



Outstanding Youth in Education Award

There is Beauty in the Struggle

By Mr Khoo Wei Lun Edwin

Realising the beauty in the struggle is what Mr Edwin Khoo often tells his students. What does he mean? He shares how a little change in perspective can make a big difference to how students face challenges.



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Tell us a story that captures the kind of teacher you are.

Last year, after one of the 'N' Level Science papers ended, a student walked up to me and said, "Mr Khoo, I hate you! The paper was so hard! It's the first time I studied for Science, but I'm still going to fail it."

I was elated. Well, not because she 'hated' me, but because this showed that my many years of nudging, experimentation and encouragement had finally given rise to hope in this student. Students who do not have hope do not study for their examinations. They simply give up. This girl studied because for the first time in her life, she had hoped that she could do well for her Science paper. And despite her declaring that she was "going to fail", she obtained a B, a result she grudgingly said was only "ok", given the effort she had put in.

When I teach a subject, what I really want my students to learn is motivation and self-confidence. I provide

them with opportunities to demonstrate their grit. I always remind them that failure and the struggle that follows is simply a part of the process of learning. I caution them not to disdain or avoid the struggle, but rather to embrace it, because this struggle will make their achievements all the sweeter.

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The same philosophy applies to activities outside the classroom. The Hua Yi basketball team has been trying for years to break into the West Zone top 4 teams for the National School Games (NSG). In 2019, as the CCA teacher-in-charge, I was on the side lines as our 'C' Division boys lost to the opposing team by one point and thereby, missed breaking into the top 4.

As we gathered at our debrief area - the boys with tears streaming down their faces - I told the boys that I was happy that we lost. "Happy that we lost?" They sombrely looked at me for an explanation. "Because in losing, we will keep our hunger to win," I said. In retrospect, I realised that this change in perspective helped to turn the players' eyes (and mine as well) from failure to hope, which kept them going. It took a while for this perspective to take root. There was scepticism initially. But with enough sincere repetition and affirmation, the 'hunger to win' became our team's rhetoric.

This 'hunger' has continued to spur the basketballers on. Even though NSG did not take place in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19 measures, the boys consistently gave their all during training in those years and came to terms with the fact that during their last competitive game, they had failed to meet their goal. You can see how well they have accepted this episode as part of their personal journey when they share this story with their juniors and friends - their eyes would gleam with

pride when they describe how they had fallen short by one point in the biggest match of their lives – but had not given up.



Developing grit through CCA

Describe a teaching method or tool you have found effective.

Did you know that the “father of genetics”, Gregor Mendel, failed his teacher exam? And did you know that his ground-breaking work in genetics was largely ignored by the scientific community during his lifetime, and how he only gained credit years after his death?

The story of Gregor Mendel is not part of the Biology syllabus, but stories like this feature heavily in my lessons. Other than putting a face to an abstract topic, telling his story was an opportunity to remind students that, sometimes, the effort we put in now may not pay off until much later. Even so, we should persist in doing good work because we will not know how our work may change the world!

I am a big fan of telling stories, because a story well told can allow the listener to experience events, emotions, and thoughts that they have not had before. Because of this, I am also an avid devourer of stories and experiences, always listening and looking out for things that I could potentially share with my students.

This year, I read Dan Fagin’s *Tom’s River: A Story of Science and Salvation*, which details how a dye manufacturing company polluted a river. I was in tears reading about Michael Gillick, who was described by his mother as ‘perfect’ at birth but started to develop tumours all over his body just three months into his life. When I taught my G1 Science students about water pollution this year, I jumped at the opportunity to share what I learnt from the book. My students were moved to hear about Michael. So, when we studied water pollution, the students could readily relate to the topic because they were already emotionally invested in it.

I have even shared stories about myself. How did I end up in the worst class in secondary school as a student? How did my life turn around? How did I meet my wife? Shared in the right context and at appropriate occasions, these stories help students learn more about

life than just the subject I teach.



Teaching lessons through story-telling

Which school project or initiative are you especially proud of?

Form teachers brought bags of snacks into class. Students were given pretend money to purchase what they wanted, whenever they wanted. As students took turns to buy, teachers increased the prices of snacks at random times. The prices kept going up, to a point where students could not buy even the cheapest snack with all their ‘money’ pooled together. They were outraged. At this point of their exasperation, the teachers revealed that what they had experienced was based on a real situation – hyperinflation in Venezuela.

In Hua Yi, I work with a team to build resources for Values-based Lessons for the whole school. These lessons are based on our school values of Benevolence, Wisdom, Justice, and Togetherness. We explore one value in depth per year, over a series of eight to 10 lessons, on what these mean to an individual, to their peers, to society and to the world at large.

This lesson on hyperinflation in Venezuela is part of the lesson series on Justice.

Similar lessons on other values abound. For instance, on the topic of ‘Wisdom’, we ‘tricked’ our students into carrying out a ‘witch hunt’. The students were asked to find the ‘witch’ in their group, but actually no one had been assigned that role. For ‘Benevolence’, we helped the students empathise with the needs of wheelchair users.

For this lesson on Justice, once the frantic snack purchase had ceased, teachers shared news reports and first-person accounts for students to get a sense of the situation in Venezuela. We also showed how different countries chipped in to help, including how neighbouring countries took in refugees.

The lesson ended off with a question posed to students – would they be ready to accept refugees into their homes? Even though there were no clear answers, it was food for thought for students to chew on.

