



A LOT OF WHAT the children do at Creative O Preschoolers' Bay is navigated not by the educators but by the children — an approach dubbed 'open education' which the centre champions. As Founder and Principal Ms Tan Beng Luan explains, "This means our children are encouraged to explore in an open space and ask questions, while educators guide and scaffold them to do their own thinking and analysis to make sense of things around them."

Children at Creative O learn through first-hand experiences.

For this approach to work, Ms Tan, 61, and her team have embraced a project-based curriculum. Topics are not fixed as each class gets to pick any issue that interests them. Together, each group of children and educators then spend the next two to four months exploring and working on their particular project.

Ms Tan uses the example of 'Canteens' to elaborate: Creative O is located in an industrial building, which has a staff canteen on the top floor. The students involved in this project went to the canteen for a few visits to observe and investigate — the people working



OPEN Minds

Creative O Preschoolers' Bay clinches Outstanding Award for Teaching and Learning for its unique approach to child-initiated learning.



THE WORLD IS CHANGING, SO OUR EDUCATION MUST ALWAYS PREPARE US FOR THE FUTURE.

//Ms Tan Beng Luan

in the canteen, the patrons, where the food came from and where the waste went. When the children were satisfied with what they had found out, they shared that knowledge with their parents by running a canteen in class — it had a fruit juice stall, hard-boiled egg stall and sandwich stall.

Such an approach, says Ms Tan, provides children with two key benefits: one, they acquire knowledge and skill; two, they learn how to apply that knowledge and skill. "We do not give our children ready answers, so they have to question and allow their curiosity to guide them. They will find out ways to try out things and in the process become positive and eager learners," she adds.



Parents Welcomed

Besides an open education, Creative O believes in having parents as part of the programme. Parents are allowed to enter the classrooms before classes begin at 9am, and in the evening after 5pm, when children can explore their environment and play freely. They get up to speed on the current projects when they view the class displays, and are then better able to engage their children while following their progress. "I think that's why Creative O parents are much more active in terms of participating in centre-related activities," says Ms Tan. "For the canteen project, the children bumped into a parent in class and persuaded her to be their 'boss'. She invested some money which the children used to buy ingredients. At the canteen's opening, they invited the parent for the ribbon-cutting ceremony."

The centre's approach earned Creative O the Outstanding Centre for Teaching and Learning accolade at the 2015 ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development. But Ms Tan is not ready to stop exploring new methods. "The award is recognition for the educators and the team for their work. But with or without the award, education is an evolution, not something that you can stop because you are already very good," she says. "The world is changing, so our education must always prepare us for the future." ♥



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CREATIVE O PRESCHOOLERS' BAY



OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS ARE

a key feature of the programme at St James' Church Kindergarten (SJCK), where the children's interests and curiosity drive the curriculum and framework of the lessons. The centre's outdoor activities are integrated with classroom lessons. This means that lesson themes and project topics can emerge naturally and organically from the children's and educators' interactions with the outdoor environment.

As its Senior Principal and Academic Director Dr Jacqueline Chung, 54, says, "Teachers take children for regular walks around our expansive grounds. This experiential learning provides a great deal of multi-sensory stimulation. When learning about colours, for example, the rich variety of leaves and flowers never fails to engage the children."

At the centre's Creative Sensory Playscape and Eco-Garden, the children can touch,

smell and water the plants as well as create art murals that are inspired by their discovery. These activities, says Dr Chung, encourage children to be curious and to ask questions through their detailed observation and investigation. Educators hone their skills by using open-ended questioning techniques as a provocation to stimulate thinking and logical reasoning.

And it is this rich learning environment, culture of innovation and creative teaching and learning practices that have earned the SJCK its latest accolade, the Outstanding Centre for Teaching and Learning Award at the 2015 ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development.

"When the centre's teaching and learning practices focus on developing children's curiosity, the children become interested and engaged, and they ask many questions," says Dr Chung. "When children's ideas, thoughts and feelings are valued and respected, they feel secure to respond without worrying whether or not they have the correct answer."



At SJCK, children are encouraged to explore to help them become lifelong learners.

Good home-school partnership, she says, is also an area of strength for the kindergarten. Parents are encouraged to be curious as well in order to support and extend their child's learning and development. For example, the centre's educators will offer suggestions for parent-child activities prior to the mid-year school break. These activities are related to lesson themes and encourage exploration. "We find that when the children return after the holidays, they proudly present and share their experiences with the other children in class," says Dr Chung.

The award is an affirmation of SJCK's belief in high quality teaching and learning practices, and motivates the centre's educators to continue to develop and innovate even further. "We aspire to be a centre with excellent people, programmes, places (environment), and partnerships, but are mindful that excellence is not an end goal, but a journey of growing continuously in our mind, heart and spirit," she says. ♥

