

Alma Forest School

Autumn Newsletter - November 2023

Middle School Special Edition

Special Edition

We're thrilled to unveil details of our Middle School curriculum in this newsletter. Come September 2024, our inaugural Grade 6 class will embark on their Middle School adventure. In a style quintessentially Alma, the curriculum builds upon the skills our students honed in the Escuela Bosque and throughout Primary School. Within the Middle School, named "The Lab", students will immerse themselves in extensive projects driven by their passions, an ambition to shape the world, and the chance to navigate various tools and technologies. Being an Alma Middle Schooler can be likened to entering university at age 11.

In addition to information about the Middle School, this edition includes some parenting ideas, recommendations and thoughts on education and research reviews.



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School News



Recently, Hugo joined us for several weeks at Alma as a part of his global journey to immerse himself in diverse communities, from Sami reindeer herders and monks to scouts and other intentional communities. His visit to Alma came at the end of his journey and he has written a very insightful article about his time at the school. It's heartening to observe someone without a background in education pinpointing and appreciating the core values of our school and their manifestation in practice.

"Relationships don't happen overnight. It takes time to build that trust as well as shared experiences to nurture those relationships. This is why, beyond projects, it is essential to share informal moments where we can be fully ourselves. This is what inspired me a lot with the Alma Forest School."

I can't count the number of games of Fireball (a cooperative game inspired by dodgeball), where the teachers were just as sweaty as the students. Indeed, there, everyone plays with everyone: the teachers are encouraged to play with the children, to share their own emotions, and even to camp with them during the famous "sleepover nights" (nights where the students sleep in their class - what a dream!). It is these informal moments that allow relationships of trust and intimacy to be created.

It would have been impossible to create such connections only in math or reading classes. However, it is on these links that their entire pedagogy is based. Without informal moments, there are no authentic connections and without authentic connections, not enough trust and vulnerability to truly learn from each other."

[Read the full article here.](#)



Democratic Education in Nature

Our staff recently participated in a study investigating democratic education in nature. This study builds on recent educational research that advocates for a holistic approach focusing on overall wellbeing, rather than solely on academic achievements. This shift is influenced by advancements in neuroscience and child development, emphasising the need for nature-connected and respectful education. **International bodies like UNESCO endorse education models that prioritise children's rights and their connection to nature. Despite this, traditional education systems are slow to adapt to these progressive methods.** The study underlines the benefits of Democratic Education in Nature, combining theoretical and empirical analyses. It highlights the positive impact on children's development and suggests national advocacy measures, including awareness campaigns and political action, to support schools in implementing this pedagogy. Below is a link to the project website where you can find the complete study which includes a comprehensive review of different types of nature-based approaches. Also available on the website is a set of guidelines based on the research that helps schools and parents implement democratic education in nature.

[Project Website](#)

Eco Committee Update

Our school's Eco Committee is embarking on an impactful journey this year, with a dedicated focus on the crucial theme of water. Unanimously chosen by committee members, this focus stems from our collective concern during a prevailing drought. Recognising the urgency, we aim to deepen our understanding of water conservation, exploring effective ways to harvest and utilise this precious resource responsibly.

In collaboration with the LifeTerra Foundation, we are orchestrating a significant initiative to combat environmental challenges. Our plan involves planting 1000 trees in the San Enrique valley. This endeavour not only addresses the immediate ecological concerns but also supports the local fauna, fostering a sustainable habitat. Through these concerted efforts, our Eco Committee strives to make a positive impact on our school community and beyond.

Thoughts from the Principal

SCHOOL, CHILDHOOD, PARENTING



Alma Students Compared

Parenthood, as you know, is a journey strewn with moments of anxiety and joy. Opting for a non-traditional educational path, such as the one we offer at Alma, might occasionally exacerbate those apprehensions.

It's natural to occasionally gauge your child's progress against 'traditional' benchmarks. However, I urge you to question: Why use the standards you sought an alternative to, to evaluate your child's progress?

It's easy to get fixated on tangible milestones. For instance, if a 7-year-old's writing isn't akin to the 'norm', it's easy to forget the plethora of other essential skills they're mastering - skills that aren't often captured in traditional assessment measures. **Remember, earlier mastery isn't an indicator of long-term success or passion in a subject.**

So, when you find yourself making such comparisons or these thoughts encroach upon your peace, consider the following:

Reflect upon how content and self-assured your children are. Recognise their worldly perspectives, their eloquence in expressing ideas, their ability to resolve conflicts and articulate emotions. These attributes, though intangible, are foundational for their journey ahead.

Choosing a progressive education for your child requires courage and trust. Trust in them, in us, and importantly, in yourself.

Stop Telling Girls That They Are Pretty!

From the moment children step into the world, they're met with a flurry of compliments. For girls, the focus often revolves around appearance, beginning with the ubiquitous, "Isn't she pretty?", and other comments focusing on hair, clothing and appearance in general. Pay attention to how people speak to your children and you will be surprised how prevalent this is. As well-intentioned as these remarks may be, they inadvertently reinforce societal values that prioritise beauty above all else.

It is crucial to redirect our emphasis from appearance to ability, character, and individuality. Praising girls predominantly for their looks can narrow their self-worth to mere physical attributes. Instead, we should cultivate environments where children of all genders are recognized for their talents, intellect, and kindness. Let's celebrate their mathematical prowess, their artistic creativity, or their leadership in group activities.

By shifting the conversation, we can **empower girls to see themselves as more than just a reflection in the mirror**, fostering confidence that goes beyond skin deep.

Similarly, we must address and deconstruct gender stereotypes that pigeonhole boys. Comments regarding their strength, toughness and size discourage a broader view of what boys can be and the lives they can lead. It's troubling to note that even primary school-aged boys grapple with body image issues, obsessing over aspects like whether they have a six-pack, their hair length or being labeled as fat.

Do we really need to comment about a child's appearance and body at all? Children look to adults for direction, and praise is seen as a request to do more of something. Let's focus on what really matters.



The World of Parenting

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION

“Are jittery parents today taking all the fun out of their children’s play?”

Over the past twenty years, Western societies have vigorously promoted physically active play among children, aiming to bolster their health. However, despite these efforts, there’s growing concern that childhood has become less physically active and less authentically playful.

A recent study offers new insights into this issue. Its findings suggest a notable shift: a fracturing of naturally occurring physical activity from childhood play. This evolution in play and childhood experiences mirrors broader generational changes.

One key observation is how changes in childhood and parenting styles are interlinked. **There’s an intensification in parenting approaches, leading to more parental surveillance and a tendency towards organized forms of childhood physical activity.** This shift often comes at the cost of spontaneous, unstructured play.

This research provides valuable perspectives for educators and parents alike, reminding us of the importance of balancing structured activities with the freedom for spontaneous play. It invites us to reconsider how we approach physical activity in children’s lives, aiming for a blend that nurtures both their health and their innate need for unstructured play.

[Read a summary of the study here.](#)

[Read the full study here.](#)



“How to talk to your children about sex”

Lots of good pointers in this article to help you navigate this difficult topic. Here are some key points but make sure to read the whole thing.

“Silence is not an option. You cannot keep your child from being exposed to bad information or values you don’t agree with. But you can help them think critically about what they hear, and share with them your values and beliefs about sex and sexuality.

Know the stages of sexual development in young children. It is important to understand the different stages and levels of understanding your child goes through, while remembering each individual child develops at their own pace.

Have ongoing conversations throughout their childhood. A common misconception is that you need to have one ‘big talk’ to explain the ‘the birds and the bees’. In fact, it is better to talk early and often with your child. Take advantage of everyday experiences with your child or things that they comment to you about.

Be responsive to your child’s questions and follow their lead. Always validate their question. Let them know you are happy that they came to you, and that you are going to do your best to give them a good answer.

Help your child to process the information they get from the world around them. While you are your child’s most important sexuality educator, you are by no means their only one.”

[Read the full article here.](#)

Noteworthy

Childhood Independence



“As parents, we all want to raise kids who are resourceful, resilient, and ready to succeed. But today’s society often frightens us into holding our children closer rather than letting them free to grow.”

This website has some good resources and information to help you support your children to become more independent. From the parent kit with specific suggestions on what can be done to a plethora of information and studies on the subject, this website is a great starting point for families wishing to raise independent children.

[Click here to go to the website.](#)

Advice from Lox (aged 10)

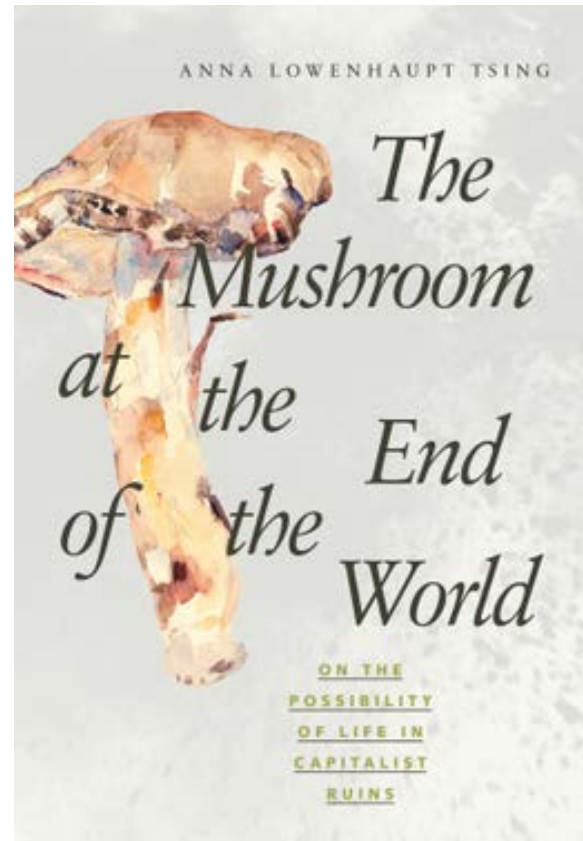
- “Listen to kids
- Empower them all the time
- Treat them as equals
- Be a guide and provide feedback only when invited
- Do wacky and interesting stuff to inspire young people.”

Some advice from a young person taken from a speech of his that was published in the Buckingham Journal of Education.

[Read the full text here \(three short pages, including a rap\)](#)



Mushrooms



“Written in “a riot” of short chapters, “like the flushes of mushrooms that come up after rain”, Anna Tsing’s highly original study explores ruined industrial landscapes and precarious livelihoods in this age of economic decline and globalisation. She travels the world in search of matsutake mushrooms and the people who forage for them in the forests of Oregon, Yunnan, Lapland and Japan, where they have become “the most valuable mushrooms on earth”, prized as gourmet treats and exclusive gifts. It’s said that after Hiroshima was obliterated by an atomic bomb, “the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom”. They only grow in forests disturbed by humans and were first mentioned in an eighth-century Japanese poem celebrating “the wonder of autumn aroma”. The smell is unique, though Tsing admits most Europeans can’t stand it: “It’s not an easy smell. It’s disturbing.” This book brilliantly turns the commerce and ecology of this most rare mushroom into a modern parable of post-industrial survival and environmental renewal.” - The Guardian



A New Chapter

Alma began its journey as a preschool in 2018, and as our youngest learners grew, so too did our school, evolving into a Primary School. This natural progression led to the conceptualisation of a Middle School, aimed at fostering our students' acquired skills in an environment conducive to their growth into independent scholars. This marked the genesis of our vision for the Middle School.

This vision has crystallised into an innovative concept, one that embodies the mission and ethos of Alma. This concept is dynamic and continuously shaped by the valuable input of our students. A thrilling aspect of this evolution includes opportunities for our Middle School students to visit and learn from other schools globally, enriching their educational experience.

In the following pages, we invite you to explore the distinctive aspects of the Middle School experience at Alma. For a more comprehensive understanding, we encourage you to visit our website and delve into the details of our unique educational approach.

Why 'The Lab'?

"The Lab" aptly describes our distinctive Middle School setup. A laboratory symbolises a realm of exploration, experimentation, discovery, and teamwork, promoting an open mindset, calculated risk-taking, and rigorous scholarly pursuits. The Alma Middle School embodies these very ideals. Through a variety of projects (details on the subsequent page), specialised workshops, and academic tutorials, students are poised to dive into a university-style learning ambience.

Envision stepping into a bustling learning hub where students are actively engaged in research, honing individual academic abilities, conferring with their Supervisor over challenges, gearing up to showcase their latest projects, refining their portfolio websites, or participating in a focused Research Methods tutorial. All these activities occur concurrently, with a seamless transition between tasks and working modes.

It will also be a space where students at all stages of the Middle School can collaborate and those more experienced can mentor students new to The Lab.

Middle School Special

Supervisory System

Central to our assessment and goal-setting approach in the Middle School is the Supervisory system. This pedagogical method is foundational at prestigious universities such as Cambridge and Oxford. While it requires more dedication, it affords an unmatched degree of personalisation in guiding students through their educational journey.

Students frequently engage in in-depth conversations with a faculty member, assessing their academic, emotional, and personal growth against their set goals. These interactions allow students to reflect, identify their strengths, and formulate plans to overcome obstacles. Key takeaways from these dialogues are recorded and integrated into the learning portfolio that students compile while in the Middle School.

Regular meetings with their supervisor are pivotal in guiding our Middle School students as they navigate their newfound independence and responsibilities. These sessions provide a supportive framework for each student to develop personalised strategies and systems, ensuring their success in both academic endeavors and independent projects. This tailored approach allows students to leverage their strengths and address their weaknesses in a constructive manner, moving away from a one-size-fits-all methodology towards a more individualised and effective learning experience.

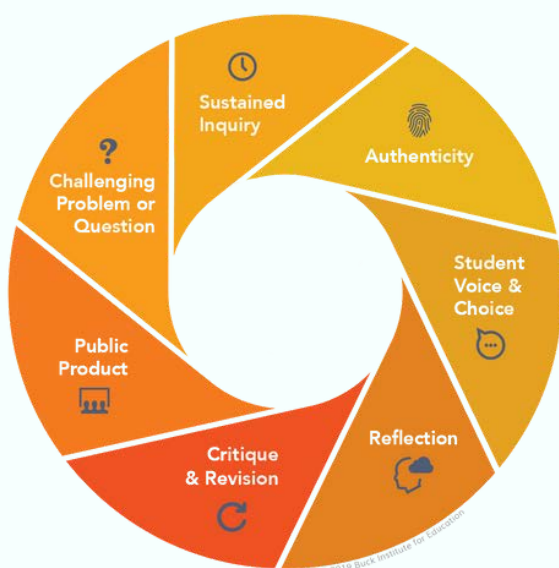


MYP Curriculum Resources

The international school sector employs a variety of curricula, and our endeavor is to source the finest resources and methods that resonate with our mission and vision. A key factor in our decision-making is the transition of our students to other schools post-Grade 8, typically at age 14. Among the top contenders for High School curricula stands the International Baccalaureate (IB), which facilitates students' entry to global universities. Consequently, our Middle School students will leverage MYP (IB Middle Years Programme) resources to enhance their proficiency in English, Maths, and Science.

This naturally raises the question of why we didn't adopt the MYP programme in its full scope. Put simply, our approach transcends this curriculum. The intimate class sizes, our dedicated team, and our inherent flexibility empower both us and our students to break free from the confines of a predefined curriculum, charting learning trajectories that are genuinely adaptive and original.

Middle School Special



Projects at the Heart of the Curriculum

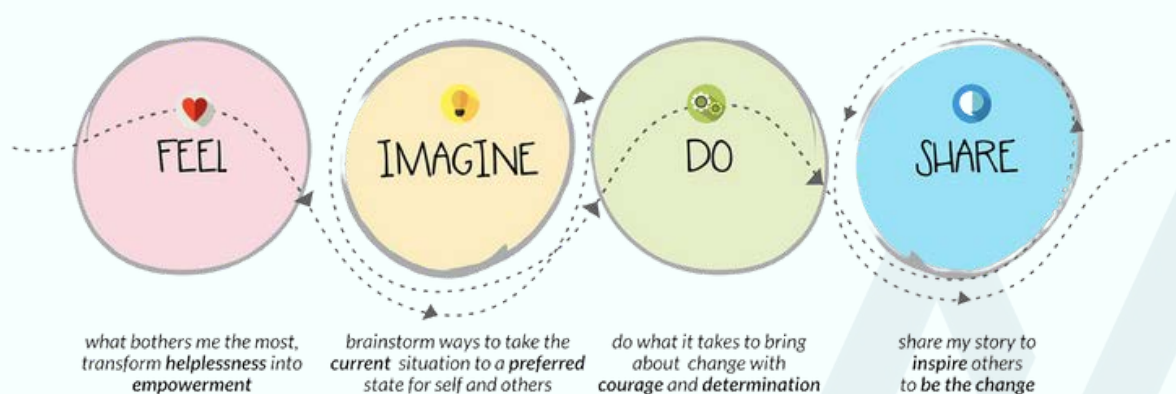
Our students embark on three different kinds of independent projects. The most substantial of these are their **Research Projects**. It is through these projects that students will explore their interests, gain a conceptual and theoretical understanding of the world and develop as scholars. At the core of these projects is a prolonged inquiry into an open-ended question that the student is genuinely interested in. A critical aspect of these projects is that they are shared with a wider audience. This begins with their peers and continues via their portfolio websites. Ultimately, our students will be able to compose research studies that can be published via platforms such as the Open University's Children's Research Centre.

At Alma, we are dedicated to nurturing our students' potential to positively impact the world. Through their **Impact Projects**, students receive the necessary framework and support to make a difference. These projects encourage students to identify areas of improvement in their immediate surroundings and teach them how to implement change effectively and tangibly. This might involve enhancing peer mediation strategies within the school, raising awareness about important causes among parents, organizing litter clean-ups in the local community, or developing more efficient recycling systems at school.

In addition to Impact Projects, students continue to develop their **Maker Projects**. Building on the experience gained in Primary School, they now have the opportunity to elevate their projects further, integrating advanced technologies like 3D printing, video production, programming, and photography. To encourage regular reflection on the project process, students will blog about their Maker Projects on their Portfolio Websites.

Through undertaking these projects, students acquire essential life skills. They learn to efficiently manage their time and resources, effectively communicate with both their peers and experts, navigate extended investigative processes, and engage in thoughtful reflection on their choices and outcomes. This approach not only fosters academic growth but also nurtures their personal development, preparing them for challenges beyond the classroom.

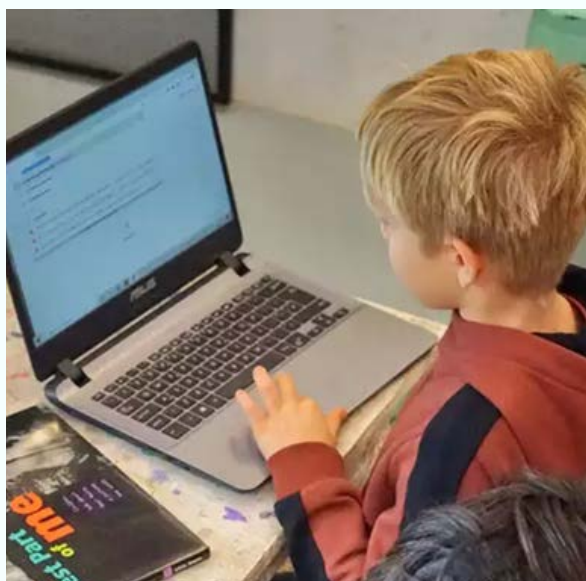
[To read more about our Middle School curriculum, click here to open the full Curriculum Outline.](#)



Middle School Special

Research Methods Tutorials

To enhance our students' capabilities in conducting independent research, the Middle School curriculum will include Research Methods tutorials. These tutorials encompass a variety of essential topics, equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their research design. Key areas of focus include Research Ethics, ensuring responsible and ethical conduct; Data Collection, highlighting effective methods for gathering information; Data Analysis, teaching techniques for interpreting data; and Dissemination, guiding students on how to effectively share their research findings. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a solid foundation for our students to undertake their research projects with confidence and competence.



Expert Workshops

While our students enjoy considerable freedom to craft their own projects and learning paths, it's crucial to also provide them with inspiration and ideas that spark their curiosity and expand their horizons. To achieve this, we offer Expert Workshops for our Middle School students, where they gain deep insights into various topics. These workshops are conducted by a diverse group of experts, including professionals from external organizations, parents, and our own school staff. By exposing students to a range of perspectives and fields of expertise, we aim to enrich their educational experience and encourage a broader understanding of the world around them.



Portfolio Websites

Our Middle School students create their own portfolio websites. These digital platforms allow students to document their learning journey, fostering self-awareness and reflection. By curating their achievements, students take ownership of their growth, showcasing their skills, projects, and milestones. The interactive nature of websites further enhances their digital literacy, preparing them for a technologically-driven world. Moreover, these portfolios provide a tangible narrative for parents, teachers, and future educational institutions, offering insights into a student's capabilities and aspirations. Ultimately, portfolio websites empower our middle schoolers to take charge of their educational narratives, instilling pride and motivation.

As our students move into Middle School they will also build their tech proficiency by engaging with tools such as Scratch, Tinkercad, Photoshop and video editing software.

Photo Roundup





Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. ~Paulo Freire