary be brought back to elementary school level practice problems to attain solid arithmetic skills.

The role of the instructor is to find the problems that are “just right” for students who have a hard time with arithmetic and math, to carefully observe the students before them as they work out the calculation problems, to find out exactly where and how they get hung up, and to give them simple hints as to where their mistake lies. This enables the students to think for themselves. When they are able to solve their own problems, the work is more interesting for them, and they will be able to get full marks for their work. One of Tohru’s favorite sayings was, “When students get full marks on their work they taste the feeling of success. Then on their own they will want more and more to work and get further ahead.”

Another role of the instructor is to carefully observe the student’s work and give well-timed hints. When a child tries to learn something, initially it takes time and the child makes mistakes. This is the process by which the child learns for himself or herself the basic principles of the problem. Methods in which the child is given the right answer right away or is pressured hard to learn do not show the child the fun of discovering the basic principles, and he or she loses volition. The child can also tend to resist the pressure and try to escape from learning altogether. The act of coaxing out each individual child’s potential to grow is really the essence of the Kumon Method.

Rapid Growth of the Kumon Method

When the book, “Secrets of Kumon Method Math,” touting “even elementary school students can understand algebra” was published in 1974, it became an instant best-seller. The telephone rang incessantly with inquiries from students and

Special features of Kumon Method are:

- ⇒ Start the student off with problems that are “just right” for him or her, i.e. problems that he or she can solve at a steady speed.
- ⇒ Drill by using the same worksheet repeatedly so as to have the student review until he or she can solve the problems at a “comfortable” speed. This gives him or her a sense of accomplishment when he or she is able to easily get full marks for his or her work.



parents wanting to try Kumon and asking for a classroom to be opened near them. Through the publication of this book, Tohru Kumon became a public figure almost overnight, and Kumon grew to have 1,960 classrooms with 110,000 students.

As the Kumon Method became well-known, a number of criticisms of the method were directed at it. One was that the Kumon Method was simply rote learning, or cramming, when what was really going to be needed in education was *yutori* (relaxation of standards or leeway) to enhance creativity. Tohru Kumon argued actively against this view.

“Nothing makes me happier than seeing students who can’t keep up on school, called *ochikobore* or leftovers, who are disheartened about schoolwork, steadily regain confidence and learn to enjoy studying again, all by starting them off with work that is below their grade level. For children who are going to have to learn all sorts of new things in order to survive in the tough real world, rather than forcing children to have an allotment of yutori, for kids who want to study it makes much more sense in terms of their future to give them the opportunity to study as much as possible now.”



Comparing the realities of the collapse of educational standards and the spectacle of chaotic classrooms that every public and private school in Japan have been trapped in under the wonderful-sounding name of yutori education with the success of the Kumon Method with classrooms in 46 nations and territories worldwide and over 4.14 million students, it should be clear which approach was correct.

Children Learning on Top of a Garbage Pile

There is a mountain called Smokey Mountain in Manila in the Philippines. It is in fact a mountain of garbage that has been built up over many years, all waste from the city of Manila. The garbage has been weathered over the years and has come to resemble the earth’s surface. On top of it are located huts built of colorful vinyl sheeting. Many children live here, surviving by scavenging. At the base of the mountain is a day care facility, and on its second floor is the Smokey Mountain Kumon Center. A female instructor named Caridad told this story.

“Since I was little I grew up picking trash on this mountain. I was born here, got married here and had my children here. I was the same as the children that come here to the Kumon Center. That boy in the first row is the oldest of eight brothers and sisters. He says his little brother offered to work scavenging in his place so that big brother can work hard at Kumon and go to college. This boy had given up on school at one time but his little brother encouraged him to come back.

“Born on a mountain of trash, never going to school, making a living scavenging, playing on a mountain of trash. That is the life of the children of this area. Even if they try to leave here, they won’t be able to survive. That’s why they can never get away. That is their destiny.” A single tear traced its way down the face of Caridad as she whispered her story.

Escape from Poverty

About 60% of the Philippine, population of 75 million, live in poverty. Almost 90% of the wealth of the nation is concentrated in the hands of less than 10%, the wealthy class of Spanish and Chinese ethnic origin. For children who cannot obtain sufficient education, Caridad says “escaping from poverty is really a big, big challenge.” An educational foundation in Pangarap Village, Caloocan City asked Kumon for its support in giving the opportunity to learn to these unfortunate children. The foundation asked Kumon to provide instructional materials and to help train instructors.

Caridad was the instructor designated by the foundation. The monthly membership fee of 100 peso (about US\$2.20) is paid by the foundation. There are already 153 Kumon Centers operating in the Philippines, with monthly fees of 1,430 peso (about US\$32), but the fee at this center is set at just 1/15th the normal fee. There is also a Kumon Center at Payatas which is the newer garbage dump known as the second Smokey Mountain. A local church called for residents to contribute funds to help pay for the 100 peso monthly fee for each child attending. The Payatas Kumon Center currently has 170 people enrolled.

A volunteer named Jaime Del Rosario is paying the fees for 75 children to attend another



Kumon Center. In order to help the most families enrollment is limited to one child per family, a rule that Rosario himself established. Masumi Takahashi of Kumon Philippines helped open Rosario's center and provided materials free of charge.

"It's because there are many families with seven or eight children. One of our elementary school boys there spends time copying the Kumon materials carefully into his notebook after he's done with the worksheet. I wondered why, until I found out that only one child per family is allowed to study, so he single-mindedly copies out the worksheets because he wants to bring them home for his little brothers and sisters to do."

At the Kumon Center in Valenzuela City in the Manila metropolitan area, there are more than 500 students with many among them living in poverty. Tricycle taxi (with sidecar attached) drivers earn about 9,000 peso (about US\$200) a month, so to pay a monthly tuition of 1,430 (about US\$32) is not easy, but they still send their children to Kumon Centers, thinking of their future. There is a Kumon student whose mother makes a living selling candy in the marketplace. This student is so heart set on attending Kumon that he tries to help make up the tuition by saving up his tiny allowance every month and giving it to his parents.

Kumon Philippines in cooperation with Japanese NPO 21st Century Association is providing educational support for the Mangyan indigenous tribes of Mindoro Island in the south Philippines. Literacy is virtually zero and this group is universally discriminated against in

the Philippines. Extremely hard to travel around the island, it takes children almost four hours to commute on foot to the elementary and middle schools in the towns.

Experienced Kumon instructors from Japan together with Japanese volunteers have come to the island to teach its children. A female Kumon student named Nelmie became the first Mangyan native to graduate from a college. She eventually returned to her village as a teacher. Nelmie is the pride of the Mangyan people, who all hope they can send their children to Kumon and have them become teachers, too.

A Gift from Our Ancestors

The Kumon Study Method has a historical background that can probably be traced all the way back to the popular education given to the masses back in the Edo period (1600-1868). At that time, children were not separated by age but sat together at desks, where the teacher would teach them one on one in accordance with the progress of each. There were as many as 15,000 facilities like this in Japan at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. The literacy rate in Edo at the time is estimated to have been between 70% and 86%, which is impressive compared to the 20-25% in England's industrial cities of the time.

Certainly because the basic education of reading, writing, and arithmetic were so widespread among its people, modernizing Japan was able to catch up so quickly to its Western rivals in the fields of scientific technology and parliamentary government. This very experience of Japan is what developing countries of today need as they attempt to modernize and democratize their governments and economies. The Kumon Way which is being offered as a concrete method of education to achieve this goal is a precious gift from our nation to the entire world. At the same time, this kind of tradition is a gift from our ancestors to us, to help us rebuild contemporary Japanese education which stands at the edge of the abyss of collapse having strayed off into "yutori education." ■

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