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Bright kids + math camp = Ivy League?

By Poornima Apte



Actor Kal Penn's Kumar, in the sleeper summer hit "Harold and Kumar go to White Castle," might not be far off the mark from the average Indian-American youth in the United States.

In the movie, Kumar is going through interviews so he can be admitted to medical school. After he botches up one such interview, he tells his father over the phone, "Yes, Dad, I know this is important. I am going to try harder next time."

In the end, Kumar discovers that he indeed does have the stuff to make it in the medical profession and all ends well.

Jokes aside, the statistics about educational and professional achievement by Indian-Americans in the United States are telling.

Fifty-eight percent of Indian-Americans over 25 hold bachelor's degrees or higher. Of those Indian-Americans who are in the work force, nearly 45 percent are employed in managerial and professional specialties.

The high value Indians classically place on education is reflected in their incomes - the median family income of Indian-Americans is around \$60,000, as opposed to the national median of \$38,000.

So it's no surprise that Indian-American children spend many hours after school and over the summer in enrichment activities specifically targeted at academics. Their parents often indicate that an excellent education for their children is one of their highest priorities.

In a pattern different from the American mainstream, even kindergartners practice math exercises over and over again to emphasize rigor. Spelling bees across the country routinely feature Indian-American children among the top participants.

Good enough for Harvard?

The middle-class focus on education probably spills over from the old country; many first-generation immigrants remember going through rigorous schooling in India to get decent jobs in a competitive and overcrowded market.

Seventeen-year-old Alingon Mitra is the son of such immigrants, Sheema and Satya Mitra, who came to the United States in the late '70s. Alingon is unassuming and polite to a fault, and his passion for Porsches is evident only when one steps into his room in the family's Worcester home.

Last November, Alingon evaluated his high-school performance at the Worcester Academy and wondered if his good grades and high SAT scores would be enough to have Harvard University bite.

He decided to apply as part of the university's "early decision" program and then waited to hear from the Ivy League school.

Alingon does not remember his elementary-school years, and they are a blur for his mother as well. The one thing both do recall is that those years were spent doing pretty much nothing. "He used to do art classes occasionally," Sheema reminisces, "but mostly it was a fun time."

Alingon did attend a Montessori school during his early elementary education, and later a Catholic school. During the middle- and high-school years, Alingon, like his older brother, Abiskar, attended the private Worcester Academy. Abiskar is a senior at Duke University.

When asked if the family made a conscious decision not to send the children to public school, Sheema indicated that they almost fell into it.

"You know, I studied in a Catholic school in India," she says. "It just kind of automatically happened."

During elementary school, Alingon did not take on too many enrichment activities, and Sheema says he did not do much over the summers as well. "Sometimes I would go to Spag's and buy some workbooks, but that's about it," she recalls.

Looking for an extra challenge

Ten years ago, Kumon was not the buzzword it is now among many Indian-American parents. A typical Saturday morning at the Kumon Center in Norwood, Mass., finds many Indian-American children lining up to test their math skills by completing rigorous worksheets.

Shuba Kumar, a software consultant and resident of Walpole, Mass., says her 6-year-old daughter, Dheekshita, is enrolled in the program because she is way ahead of the kindergarten curriculum in the public schools and is looking for an extra challenge.

Archana Dubey, who runs a Kumon Center in Nashua, N.H., says the Kumon program reinforces learning in school and is useful in both remedial and enrichment situations.

When asked if children find doing worksheets boring, she says that might be the case when children have to start at lower levels than what they are doing in school, but as they catch up and advance, they enjoy the work.

Dubey emphasizes that Kumon offers a lot of incentives for children to do good work. "In Kumon, we say that there is no vacation," she says. "Sometimes things related to academics is not fun, but if you have to go to a good college, you have to work hard."

Gauri Chandna operates ATFS Learning Center out of her home in Shrewsbury, Mass. She offers academically enriching after-school programs that focus on mathematics and other school subjects.

Chandna says that, unlike in Kumon programs, her students get to choose from a variety of topics, rather than practicing repetitive exercises.

Like Kumon, the sheets from the center focus on thorough knowledge of a topic, but a student doesn't have to complete them within a certain time limit before she is allowed to move on.

Chandna also runs a summer camp that incorporates an academic curriculum into its activities. Recently, during a warm summer day, children varying in age from 6 to 12 participate in "binder time" for an hour or two each day, completing math sheets from a wide range of topics.

Scattered around the camp room are games that reinforce the mathematics concepts learned from binder time.

The children also get to conduct hands-on science activities; a papier-mâché model of the human respiratory system sits casually propped on a corner wall.

Twelve-year-old Rajeev Chorghade, of Natick, Mass., attends the camp and is enrolled in ATFS learning programs during the school year.

He says he likes the work and would gladly choose it over anything else.

"I like working toward goals," Rajeev says. "Here we beat ourselves, not everybody else."

The quest for creativity

While math rigor seems to work well during the elementary-school years, Revathi Rao of Barrington, R.I., says that during the middle-school years, the path between school curriculum and enrichment programs such as Kumon seems to diverge.

"Kumon has its place," says Rao, whose sons followed the program for a while during elementary school. "It gives some semblance of a structure to a day. Some kids need that structure, that extra practice."

Rao says many Indian-Americans like the math rigor because it is what they remember from their own schooling in India. "It's almost like the times table we used to do in India over and over again," she laughs.

As her children entered middle school, however, Rao says they were doing more advanced and "creative stuff," and the need for Kumon never sat well with the overall education goals. The boys eventually stopped doing Kumon.

Deepti Nijhawan of Lexington, Mass., says her sons, Arun and Rishi, enrolled in the Finegold Math Center during the second half of the last academic year.

Nijhawan is impressed by the creative solutions to math problems that Mike Finegold, the director of the center, emphasizes.

When asked why she felt the need to supplement her children's curriculum in the first place, Nijhawan indicates that the schooling in Lexington is very competitive.

"Everybody is doing something," she says, "and then even the teachers assume that you already know a lot of

the material, which is a shame. You just need to keep up your grades."

Specialized camps the rage

Ultimately, it seems as if the choice for enrichment seems to come down to what works for individual children and their families. Veena Chorghade, Rajeev's mother, says the family chose ATFS because it was a good blend of creativity and academics.

Alingon Mitra, for his part, remembers that his own middle-school years were taken up with a few extracurricular activities such as flute lessons, the school newspaper, and his all-time favorite, tennis.

Sheema says she sometimes worried if he was suddenly doing too many extracurricular activities in middle school, but knew he was fine because he was never stressed or let his grades suffer. "He has that drive," she says. "He is very focused."

During the summers, Alingon did not do any enrichment camps until his very last high-school year, when he went to Northwestern University under its Junior Statesmen of America program to learn more about political communication and government design.

This is contrary to trend where computer or other specialized camps seem to be getting increasingly popular, even for middle schoolers.

The ID Tech Camp recently hosted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology had children as young as 7 learning the basics of multimedia programming. Camp Director Andrew Baron says children who are genuinely interested in computers and technology at school appreciate the opportunity to indulge their passion for a couple of weeks in the summer.

"They might be the odd ones out in school," he says, "but here they are united by a common love for the computer."

Arjun M. of Stowe, Mass., is entering seventh grade and has enjoyed all the camp's offerings, including its most popular program, video-game creation. (Camp policy prohibits children's last names from being released to the press.)

"I made a game based on Pac-Man," he says. "I got my people to walk around, pick up food and eat it."

Arjun says he can't get enough of the camp. "I like learning new stuff about technology and making lots of friends," he adds.

'There is no magic pill'

Child psychologist Anna Lombroso, who has a practice in Natick, Mass., says that while many children are indeed looking for more, most elementary schoolers need plenty of "down time."

She encourages parents to provide their children opportunities, but cautions against overdoing it. "It is a very complicated issue," she says. "You want to tread carefully. If you are going to be scheduling many things for your child, they do not have an opportunity to discover for themselves who they are and what their strengths and weaknesses are."

Last December, Alingon Mitra finally did hear back from Harvard. "It was a big fat envelope," he remembers, which indicated that the school had said yes.

Sheema, his mother, says she doesn't know what schools such as Harvard look for in an applicant. "There is no magic pill," she says. "If everybody knew about it, everybody would be getting one."

When asked if he knew why Harvard chose him, Alingon says with a shy smile, "Maybe because my ultimate goal was not to get into a good college, it was to get the most out of my high-school education."
