



A sign written in four languages in the school



A classroom at Ushioda Elementary School

DURING the Edo period (1603-1867) when the Tokugawa shogunate reined over the country, Japan had little contact with foreign countries. However, with the Treaty of Peace and Amity between the United States and Japan in 1854, trade with foreign countries started to gain momentum. One of the ports that opened at that time was Yokohama Port. Yokohama, where a settlement for foreigners was established, has grown as an overseas gateway since the Meiji period (1868-1912). The population of foreigners who live in the City of Yokohama has almost doubled in the last twenty years, reaching 80,000 people. The number of children of foreign nationality or dual citizenship is also naturally increasing. More than 8,400 such children were enrolled in Yokohama municipal elementary,

junior high and compulsory education schools as of May 2016.

Ushioda Elementary School in Tsurumi Ward, located in the Keihin Industrial Area adjacent to Yokohama Port, educates a large number of children from international families. Currently some 130 children, or about 20% of all of the pupils at the school, are from international families, with parents hailing from fifteen countries including North and South Korea, China, Myanmar, the Philippines, Paraguay, Brazil and Peru. One catalyst for the student body in Ushioda Elementary School to have become multinational was the widening of the range of methods for non-Japanese of Japanese descent living overseas to work in Japan enabled by the revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1990.

SETTLING IN

The City of Yokohama in Kanagawa Prefecture has instituted a range of measures to ensure that children of international families enjoy a sound education irrespective of their language ability on entering school.

KYOKO MOTOYOSHI

“Children of foreign nationality increased in the blink of an eye at that time and we had a lot of trouble coping with them at first,” recalls Principal Hiroto Kondo. “For the students who were unable to speak Japanese fluently to receive an education with peace of mind, the prefecture and the city



Ushioda Elementary School Principal Hiroto Kondo



Ushioda Elementary School in Yokohama

worked together to establish a support system, and our school has been building know-how through trial and error.”

As part of the system in Kanagawa Prefecture, public elementary and junior high schools where there are five or more students who need Japanese-language training are allowed to open an international class with full-time teachers assigned to the class. In addition, the City of Yokohama dispatches a maximum of three part-time teachers according to the number of students who need Japanese language training regardless of their nationalities. Under this system, six teachers lead the international class at Ushioda Elementary School, and one teacher takes care of the students in each grade, from first to sixth grade. This grade-based teacher assignment system is one of the characteristics of Ushioda Elementary School and has become a factor in building a good relationship between the teachers and the students.

“Because the international class is a small group consisting of ten or fewer students, unlike a general class where about thirty students have lessons at the same time, we are able to teach according to each student’s level of understanding,” says Kondo. “Lessons like math and Japanese are the same as those in regular classes in the grade, but the teachers explain the content in simple Japanese, using many pictures and charts.”

All photos: Takemi Kato

Sometimes a student who speaks no Japanese at all enters the school. In this case, Ushioda Elementary School provides educational support in his or her native language until he or she learns more Japanese. The school asks a facility called Tsurumi International Lounge to dispatch the necessary language staff from an NPO group, with support from the City of Yokohama. With just one or two exceptions in the past, the school has been able to provide native-language teaching for all pupils needing it in this way.

Although the linguistic and cultural gaps between Japanese and international students can be large in some cases, children soon begin to play together even if they don’t understand each other’s language. If there is a child who is in trouble and doesn’t understand Japanese, other children try to help him or her by finding a student who speaks the same language, among other ways. Kondo believes that such human relationships lead to a multicultural symbiosis in education.

“The number of children with international backgrounds will continue to increase in Japan. It is necessary therefore to increase the number of public elementary and junior high schools that are able to cope with them,” says Kondo. “We will work to enhance guidance and support for international children by widely sharing our information and know-how in the future.” **J**