



# Discovery Montessori School

Amelia Sewell visits the kindergarten campus in Discovery Bay

With Hong Kong's limited supply of space, it is not unusual to find kindergartens squeezed into small, pokey corners. The resulting atmosphere is therefore often more akin to a dark store cupboard than an inviting place for inquisitive minds to learn.

Discovery Montessori School (DMS) in Discovery Bay's North Plaza however is no such place; because whilst the space may be compact, it is nonetheless a wonderfully light, bright kindergarten that feels both modern and homely. With clever mezzanines built into the classrooms that give the space the playful feel of a tree house, the school is free of posters stipulating dos and don't (other than one polite sign asking parents to remove shoes). Looking over the bay, which immediately post-Mangkhut was looking beautifully inviting, this is a kindergarten that feels entirely fresh and welcoming.

Montessori is an educational theory that is broadly familiar to many, having been in practice for over a hundred years. In a (crude) nutshell - with apologies to any experts out there, it promotes the idea of child-led, individualised

learning within a mixed age-group environment. Classes are hands-on, focusing on sensory play; and of crucial importance is the concept that each child chooses (within established limitations) which activity they want to take part in. It is about as far from rote learning as Donald Trump is from winning the next Nobel Peace Prize.

With educational 'trends' frequently popping up, Montessori has been quite a fashionable word for schools to mention in their mission statements. However, there is a difference between those that say they are 'Montessori-style' and those that are purebred Montessori schools. DMS is the latter; lead by two passionate Montessori teachers in each class, the kindergarten is a fully invested ambassador for this increasingly popular teaching style.

The kindergarten in DB Plaza is one of DMS's three campuses, with another just down the road housing the primary school (DMA) and another in Central. The DMS kindergarten started in 2010 and now has 120 pupils aged between

one and six. The Nursery (1-2.5 year olds) and Little Casa (2-3 year olds) are in classes of their own age group but the 3-6 year olds are in mixed classes.

Most of the pupils live only a short distance away but there is also a school bus service which also helps to cater for those in Tung Chung and Tsing Yi. Despite the bus service



Flower arranging

though, the vast majority of children walk to school, which is in keeping with that enviably calm, wholesome feel that Discovery Bay is known for.

The school is run by Principal Gloria Law and Vice-principal Marsida Gostivari, two passionate and knowledgeable Montessori specialists who relish the chance to educate both children and parents on the benefits of Montessori schooling. And in many cases, it is the parents who need more guidance than the children.

As Gostivari explains, "Some parents want to see results immediately but Montessori focuses on the process more than results. We teach our children that the way you do something is much more important than just what you achieve. These are skills that you will have all through your life, and once you have them, the results will come."

In order to help the parents understand the process and, if desired, continue it outside of school as well, DMS runs parent evenings on the various aspects of the ethos. This helps to compound what the children learnt in the classroom.

"We explain the five areas of the teaching but we also explain to them how we demonstrate to the children so that the parents know how to apply this at home as well," Law says.

Gostivari adds, "In a sense, Montessori is a

lifestyle. We do hope that when the children go home they will start doing things in a Montessori way. So for example, they will tidy up after themselves. That's when parents say to us – "this is really working!"

A key feature of the ethos is the promotion of independence, the development of coordination of movement, and the building of confidence.



Montessori is a happy place to be for children and adults

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The mixed age group, on the other hand, provides a vertical influence in the classrooms which encourages children to learn from each other and allows leadership skills to develop.

Less dependence on the teacher is also encouraged by allowing the children to choose which activity, of a pre-decided selection, they do instead of conscripting everyone to do the same thing at once. Rather than inviting all out chaos, the result at DMS is wonderfully harmonious and surprisingly ordered. On my visit, I peeked into every classroom and, amazingly, there was not a cacophony of bedlam erupting in each corner, which one might expect in such a scenario. Instead, I saw peaceful but productive classes of both individual and collaborative work with interaction of children of all ages.

A phrase that pops up a lot when discussing Montessori is “freedom within limits”. The limits part is one that Gloria Law likes to clarify.

“One of the statements I hear often is, ‘In Montessori, children have no limits, they can practically do what they want!’ Well, it’s true that it is based on the principle of free choice; however the freedom we give to our students is within limits. The purpose of the “freedom within limits” is to promote true discipline. If the child is being disruptive or misusing the material, the teacher will intervene and redirect him to other more appropriate materials. We do not simply ignore the behaviour,” she says.

In addition to being a Montessori school, DMS also offers a bilingual environment. The day is structured so that the first circle time is conducted in English, after which the main class



Presentation of the Continents Globe

resumes and at the end of the session the circle time is conducted in Mandarin.

“There is an equal portion of time to stimulate both languages,” Law says.

The classroom is prepared before the children arrive each day with all the materials in both languages. In each class, there is always one English speaker and one Mandarin speaker. With both teachers moving around the room throughout the 3-hour lesson, as the class evolves, the children are given a fully bilingual environment on each subject.

And finally, here are two glorious words that every sane parent of a young child wants to hear – NO HOMEWORK! None - not even a smidgen. Hearing this is the educational equivalent of hearing angels sing, although anyone familiar

with Montessori will not be surprised as the concept of homework goes against the structures of the ethos. But nonetheless, it is something in which we should rejoice.

“The students learn in full concentration through the work during 3-hour work cycle. The only thing we suggest to parents is that they read to their children,” says Law. Amen to that.

The children of DMS have no idea how lucky they are to have a kindergarten like this on their doorstep.

*Discovery Montessori School is hosting an Open Day at their Central campus from 10am until noon on November 17. Visit their website for more details. Discovery Montessori School (Central), 3/F Mandarin Building, 35-43 Bonham Strand, Central. [dms.edu.hk](http://dms.edu.hk)* 

