

Facilitating Academic Excellence Through Inquiry and Play

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The Canadian International School (CIS) early years classrooms (ages 3 - 6) are inspirational and vibrant learning spaces, and ones that utilize years of research about how children learn best. Our programme is based on the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB PYP), and has an inquiry and play-based approach – an approach at the heart of substantial research, documenting the importance of play in young children’s healthy development and learning.

This research clearly shows that children who engage in play have greater language and social skills, and more empathy, imagination and capacity to understand others. They are less aggressive and demonstrate more self-control and higher levels of thinking than children not in play-based kindergarten programmes. By the age of 10, children who have “played” in kindergarten excel over those who have not in many ways. They are more advanced in reading and mathematics, and are better adjusted both socially and emotionally. Students who have benefited from a play based kindergarten programme typically excel in creativity, intelligence, oral expression and work habits.

There is often a misconception among many as to what “inquiry-based” or “play-based” learning is. Some believe that play is a waste of time in school. Others assume that the earlier a child begins to master the basic elements of reading, such as phonics and letter recognition, the more

likely they are to succeed in school. While phonics and letter recognition are crucially important in an educational context, when we look at decades of research, we know that these beliefs about how children learn best at a young age are false.

At CIS, we have a purpose-built school facility that was designed to support our inquiry and play-based programme in the early years. All classrooms are organised around learning “pods”. These are large, open, shared spaces where teachers can set up hands-on learning centres, organised in ways that support how young children best learn. Literacy and numeracy are taught explicitly by teachers in large and small group settings, along with daily learning centre experiences that provide students with time to learn through inquiry and play.

In terms of literacy, our teachers job is to build a bridge from oral language to written language. This bridge must be built on a strong foundation of oral language and creative thinking, both of which are developed through play. How do teachers do this? Students write “grocery lists” in dramatic play centres that are set up to represent home or a grocery store. They participate in writing thank-you notes with their teachers to guest speakers and visitors to their classroom. Children also build language as they engage daily in responding to stories through writing, drawing, art and music.

In math, or numeracy, our students explore number concepts through a variety of “hands-on” learning opportunities. These might include water

play for exploring volume and capacity, coloured toys and blocks for sorting and classifying, creating graphs reflecting student interests and questions, and daily counting and number opportunities. This hands-on exploration solidifies concepts and understanding much more concretely than rote learning. Our inquiry and play-based programme allows us to work with small groups of students and to differentiate teaching to suit the academic needs of a variety of learners.

Inquiry and play-based learning at CIS does not mean a chaotic approach to learning or a lack of guidance by teachers. Instead, it is a balance between a classroom rich in child-initiated play and focused learning guided by our teachers. In all child-initiated play activities, our teachers are actively present. They monitor, engage, and where needed, guide the children’s play, answering their questions, building on their ideas and introducing new content and concepts as appropriate. Classrooms are organised in a purposeful manner that leads to the exploration of concepts (ideas) that they want the children to explore. While we recognise that young children develop on a continuum, high expectations for learning are still in place within our inquiry and play-based classrooms.

To find out more information about CIS’ inquiry play-based learning programme, please visit www.cis.edu.sg