

Discovering Montessori

We take a tour of *Discovery Montessori Academy*, the primary school campus located in Discovery Bay, to see first-hand the benefits of a Montessori education



During our visit to Discovery Montessori Academy, the children are making presentations to their parents. We sneak into the back of the large, open room and watch as the children in the mixed-age class – aged between eight and 10 years – each stand up and address their audience.

The children have been working on a project about Early Man for approximately four months. They've been watching documentaries, undertaking research, writing up their findings and creating a timeline, culminating with this presentation.

It's always impressive seeing a young child stand up and make a presentation, overcoming their nerves and speaking loudly and clearly; it's not easy to do. When we consider that for some of these children English is a second language, and that a few have only recently learnt to speak English at all, it's even more impressive.

Also impressive are the sheets of handwritten paper included on the timelines they've created. The writing is very neat, and all cursive. At Discovery Montessori, the children learn cursive writing when they are just three years old. "Cursive writing is key

to Montessori learning, representing fluidity of hand and mind," explains one of the teachers.

In a classroom next door, a group of children, who were not quite ready to tackle the subject of Early Man, are also making presentations, but this time about insects. The children are either a little younger or have a lower level of English. One child is originally from Russia. When he joined Discovery Montessori Academy he had no spoken English at all; six months later he could communicate verbally and one year later, he can read and write in English. That's pretty impressive.

The students at the school are a mixture of nationalities; there are European and Asian families, including Hong Kong Chinese families. It's

a truly international school.

But how has it achieved such positive results with teaching language skills? This comes down to a mixture of hard work, patience and the Montessori way of teaching.

Montessori learning is suitable for all children, including gifted children or those with special educational needs, as it focuses on individual learning. There is no pressure – children can learn at their own pace, speeding up if they are fast learners or taking their time to work on areas that may require more work, so it provides a great setting to learn languages.



In another classroom children age six to eight years – the equivalent of grade 1–3 in a regular school – are working to a three-hour work cycle on a variety of tasks. The children do not sit on a chair; they have a work area on the floor. They are free to move around, but not to go onto other people’s work area. They are allowed time to settle, but then they concentrate. “Montessori is freedom within limits,” says Dr Christie Leung, school supervisor of Discovery Montessori Schools. “A successful Montessori classroom is very calm and works in harmony,” says Christie. “The freedom allows children to build their own self-discipline, they learn to respect others and to make the right choices.”

Discovery Montessori Academy is an intimate school, so the staff number is fairly small compared with other schools. It is close-knit and feels like a family rather than a large corporation. It’s comforting to the children. There is an open-door policy and parents have been known to come and spend the best part of a week familiarising themselves with the school. There is no homework so parents are encouraged to come for update meetings to keep informed of their child’s progress. The school prides itself on its communication with parents.

The school currently has IB candidate school status and is working toward becoming an accredited IB

school in the next two to three years. It is the only Montessori school in Hong Kong working with an IB curriculum.

Ms Tammy Chan, principal of Discovery Montessori Schools, believes that the combination of Montessori and IB is a natural fit. Montessori builds the foundation of subject matter while IB provides children the skills to present. And, as we’ve seen, the presentations are a key part of school life here.

Tammy feels that a lot of people misunderstand Montessori education, especially when it comes to its use as a curriculum for elementary education. “They are worried because of the mixed ages and because you can’t see [results] so clear-cut. But we have



children excel above their age level, and children that were behind that are able to catch up in a very short time," she says.

How do the teachers judge these levels? The school has developed its own benchmarking based on those set by the US Department of Education and the Hong Kong Education Bureau. These benchmarks guide the teachers on their expectations of the children indicating what they should achieve by each grade. The school uses its own tools to make assessments at the beginning of the year, looking at reading, writing, maths and also Chinese. These are then checked at the end of the year to see progress and to check that children exceed these benchmarks.

When it comes to learning Mandarin, children are put into ability level, not age. There is a native stream and non-native stream, and each stream has levels 1,2,and 3. The children are taught traditional characters. The traditional way of teaching would involve lots of memorisation, but that's not the way it's taught at Discovery Montessori. "We show them the way, we give the keys to learn," explains Tammy, "because not everything can be memorised." She believes that once you know the structure of the traditional Chinese, like radicals and stroke order, you can almost copy and write every

single word. "Our Chinese is very advanced," says Tammy, "the children are able to write sentences and write a story also, using strategies." The native stream is particularly strong, meeting the levels achieved in local schools in Hong Kong.

Children also have art, and PE and music lessons twice a week. Music involves participating in a string orchestra or band. There is also dance movement and choir. There's outdoor space, including a basketball court, although when we visit, the rain keeps play very much inside.

As a group, Discovery Montessori consists of three campuses, educating some 600 children. The Central campus, located in the heart of Central, has six classrooms and caters for children age one-to-six years. Another Discovery



Bay campus, also featuring six classrooms, caters for children age one-to-six years. This Discovery Montessori Academy campus caters for children age six-to-12 years.

Although many of the families do live in the Discovery Bay area or Tung Chung, there is also a school bus bringing children from Pokfulam, Central and Kowloon.

Tammy and Christie are clearly incredibly proud, and devoted to the DMS schools, which first opened in 2010. "We put in a lot of effort. For children with so many different languages to come together in harmony, it's a lot of hard work," explains Tammy. "The first year was hard work; there were no role models in the class because there were no older children. Kindergarten was always successful, but elementary had this difficulty but we overcame it. A grade two pupil is now doing the work of a grade three or four student." The hard work is clearly paying off and there is a lot of which to be proud. 

