

HUSNA LAPIDUS

Practice as pedagogy

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Husna Lapidus has a dream for education.

Ten years after taking over leadership of Kumon Math and Reading Center (now in Manlius) from her mother, Husna has built this dream on the foundation of Kumon concepts and ideals in which she passionately believes, as well as the changes she has observed firsthand in students and education since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kumon is not only a learning method but also a philosophy with implications that extend well beyond any individual student, family, or classroom, into society itself.

In 1954, Japanese math instructor Toru Kumon developed a series of step-by-step worksheets to enable his son, Takeshi, to teach himself math. Toru “believed that the work of an educator is to foster a mindset for self-learning in children” (kumongroup.com). He dedicated the rest of his life to perfecting the Kumon educational model based on this tenet.

New Kumon students are evaluated so they may begin with work they can do easily, without any input from parents or other educators. They are sent home with worksheets (a derivation of Toru’s originals) to finish every day until their next Kumon classroom visit. Students return the sheets for review by supportive instructors who then assign the next appropriate level of work. The students leave the center with more sheets to complete independently at home until handing them back the following week.

“It’s not a miracle; it’s a practice,” Husna says.

“The secret sauce, the golden ticket of Kumon, is students starting where they are... where there are no gaps in learning... even if that seems lower than where they think they should be. When they do this, they are accessing the portion of their brain that’s automatic... automaticity. That way, they build on their knowledge gradually so that at every stage they’re growing that foundation... By greasing the wheel, getting them confident, and getting their habits ingrained, we change their mindset and we empower them with an unstoppable ability to impact the world in the ways most important to them.”

Indeed, Kumon teaches students about themselves as much as it teaches math and reading.

Husna says, “All knowledge is self-knowledge.”

Moving through the Kumon curriculum reveals to students their own tendencies, their useful and not so useful habits, allowing them to change their approach to study, become better.

“They will want to be better,” Husna says.

Since COVID, Husna observes changes in all of her Kumon students. “It’s said by the Department of Education that American children are behind by an average of three years of learning. There are a lot of kids today who have gaps... that started from COVID-time education that have never been addressed. These kids are now embarrassed to even get help or attend school. Nationally, we’re finding a higher than ever percentage of chronically absent students, and I think it is in large part because of this ripple effect,” she says.

She notes how the pandemic exposed the deficiencies in the American education system, causing parents, teachers, and students to question everything from how information is delivered and by what means and by whom and in what time frame to how learning is measured and assessed.

“As our world becomes even more globalized, parents will appreciate knowing that their child’s ability stacks up on an international scale rather than just the USA, NYS, their district, or teacher. As we know, American standards in primary education are lacking, even more so since the pandemic,” she says, referring to the international standard by which Kumon measures its students.

In short, COVID turned education, like so many things, on its head. But what can be more important than how our children are formed, nurtured, informed? As a highly educated adult who experienced the trauma of academic pressure, a parent of three independent, unique learners, and an educator herself, Husna mulls this question regularly.

She recognizes the emotional legacy of COVID, as she and her Kumon colleagues detect anxiety, social skill challenges and emotional regulation struggles amongst their students, highlighting the need for strong mental health support and social-emotional learning.

“At Kumon, we address these needs by providing a structured, supportive learning environment that fosters resilience, and academic growth,” she said. “The brain training we do at Kumon has been neurologically studied and found to enhance other prefrontal cortex functions beyond calculations and comprehension. It strengthens the brain’s abilities to elevate self-control, empathy, and emotional well-being for both students and their families.”

The mastery acquired by practicing knowledge from a place of confidence and independence naturally spills out into other places in life.

Kumon’s aspirations, as outlined on their website, line up with Husna’s: “By discovering the potential of each individual and developing his or her ability to the maximum, we aim to foster sound, capable people and thus contribute to the global community.”

Husna questions if American schools currently achieve this goal. She knows that school serves many purposes outside of simply the pursuit of academic knowledge. But what if school could be reimagined using the Kumon model? What if school could be shorter, self-regulated, different? What if students had more time to pursue their own interests and passions? What if they had no anxiety around homework and tests, no fear of trying new things, no personalization of mistakes?

“We believe the more we talk and teach, the less the students will think for themselves. The difference with the Kumon method is that the aim is to foster independent learning ability.”

Husna dreams of a time in the future when all students are encouraged to think for themselves.

During COVID she taught herself how to play guitar and she recently bought a cello.

The Kumon method of starting where you are and practicing from there, the patience and humility she’s learned as a student and practitioner of the Kumon method, gives her the belief in herself, the confidence that she can and will learn.

“I don’t know the first thing yet,” Husna says, “but I know I’m going to be able to do it.” SWM

HUSNA'S ONE WORD

KAIZEN. Kaizen is a Japanese word that means "continuously improving." I like this to describe myself because it emphasizes the journey rather than a single attribute that could be a snapshot in time. I'm multifaceted, but one thing is consistent in everything I do - I want to do it well, I want to do good, and I want to keep doing better.

