**The most rewarding work**

“Junko Sensei! Junko Sensei! Junko Sensei!” the students chant as their teacher enters the classroom. Japanese LowK teacher Junko O’Neill is truly adored by her students. “Imagination tea parties! Painting and playing! Glue and scissors! Dinosaurs! Making houses for our little pets!” the students shout out some of their favorite activities from class this year.

“Junko is very caring and understanding. The children really love her,” parent Ryan Dyson said. “My son constantly talks about Junko at home.”

Originally from the small lakeside town of Shiga, Japan, Junko often dreamed of living in a big city like Tokyo or abroad when she was young. She started studying English during elementary school and became fascinated with immersion education in college. After graduating she started teaching young children English at Shichida Method schools in Japan and Singapore. “When I lived in Singapore I was so fascinated by children who spoke two languages naturally. They conversed mostly in English and Chinese but some also spoke English in combination with Malay or another language.”

Although Junko doesn’t see many parallels between the Shichida Method and the International Baccalaureate (IB) they do have one thing in common: “neither program focuses on making children memorize a series of facts, instead empowering children to take ownership of their learning,” she noted.

Junko moved to Portland in 2005 and started at TIS in 2006 as a Japanese Assistant Teacher. “I had great experiences working as an assistant teacher for four years and then another dream came true when I was promoted to homeroom teacher! I was so excited and scared at the same time. The school year was just days away, and I had so much to prepare, that I barely had time to appreciate the changes that were coming. I’m so grateful to my first class for teaching me so much,” she said.

Working with preschoolers comes naturally to Junko. “I had a wonderful experience during my early years of education and formed very strong bonds with my teachers,” she commented. “I was naturally drawn to recreate that experience in my professional life. I find working with young children to be the most rewarding kind of work imaginable. Young children are uniquely talented at making me think, laugh, or feel surprised – sometimes all at once! I learn from them every day and it still amazes me to see the beauty of the world through their eyes.”

At any moment you will find Junko engaged and excited to be teaching and learning alongside her students. “I believe that a teacher’s energy directly affects the students’ learning. If I feel bored with my lesson, how could my students enjoy engaging in their learning?” she explained. “I always try to keep in mind that if I feel excited and interested in my lessons, the students will reflect my energy back to me and their classmates.”

“Junko has always been full of warm energy – toward teaching, the students, the families and her coworkers. The students really respect her and see her as a motherly figure,” Japanese lead teacher Keiko Buckendahl said. Ryan agreed, “She has that personality – everybody is drawn to her and everybody loves her.”

Junko is often recognized for her outstanding artistic talent and creativity. Parents Yukako and D’Arcy Owen have seen Junko’s creativity directly influence their daughter: “Her teaching is so creative and artistic and she is so effective in teaching the IB units. The projects our daughter brings home are beyond what one would expect from a usual class of preschoolers. She shared a picture she drew of a family, in the picture the family was dressed as Bedouins inside a tent in the desert – we were very impressed. It’s this kind of thing that tells us that Junko is not only growing our daughter’s aptitude for art but also creating a strong connection with the IB units. We are very pleased with the creativity and deep level thinking that all the kids in Junko’s class seem to display.”