



Next generation tutor dazzles students

By Nitesh BOODHOO

A Japanese android known as *Saya*, created and developed by scientists at the Tokyo University of Science – the first robot tutor in the world – has proved a hit with school children in Mauritius. The futuristic learning experience was organised by the local non governmental organization (NGO) 'Societe pour la Promotion des Entreprises Specialises' (SPES). According to SPES programme officer, Helena Langlois, technology can be utilized to make the teaching and learning experience more effective.

"The purpose was to high-

light the joys of technology to children. They had great fun when *Saya* called out their names," said Langlois, "she has not only enchanted the children but also adults who have been interacting during the tutoring sessions".

Saya can express six basic emotions – surprise, fear, disgust, anger, happiness, sadness. In a demonstration, the robot's mouth popped open and its eyes widened to appear surprised. *Saya* pulled back on its lips to produce a smile and articulated simple preprogrammed phrases such as 'Thank you.' Langlois explained that *Saya* was here on a technical exchange programme between

the NGO and the university. She emphasized that Mauritius must adapt to new technologies as non-access is definitely a strong barrier to learning.

Professor Hiroshi Kobayashi and his team at the university have developed *Saya* for over 15 years. First developed as a receptionist robot in 2004, *Saya* was tested in a real Tokyo classroom in 2009 with a handful of fifth and sixth graders. Her facial expressions are made possible by a series of 18 motors that function as human muscles and her language consists of approximately 300 phrases and a vocabulary of some 700 words. ■