

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

LEARNING FOR LIFE

SETTING A FRAMEWORK FOR KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

A good kindergarten blurs play and academics, serving as a bridge from home or preschool education to learning in a more traditional classroom setting, writes **Pin Lee**

In Hong Kong, it is not unusual for parents to feel anxious about giving their children a head start in education, right from kindergarten. Although preschool education is not mandatory in Hong Kong, most parents enrol their children in an early-learning programme because of the city's competitive educational system and the high expectations that accompany children's preparations for formal schooling.

Getting your child into a good kindergarten is paramount, so the thinking goes, because it can lead to admission to a respected primary/junior school, and then to a competitive secondary school and, eventually, to a top university.

Although the curricula in kindergartens can vary from one institution to another, most aim for similar goals – most importantly, to serve as a smooth introduction to primary school for any child. The Hong Kong government encourages kindergartens to take the child-centred educational approach when teaching children how to be socially aware, to cultivate good habits and be curious about their surroundings.

However, what children learn during their years at kindergarten is often the centre of scrutiny. There has been criticism that some kindergartens subject kids to too much schoolwork, often with little exposure to physical education or arts, music and science.

In the more academically inclined institutions, children are also subjected to rote memorisation or taught through drill and practice, and expected to be able to do things by the time they leave preschool that some – perhaps even many – are not developmentally prepared to do.

So what are the hallmarks of a high-quality kindergarten curriculum? This begs some questions. And what should children be learning at kindergarten in the first place?

Early childhood educators say kindergartens should help form the building blocks of physical, social and emotional development in youngsters. As such, some academic learning – the basic concepts of mathematics such as counting, recognising shapes and reading time – are necessary, and so are literacy, critical thinking and honing cognitive skills.

Experts also point out that a good preschool should provide a bridge from education at home or at kindergarten level to education in a more traditional classroom setting where children must interact with a teacher and follow rules. As such, learning soft skills like self-control and how to cooperate with others will help children transition more easily into primary school.

According to Betty Yau, principal of Fairchild Kindergarten, learning numeracy and literacy are all part of early education, but equally important are the soft skills to prepare children for the modern workforce.

"In this digital age, knowledge is freely available and at the end of our fingertips, but problem-solving skills, critical thinking and collaboration are all things that need to be developed in an early-years classroom," says Yau.

She added that students at Fairchild, through being in a nurturing environment and supported by mindful teachers, also learn to be kind, empathetic and respectful, which are all soft skills developed from a young age.

Jen Crickenberger, curriculum instruction coach and Junior Grade 1 literacy coordinator of The Harbour School, says beginning school before the age of four depends entirely on the child's readiness and family preference.



Students at Fairchild Kindergarten are instilled with empathy from an early age. Photo: Handout

"I believe that drilling facts into such a young child can cause burnout and a dislike for school. A high-quality kindergarten programme that is well-versed in what is developmentally appropriate for children as young as two will emphasise play in a print-rich environment," says Crickenberger.

Geoff Heney, lower primary principal of Hong Kong International School (HKIS), states, "Kindergarten can be the foundation for all learning in a child's educational career. Of course, basic maths and literacy skills are built in kindergarten. At this age, students should be given the

opportunity to learn what numbers, shapes and measurements mean. It is a time to build their conceptual understanding and comprehension skills for primary school."

But Heney also stresses that a good kindergarten will also help students to learn how to develop healthy relationships and start to build friendships. He says teaching children to be independent is another aspect of preschool.

"It becomes a place where students begin to organise themselves and learn many self-help skills and tasks on

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■



Children have been found to master skills far faster through play than traditional learning. Photo: Handout

their own or with teacher-guided practices. Through a language-rich environment where students are questioned, encouraged to share ideas and thoughts, and solve authentic problems – they are building strong language and cognitive skills which assist in effective collaboration, academic achievement and successful relationships,” says Heney.

“Kindergarten builds on the idea of encouraging students to be curious. We want them to explore their passions and ask questions in order for the learning to become authentic and meaningful to them.”

Faced with criticism that some kindergartens have become too focused on academics, educators say teaching through play is a better approach since this is a proven way for students to learn both academic and non-academic skills.

Yau says Fairchild is in complete agreement that it is through play that children learn most effectively.

“Brain development in the first six years is immensely important to support the connections children make,” she states.

“That is how they can make sense of everything around them, understanding their place in the world. Play-based learning in a nurturing school setting best supports the development of brain connections, and the most efficient way for young children to learn is through joyful, active and engaging hands-on experiences.

“Through play, children can master skills through 20-30 repetitions, rather than over a 100 in traditional learning modes. Children at play are at work, figuring out their own theories such as how a stone can sink in water, or why does the turtle swim in shallow water.

“Using real-life ideas, they can discover answers by themselves, rather than be spoon-fed the answers. Through this process of active learning, children can be much more creative and innovative, and we believe this is how they learn best,” adds Yau.

Fairchild Kindergarten, according to Yau, subscribes to the Reggio Emilia method of teaching whereby children learn through their individual interests.

“We are one of the few Reggio Emilia-inspired schools in Hong Kong where we honour a strong image of the child as competent individuals. Our teachers plan many projects in the classroom to create a happy, engaged and rich environment where no two days are the same but every day is fun, exciting and productive. When children do not want to leave school at the end of the day, we know they’ve had a great day,” adds Yau.

“We follow the interests of children, rather than follow a fixed schedule of learning. This makes the learning more interesting for the children, and they are therefore more engaged by having more ownership of the content of their learning. Children thereby become active learners. They do not need teachers to ‘teach’, they just need teachers to support and guide their questions.”

To enhance the learning experience for youngsters, Yau says Fairchild introduces many natural elements such as sand, water, shells, plants and insects, into the classroom. This, she says, will also teach kids from an early age about social responsibility and love for Mother Earth.

“Having natural living things in school helps children learn to look after the insects or animals, learn about their body parts, the life cycle, what they eat, and helps develop their empathy, understanding and awareness of sustainability. Children then learn to appreciate relationships in the world and how the natural world impacts them and others,” says Yau.

The Harbour School adopts the US Common Code Standards when teaching mathematics and literacy, and takes an integrated approach to teach science and social studies.

“Developmental skills such as social skills, taking turns, showing responsibility and an emphasis on kindness are interwoven within the school day, whether it is when children are reading a levelled text in a small guided reading group or pretending to be a shopkeeper selling apples or sushi in our structured play space,” says Crickenberger.

The Harbour School also advocates teaching through play. Citing the 2009 report by the National Association

The Harbour School takes an integrated approach to science and social studies.

Photo: Handout



Children at play are at work, figuring out their own theories such as how a stone can sink in water, or why does the turtle swim in shallow water

for the Education of Young Children, Crickenberger says play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence.

The report says play gives children opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practise emerging skills.

“Our students play throughout the day, from independent exploration of ‘maths tubs’ filled with pattern blocks, teddy bear counters and playing in a structured play space to hula hooping outdoors during recess,” adds Crickenberger.

“Whether online or on campus, our kindergarten programme offers a hands-on US curriculum that is tailored to the needs and strengths of each student.”

Heney says teachers at HKIS adopt an inquiry-based approach when teaching youngsters. Students will be encouraged to ask questions or teachers begin a lesson with a question. This will spark curiosity and students can then explore and build upon that teaching point.

“What is important to note is that we teach our core subjects in a manner where students feel a strong connection to what it is they are learning. We want students to feel like they are a reader, an author, a scientist, a mathematician

“Building a learning identity for each child is of the utmost importance. It is important to recognise that each child brings their own unique gifts to a school and we believe in celebrating that,” says Heney. “In addition, that belief in themselves sets them up for success as they go through school.”