

# CHOOSING THE RIGHT CURRICULUM



Photo: Jonathan Wong



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Deciding on a kindergarten can be challenging, so understanding the different curricula available is of utmost importance, reports **Anjali A. Hazari**

In late September, the Hong Kong government announced its policy on free quality kindergarten education, which represents a new milestone in the development of early childhood teaching in the city.

From the start of 2017/2018 school year, annual expenditure will increase from HK\$4 billion to around HK\$6.7 billion, with estimates indicating that nearly 75 per cent of half-day kindergartens will be free of charge.

This is certainly an encouraging sign, as statistics show that the number of local kindergartens increased only marginally over the last six years, compared to an increase of close to 50 per cent for "non-local" schools.

In the same period, pupil numbers increased by nearly 25 per cent, while the number of trained teachers with certificates in early child-

hood education grew by around 22 per cent.

"There is no shortage of early childhood learning centres in Hong Kong," says Urvanshi Mahbubani, a Year 1 teacher with nine years' experience. "However, it is important to select one that is right for your child, since each school plans lessons within the framework of a specific curriculum and employs distinctive teaching methods."

The models of early years teaching most commonly used in Hong Kong include Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and other "traditional" methods.

Montessori education emphasises child-centred learning and a relaxed environment, with the teacher acting more as a guide than an instructor. The children complete "work cycles" in which they select different resources to use at their own pace. The classrooms are of-

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ten organised in a way that children of different ages work together, with older kids serving as mentors for the younger ones.

Waldorf education is based on the educational philosophies developed by Rudolf Steiner. It divides childhood into three developmental stages and sets out learning strategies appropriate for each one. There is a daily routine which includes free play, art work, circle time, outdoor recess, and practical tasks with rhythmic variations. At present, Highgate House is the only accredited Waldorf pre-school in Hong Kong.

Schools following the Reggio Emilia approach include Fairchild Junior Academy and Blooming Buds pre-school. Lessons look to inspire a spirit of inquiry, encouraging children to explore and better understand the world around them. Questions may lead on to projects, and in a system of

“curiosity-based learning”, teachers tend to act more as mentors or partners than simply instructors.

Mahbubani, who trained in the United States and completed a master’s in early childhood education in London says that in practice, many teachers incorporate key aspects of each method. “Although I teach a traditional Year 1 class, where conventional, instructional lessons are initially teacher-centred and child-observed, I do see the benefit in also giving students practical Montessori materials to work with,” she says. “For instance, children have the opportunity to fasten and unfasten things like Velcro straps, zippers, shoelaces, buttons and buckles.”

Research shows there are beneficial aspects to each model, but Mahbubani advises selecting a pre-school that best reflects a child’s needs and favoured methods of learning. Some children thrive when given the opportunity to explore and direct their own learning, while others do better with more structure and formal instruction.

In addition, parents should be sure to do plenty of research and not be afraid to ask questions. Many schools offer trial classes and let parents observe part of a lesson, which offers useful insights. However, parents are advised to check each school’s credentials, as certain schools have been known to claim accreditation which

has not yet been granted.

Paulina Yuen, a lecturer at the School of Continuing Education at Hong Kong Baptist University, advises parents to look for developmentally appropriate curricula for their children. This is important for both building self-confidence, and establishing a strong relationship with teachers.

“Children need time and space to construct their own understanding,” Yuen says. “A play-based curriculum helps a child develop cognitively, socially and emotionally.” ■