



Ms Cynthia Tan engaging children through play

THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

AT THE CATERPILLAR'S COVE @ JURONG EAST, CHILDREN ARE AT THE HEART OF THE CENTRE'S TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES.

When children are empowered to take ownership of their own learning, the process becomes something that is "not left to chance," as Ms Cynthia Tan, principal of The Caterpillar's Cove @ Jurong East, puts it. For early childhood (EC) educators at this centre, it means working together with the children to co-construct their knowledge, understanding and learning through their interactions with adults, their peers, the environment and resources — and even during pre-school routines.

This approach has guided the educators to facilitate learning based on the children's individual needs. They are not fixated on giving answers. Instead, they engage children in a thinking process by tapping on their curiosity, interests and through various

questioning techniques. Children are encouraged to ask questions, make guesses, investigate their 'theories', and deepen their level of engagement and understanding, explains Cynthia.

These practices and the purposeful learning environment that engages children through play and hands-on experiences have enabled The Caterpillar's Cove @ Jurong East to clinch the ECDA Awards 2016 for Outstanding Centre for Teaching & Learning. Its open concept layout and spaces send a message of freedom for children to explore, discover and learn, and to foster their imagination and creativity, explains Cynthia. In addition, "private spaces such as nooks allow children to have intimate small group conversations among themselves, and even some time alone," she says.

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Ms Cynthia Tan

Myriad Learning Experiences

The centre engages the community as collaborative partners too. For example, children have had the chance to look at the tools student optometrists from Ngee Ann Polytechnic use, and explore the Red Rhino (a new-generation fire engine) during a firefighters' visit. "There is a wealth of knowledge outside the centre. We need to connect community partners and resources with children's interest to create learning opportunities," says Cynthia.

Family involvement is also important. The educators use Learning Stories to document and assess children's learning and development. These stories are shared with parents for their perspectives to further deepen insights about the child.

"A partnership is necessary to build trust, shared understanding and a common agreement on their child's development," explains Cynthia. Before each parent-teacher meeting, parents are invited to provide written feedback on their observations of their child's learning, and together with the educators, develop individualised goals for the child. Educators' shift hours are planned such that they get to meet different families in a week.

Educators at the centre also engage in professional discussions on teaching and learning, with some having opportunities to conduct small-scale research, present at conferences and mentor student educators. This is key to quality practices, says Cynthia, and ensures better outcomes for children. ♥



SCHOOL TO PRE-SCHOOL

Cynthia facilitated a tea session for the ECDA Training Award Graduants from Ngee Ann and Temasek polytechnics and ITE College Central on 12 November 2016. "We focused on establishing a good rapport between home and pre-school — a concern for EC educators and parents alike. Such tea sessions help the next cadre of EC educators plug into important issues, with tips and useful information. They help the Graduants make a smoother transition into the EC sector and be better prepared for their new job as an educator," explained Cynthia.



Photos courtesy of The Caterpillar's Cove @ Jurong East

PURPOSE-DRIVEN PASSION

LEARNING REMAINS A KEY VALUE FOR MS KATHRYN GOY, AN OUTSTANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADER.



If there is anything that Ms Kathryn Goy has learnt after 19 years in Early Childhood Education, it is that passion needs to be cultivated and professionally sustained.

"Purpose shapes passion and one also needs to be innovative about it. This has been the key motivating force with an Outstanding Early Childhood journey. It's my guiding principle

When activating a change, Ms Goy is able to get buy-in from the team to work collaboratively. The team support and synergy is strong under her leadership.

Ms Regina Tan



Ms Regina Tan, staff under Ms Goy, facilitating the children's learning in class

to map out my course of action in whatever projects I undertake. It requires constant self-reflection and this has increased my efficacy as a leader," she says.

Kathryn, the Lead Principal at PCF Sparkletots Preschool @ Pasir Ris Blk 738 (KN), was recognised with an Outstanding Early Childhood Leader Award at the ECDA Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Development 2016.

The award has given Kathryn, 50, a sense of recognition and provided opportunities for her to meet and learn from other EC leaders and professionals.

She is always looking out for innovative ways to improve existing processes to enhance children's learning, staff competencies and stakeholder partnerships.

Kathryn believes that innovation can be achieved even by making small changes to existing ideas to do things more efficiently or in a better way. She is also eager to give her staff space to contribute ideas and question existing practices as that "stretches their capacity".

An example is her centre's Junior News Broadcaster project.

Leveraging on video technology, it has evolved from a platform for children to share current affairs to one where parents source for news clippings with their children as broadcasters. Kathryn finds such an innovative project useful. While children improve their language skills and gain more confidence through oral presentations, the programme also helps to improve centre-family partnership, as the parents are interested and involved in their children's learning.

As a leader, Kathryn endeavours to instill resilience in her staff so that they can cope well with change and adversity. Her "infectious" positive mindset has inspired teacher Ms Regina Tan to develop an optimistic outlook at work. "When activating a change, Kathryn is able to get buy-in from the team to work collaboratively. The team support and synergy is strong under her leadership," Regina, 58, says.

"Forging bonds with fellow educators, families, community agencies and the grassroots are also important. [Doing so] creates a valuable network for us to harness new ideas, innovative practices and resources to improve student and school outcomes," says Kathryn. ♥

HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN OUR RELATIONSHIP AND TRUST WITH FAMILIES? KATHRYN HAS THREE TIPS:

- Understand and appreciate that each family is unique and make an effort to know each family and child personally.
- Establish a trusting relationship by showing integrity and by matching words with actions.
- Have regular informal chats and discussions to get feedback from families to value-add to the centre's curriculum.



Ms Kathryn Goy doing an interview with the little broadcasters