

a program showcase

Podar Jumbo Kids

by Michael Kalinowski

Mumbai, the commercial capital of India, is a group of seven islands on India's west coast. One of the most populous cities of the world, Mumbai was originally home to fishing communities. Formerly ceded to the Portuguese and then to Charles II of England when he married a Portuguese princess, the city was named Bombay by the British East India Company and renamed Mumbai in 1996.

In India, pre-primary education is not a fundamental right; thus a low percentage of children receive preschool education. Kindergartens are divided into two stages — lower (LKG for children aged 3-4) and upper (UKG for children aged 4-5). Recently playschool and nursery sections have become part of urban preprimary schools, serving children as young as two. In urban areas, where sufficient numbers of children are available within a reasonable radius, separate nursery schools may be provided. A few nursery classes are attached to junior basic or primary schools. While kindergarten in rural areas is free and paid for by the government, most schools in urban India

receive no subsidy or governmental funding. Parents pay variable fees and the expense of running a preschool rests on the owner.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) provides support and technical assistance to a number of schools in India and oversees many aspects of enforcement of education policies, especially to government-run institutions. NCERT applies guidelines uniformly for all schools, including privately-owned preschools.

In 1927, Sheth Anandilal Podar, an eminent Mumbai-based businessman, with interests in cotton mills, founded the Podar Group of Schools, and Mahatma Gandhi served as the first President of the Anandilal Podar Trust. "What started as a single institution is today a multi-school, multi-city, multi-brand entity, ambitiously executing a growth strategy with an emphasis on global standards" (www.podar.org/history.html).

Podar Jumbo Kids (PJK) was launched in 2000, after trustees decided to establish a preschool, global in its format and curriculum, but local in its philosophy. At the time most preschools used formal teaching methods, although a few were making waves by using the international *playway* method as well as international curricula and toys.

Swati Popat Vats, a well-known educator, parenting professional, and author of several books was hired to administer the school. She coined the term *Kiducation*. "Kiducation is all about education where the child's all around developmental interests are kept at the forefront. In India preschools are considered nothing more than stepping stones for high school education and parental mindsets were fixed on written work and tests. We tried to create a metamorphosis in the way



PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. KALINOWSKI

preschools were perceived.” Podar Jumbo Kids utilizes a simultaneous, three-pronged approach of parent, child, and teacher.

The parent: Staff worked to change parental mindsets through workshops. “A session of ‘Sing-Along-With-Mummy’ was crafted so that parents — mostly mothers — came to have fun, interactive sessions with their child.”

The child: PJK offered a child-centric curriculum that was *playpositive* as well as play oriented, to reduce a child’s learning stress while satisfying parental academic concerns.

The teacher: A one year diploma was crafted so that teachers could take pride in their work, but also reorient themselves with a more developmental perspective. For the first time perhaps, teachers were taught to reason and question any new/old idea before applying it in the classroom.

Vats used Montessori’s techniques and books but added other educational approaches:

- from Glendoman emerged sight reading,
- from Stiner music and movement,
- from Mahatma Gandhi the Head Heart and Hand methodology,
- from Tagore love from nature and learning through drama and puppetry,
- from Reggio Emilia day-wise progress and documentation.

Homework became *home play* to demonstrate that learning is for fun. It also propelled parents to actively participate in their child’s learning. Says Vat:

“Instead of a boring report card that gives a grade or marks to the child, PJK took a leaf from the Reggio method and started portfolios and achievement books. The child thus takes home an achievement book, where all that the child knows and not what he/she scores, is highlighted.”



For Vats, parenting and teaching people about parenting has become a mission. With books on parenting and workshops on parenting regularly conducted on school premises, she is now focused on toddlers and their parents. She says, “If we understand the secret of life skills, then all parents will have a child that is happy, motivated, a great learner, an achiever, emotionally and socially strong, and a powerhouse of knowledge and learning.” Podar Jumbo Kids has 55 centers around India.

For further information contact:

Swati Popat Vats, President, Podar Education Network
Saraswati Rd. S’cruz (W), Mumbai 400054 India
swatipopat@podar.net • www.jumbokids.com

The Program Showcases were developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education.

They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world.

Selected programs will appear in future issues of *Exchange*, and are also available on www.ChildCareExchange.com.