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An Education for Self-discovery

Non-examinable subjects such as Physical Education, Art and Music offer some of the best opportunities for students to discover and develop their individual talents and strengths.



Most students think of Physical Education (PE), Art, and Music (also known as PAM) as fun and stress-free. After all, there are no exams to take for them!

But PAM can be much more than a welcome break from academic subjects. Besides keeping our students physically robust and creative, these subjects can help students better understand and develop themselves and their peers as "humanistic" individuals.

Time and Space for Development

"We lead such hurried cognitive lives in school," says Professor Michael Chia, Dean of Faculty Affairs in NIE and an expert in physical and sports education.

Our students are usually preoccupied with doing well for their exams and tests. They are probably cognitively very well developed, as much of each schooling day is focused on the academic development of the mind.

But what about other aspects of their lives, such as their ability to work with and relate to others, or the development of their relational capital? What about the forming of their personal identity and core values?

An advantage of PAM activities is that there are the significant elements of play, self-expression and creativity. Add to that lots of interaction with peers, and you get an outlet for students to exert themselves socially, emotionally, mentally and physically. These are key ingredients in the "cooking pot" of personality and values formation.

As students develop themselves in these various aspects, they are on the road to discovering their core beliefs, personal philosophies and ethical compass – their "humanness", as Prof Chia puts it.

"Sports, Art, PE, Music – creative arts, particularly – provide *time* and *space* for young people to be themselves, and to discover what they can be, for good."

"The Lost, the Least and the Last"

Something that Prof Chia strongly believes in as a life philosophy is a saying attributed to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, on the need to look out for "the lost, the least and the last".

This applies to educators and students alike, reminding us to look out for such students in our midst and appreciate each other's unique gifts. This keeps us anchored in empathy, which is a much needed value in our economically driven society.

"Youths and adults are all 'abled' or 'disabled' in our different life experiences," he muses. Someone may excel in his academic studies but feel socially awkward. Another student may not be as academically inclined but is a natural when it comes to rallying people together.

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This belief can also help students to see that even teachers and adults are not infallible. “It becomes a very humane thing,” says Prof Chia. “And then the learning becomes more collaborative, in that the teacher is an educator, and you give students that space and respect, but at the same time teachers are there to support you.”

Seeing Oneself in a Different Light

In the classroom, each student adopts a “classroom” persona, usually and in part determined by the grades they get. Those who do well will be seen as “smart” and tend to be respected more by their peers.

But students who are not strong academically may have other strengths. Someone who may not do so well for his Physics tests may be a gifted basketball player or a good project team player or an effective communicator.

“The beauty of these PAM subjects is that they can lend themselves to self-discovery by students. We are also able to view people through different lenses, because people adopt different personalities in different situations,” notes Prof Chia.

He cites an example of students who may usually be very reserved and quiet but become “liberated” when they perform on the stage. This is where school and education acquiesce – schooling activities become discovery and educative activities that are meaningful to the students.

Sports, Art, PE, Music – creative arts particularly – provide time and space for young people to be themselves, and to discover what they can be, for good.

- Prof Michael Chia, Office of Faculty Affairs

PAM also provides ample opportunities for students to shine and grow. Seen in this light, achievement no longer becomes defined by only academic results. It's easy to forget that in life, there can be many different routes to success – some shorter, some longer, some common, and some less common.

“You look at people’s varied experiences – the top dancers, the top stage personalities, the top scholars. They may all come from very different backgrounds and have different experiences. But they all get there, right? Ultimately, that’s what we want for our society.”

What is important is that each child is helped and facilitated by the schooling experience to find fulfilment as a person and a valued member of society.

Facilitating Social-emotional Learning

When students are engaged in PAM, they express and experience the “whole spectrum of emotions”. And of course, these activities also encourage interaction among the students.

“There is a great learning of the self and others, provided there is scaffolding provided by the teacher,” Prof Chia says.

For such social-emotional learning, the role of the teachers is no longer to teach but to facilitate. “In the real sense of education, it’s not the child adopting your standards,” he adds. “It’s the child learning to cope with an emerging new world.”

Sometimes, adults are tempted to “short-circuit” the learning process and just skip to the outcome, or the “moral of the lesson”. But our students need to navigate their way through the challenges, and teachers should come in only when necessary.

Never underestimate the wisdom that young people have.

- Prof Chia on listening to students’ voices

Students can become co-creators of their own solutions. For example, when disputes happen between students, teachers are usually called in to resolve the situation. Why not give the students the chance to get to sort out the issues themselves first?

When Less is More

While in the past PAM was mostly about teaching the techniques or skills in PE, Art or Music, now they are seen as one of the best opportunities to develop 21st century competencies in our students. What can PAM teachers do to provide a more holistic educational experience?

“Sometimes less is more,” Prof Chia suggests. Teachers can do less teaching, and allow more interaction and peer-sharing among students. Listening to students’ voices is paramount.

“You start with the end in mind, a certain vision of what you want to see in your class, or what you want your class could be, for good,” he stresses.

Of course, it's easier said than done. There'll always be some "messiness" when teachers are not taking full control of the situation, and there may be trade-offs, but it's okay. When experimenting, there are mini-failures and mini-successes in the process; one cannot do without the other. Very often, the learning is deeper and more meaningful in failure than in success.

It is important for others to frame "failure" as a failure to learn from the situation. For example, a school may decide not to focus so much on the results of students' physical fitness tests, and instead emphasize group sports that encourage team-building.

While their students may not be as fit as before (as judged by the fitness tests), they now know their peers better and know how to work together as a team. These become the building blocks for even greater things to come.

A Digital Pause

Youths nowadays live out a big part of their lives in virtual space, be it on Facebook, Instagram or Whatsapp. When they're interacting with others online, they adopt a certain cyber personality.

"They have a certain persona, they speak a certain language, they express themselves emotionally or otherwise in certain ways," notes Prof Chia.

But some people spend so much time in cyberspace that it has become a worrying trend. Technology has become so advanced that students can now choose to work together on projects without ever interacting physically and socially with those they work with.

"What are you like in real life, as a real person? What kind of a person are you without the gadgetry?" That is what matters, says Prof Chia.

To him, PAM provides a "digital pause" for students to get back into the real world and focus on building real-world relationships. It lets them interact with people face-to-face, away from their mobile phones and books and exams.

"It allows students to develop the other aspects of their lives. What are you like in the physical, the real person, through sports, or through games?" They can then begin to discover how they and others behave in different situations, and through that, discover their own values and identity.

Change Takes Time

Helping students to discover and develop their "humanness" is a worthy goal. But it may take a while before teachers can see the fruits of their labour. Prof Chia advises them to be patient and not to rush for results.

"Don't be so *kan cheong* (impatient)! Some things will take time. And human behaviour doesn't just change overnight." Desirable and humane behaviour needs to be affirmed within and outside of the classroom.

And as teachers journey with their students in this process of self-discovery, who knows, they may gain some useful insights of their own.



Prof Chia recounts a valedictorian speech where a former NIE student teacher shared her experience of counselling a student from a broken family. She came away feeling that "the counsellor became the counselled". The teacher was moved by how the student persevered and came to school every day despite the difficulties at home. These are humbling lessons as even adults may not display such resilience and positive traits in the face of adversity.

"Never underestimate the wisdom that young people have," Prof Chia says, because they are the ones who face the present context and it can be very enlightening to hear their perspectives.

"When we say that the future lies in the hands of the young, do we really mean it?" he asks. "Are you trying to shape them in standards which will be outdated or irrelevant? Because if they did everything that you say would be good, it would not be so because the future context will be different."

Instead, what we want is for them to become humanistic thinkers and leaders. Contexts may change, but their values will remain. And as he reminds us, these future leaders "are going to make policies for the rest of us!"

So as teachers or significant others in our students' lives, we need to plant the seed, fertilize, water and radiate warmth for kindness, empathy, resourcefulness and self-leadership to take root and

flourish among our youths. "Educators really have to empower them now through guidance," says Prof Chia.

In so doing, the trees of the future, in the jungles of this globalized world, will provide good shade and bear sweet fruits.

Prof Michael Chia is the Guest Editor of this issue. He is the Dean of **Faculty Affairs** and a Professor with the **Physical Education and Sports Science Academic Group** in NIE. He also leads research on physical fitness and holistic development of Singaporean youth. In his spare time, Prof Chia enjoys experimenting in his kitchen and imagines himself as a participant in the television series *MasterChef*.

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Shaping Creative Expression through Music

Learning and making music is more than just a recreational activity. NIE researchers believe it can facilitate learning and encourage creative expression. They are singing the praises of music education.

“Look at that child! I did not teach that!” exclaimed one music teacher, who found one of her students playing a tune he had improvised on his own. What happened in this music classroom can happen in yours too.

Eugene Dairianathan and Eric Peter Stead believe that music is more than just a recreational activity, or about honing talent. It is a subject that can help to develop critical thinking and shape creative expression.



“Music may not be an assessable component in the way Maths, Science or English are, but it has the ability to teach skills students can use in other subjects,” says Eugene, who is Head of NIE’s Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group (VPA).

Relinquishing but Not Losing Control

Music shouldn’t be thought of as belonging to just the affective domain. In fact, music involves many cognitive skills, such as creative and critical thinking, which are linked to academic disciplines.

For Peter, a Senior Lecturer with VPA, music is a vital part of the growth and development of a 21st century learner.



“If you refer to Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, he cites musical intelligence as a specific intelligence,” Peter explains. “It is about knowing the world. It helps to holistically educate our students.”

But music teachers may be more comfortable with a “teacher-controlled curriculum”, where the teacher is seen as the instructor. However, for such a creative and expressive subject like music, Eugene and Peter encourage teachers not to limit learning.

In the course of their research, they saw how teachers can create a space that facilitates their students’ learning. If carefully done, it allows ownership of the learning to return to the learner. What teachers need to do is deliberately relinquish some control.

For example, when teaching students about the fundamentals of beat or rhythm, the teacher can illustrate it by demonstrating a series of finger clicks and hand claps and then getting the students to repeat it.

However, that’s where the instruction ends and facilitation continues. The teacher can then ask the students to create their own personal beats. Not only does this require the application of cognitive skills, it shifts agency from the teacher to the students, making learning more authentic.

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Creating Lived Experiences

Eugene recalls one teacher who believed in maintaining control over the class. “Being encouraged to relinquish control caused her some consternation. But in giving some agency back to the students, she found that students could learn on their own.”

She told the research team that by letting go and letting her students discover things by themselves, they learned transferrable skills that could be used in other subjects.

“Rather than losing control in the class – and losing learning – she found that she gained learning because the students themselves, by being given ownership, took upon themselves the intrinsic motivation to get the job done,” Eugene notes.

Seeing the benefits of relinquishing some control, this teacher brought her music class to a nearby construction site. She asked her students to listen to all the “noises” and link them to the musical notes they had learned in class. In this way, they were able to turn the noises into resources for creating and making music.

Their learning experience was suddenly and creatively transformed. This enabled them to think beyond the music classroom and use this knowledge in other subjects.

“It is about scaffolding and helping to shape the students’ thinking process,” says Eugene. “It’s about using music to develop creative thinking,” adds Peter. “We create lived experiences out of music education.”



Confident and Creative Learners



“Music gives spin-off benefits that are needed in today’s context,” Peter tells us.

Teachers in Eugene and Peter’s study noticed that the students gradually gained the confidence to shape their own creativity through music. The confidence they gained through music in turn developed skills such as critical thinking and creative expression.

The research team observed that the more creative the students became, the more confident and persuasive their arguments and speech were. This opens up the possibility of creative expression being not just an outcome but an ongoing development.

“It is not about the students being creative, but it is about developing the idea of creativity in them,” says Peter. “It is about opening their eyes and ears to the possibilities of creative work.”

If expressing creativity through music has helped these students shape their learning the way they like it, then the possibilities for their learning are limited only by their creativity.

Eugene Dairianathan is Associate Professor and Head of the **Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group (VPA)** at NIE. His interests lie in music theory and analysis. **Eric Peter Stead** is a Senior Lecturer at VPA. He is interested in the psychology of the perception of sound and the role of music in moral and social education.

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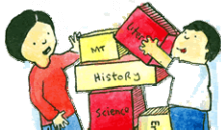
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Anchored in the Arts

Students of SOTA are meant to hold a creative vision that enhances the way they see the world, even as they are nurtured to be artists who are very good at practising their crafts.

There was a boy who, as a primary school pupil, was already feeling “completely disillusioned” about education.

“By all estimates, he would have been an average student in a secondary school,” says **Dr Letchmi Devi Ponnusamy**. “He was slowly losing confidence in his own education from the discussion we had.”

Yet, by the time he turned 18, this student was one of the high achievers in the International Baccalaureate exams. How did that happen?

In his opinion, it was the education he received at the **School of the Arts (SOTA)** that turned his life around. This student had previously found learning in school to be “flat” and “dimensionless”. But he began to appreciate that learning can actually be deeper and more layered in SOTA. From there on, he began to flourish in school.

Learning as a Process

“I think the key here is the richness in learning that is anchored in the arts,” explained **Dr Tan Liang See**, a Principal Investigator of a suite of projects by SOTA and **Office of Education Research (OER)** in NIE.



“What works in SOTA is that the school has built an arts-anchored environment that encourages the development of dispositions to examine diverse perspectives, to explore and define problems, which is fertile ground for student learning. I think the key is really giving students the time to think and to manipulate ideas – in other words, focusing on the process of learning rather than the outcome of the learning.”

The SOTA curriculum is designed to provide rich experiences that require students to not only focus on the product but also the process. For example, students are encouraged to enter competitions to keep them motivated and take responsibility for their own learning.

The school also showcases their students' works to communities of practitioners to provide opportunities for students to rehearse and refine their creative product.

“Even when they do showcasing, they don't just show the final product,” Liang See explains. Instead, they showcase the works in progress.

Students are also required to critique their own work in class. “The thought processes of students are very much valued and documented,” she added.

Another approach that SOTA strongly believes in is a “connected curriculum”, as a way of letting students forge connections between the different areas of knowledge, be it in the academics or the arts.

Connected Curriculum

“It is evident that the ‘connected curriculum’ is a very important feature of learning in SOTA,” says Letchmi. Many may think that the curriculum needs to be simplified in order to be understood, but complexity excites the learners and increases interest in learning. The connected curriculum permits learning to be complex.

For example, Integrated Arts (IA) is a subject where students are encouraged to forge connections between different forms of arts.

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Liang See recalled a teacher exploring the use of space in different art forms during an IA lesson.

How does the visual artist utilize available space when designing an exhibit? How does the painter incorporate space in a drawing? When would a composer pen in a rest when composing a piece of music?

“That’s how the teachers bring in all these discussions with the students and have them think of how they would use space in their own art form and how can they create this space between the art forms.”

Another example was the hydroponics sculpture that a teacher asked Year 5 Visual Arts students to create.

It was a deliberate attempt to make students think of how they can connect what they’re learning in science to visual arts so they can come up something unique, explained **Dr Myra Bacsal**.

“In no time, in Singapore, there’ll be creativity infused into a range of professions through arts-anchored education and such professionals might approach things in a very different manner. That’s what the school aspires to achieve in its students,” says Liang See.

Cultivating a Creative Vision

The educational beliefs at SOTA are rooted in the school’s aim. Contrary to popular perception, the school is not only looking to churn out painters, musicians or dancers. What they want is to imbue in their students a sense of what Myra calls a “creative vision”.

She describes it as a gift, a different way of seeing the world around them and heightened awareness of their environment.

She gave an example: “When you walk into a room, if you’re a SOTA student and if you’re a student from the mainstream school, you’ll see things differently, in terms of the lighting, in terms of the colour, in terms of the composition of the room and so on.”



“It’s what the arts have given them – a different level of understanding.”

Letchmi sees SOTA as a school that develops the ability to see possibilities, in addition to artistic ability.

“There’s a difference between the two,” Letchmi pointed out. “You want children to learn to appreciate and think and learn creatively.”

The school provides them with a “creative space” and “creative processes” for such exploration. And given time, “you’ll observe that the students will generate creative ideas; they’ll exhibit creative behaviours, and essentially it’ll give you a product,” says Liang See.

Teachers and Students: Mutual Respect

When asked about their teachers, SOTA students and graduates spoke of a prevailing culture of mutual respect.

“The teachers know their students by name,” says Myra. This may not seem like a big deal but it matters to them. One student recalled how she felt invisible in her primary school because the teachers there didn’t know her name. But things were very different in SOTA.

This regard for students extends to the way SOTA teachers teach as well. “There is that respect for students’ vision, regardless of how seemingly immature they are. Most of their products seem to be like that initially, but the students would always surprise them in the end,” observed Myra.

“It’s good in that sense as it’s not very prescriptive. It helps that there is a very warm and affirming relationship between the teachers and the students.”

Letchmi says that SOTA teachers put in a lot of effort and are “constantly struggling with how they can better meet the everyday learning needs of the learners.”

In return, the students feel inspired by their teachers, many of whom are practising artists, and also a deep sense of appreciation for what they do.

Community of Artists

For the projects, the research team interviewed a diverse group of students. There was something in common among them: "They all love the school like mad – very strong love!" observes Liang See.

When asked about their learning experiences in SOTA, the interviewees were more than eager to share details.

"There's a very deep-rooted sense of belonging," Letchmi noted. Over the course of 6 years, the students bonded with each other and formed a community of artists.

Some of them didn't start out with very high self-esteem as learners but the experience of being in a supportive community made a big difference.

A girl whom Letchmi had interviewed confessed that she struggled with both her art form and her academic study in SOTA. But she drew strength from the fact that she was surrounded by peers who shared the same passion for art and teachers who were willing to work with her.

Globally, people have been trying to justify the need for an arts education, says Liang See. In the case of SOTA, the research team has found evidence that learning in an arts-anchored school has enriched students' lives and made them even more passionate about the arts.

As Myra puts it, "Art is not just what they do. It's part of who they are."

About the interviewees

The suite of projects by **SOTA** and **OER** looks into the teaching practices and curriculum of the school and their impact on students' development and outcomes. The research team comprises **Tan Liang See** from the Office of Education Research; **Garces-Bacsal Rhoda Myra** and **Letchmi Devi Ponnusamy** from the **Early Childhood and Special Needs Academic Group**, **Lum Chee Hoo** from the **Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group** and **Ramos Maria Eloisa Villanueva** from the **Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice**.

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Music to the Eyes

What does music mean to your young pupils? To find out, try asking them to draw! You'll be surprised to discover more about what they think of music and how they want to learn it in school.

Music affects all of us differently. This is true of children, too. The way they connect to and make sense of music also differs, depending on whether they are in school or at home.

That's what sparked an idea in **Dr Lum Chee Hoo**, an Assistant Professor with NIE's **Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group**, to look at the meaning of music in children's lives.

"I have always been interested in examining the meaning of the arts in children's lives," he explains.

As children grow up, how does music influence them as individuals? And what can teachers do to engage pupils in their music lessons by reflecting on their pedagogy and practices?

Expressing Perceptions of Music



To find out, Chee Hoo posed several questions about music to pupils from five primary schools. Questions like: "When you hear the word 'music', what comes to your mind?" And, "How do you do 'music'?"

But asking pupils to just write down their responses may elicit short or vague answers. And being young, they may also not be able to find the right words to describe their feelings towards music.

So he also asked the children to draw out a picture of what music means to them and its relationship with their daily lives, to get a clearer picture of their views.

"It is interesting because thinking about music and how it manifests to a bigger piece of painting will tell us what is significant."

True enough, from the children's responses and drawings, the research team and the music teachers realized that every

child saw music differently.

Reflections of Classroom Practice

"Students drew an mp3 player, instruments such as the piano, or even performing on the stage. These can allow teachers to know their pupils at a deeper level in terms of their preferences for musical activities," notes Chee Hoo.

Through the drawings, teachers could see what current influences the children were exposed to. For instance, drawings of devices such as mp3 players showed that technology plays a big part in pupils' involvement with music.



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It's also a quick way of looking at what happens in the classroom. For example, in some schools, music notes and staff often showed up in the children's drawings.

It made music teachers realize that the emphasis they had placed on the learning of musical notes, something they had done unconsciously, had an impact on how their pupils viewed music.

Putting the children's responses into a "wordle", a visual representation of responses that appear most frequently in the research, also gave the music teachers an immediate sense of what was more significant in pupils' responses about music.

As Chee Hoo puts it, it's a good chance to see "what is in the children's heads".

"In a way, it allows educators to really see how music relates to children in their daily lives and ascertain their strengths."

Making Music Classes Better

Chee Hoo hopes his findings can facilitate reflection by music teachers on how they are teaching music.

"The idea is for teachers to think about their programmes and what they can do to further the creative spaces for their pupils," he explains. "Only the teacher can decipher those possibilities."

Although the research team didn't get to talk to the children about their drawings, Chee Hoo believes these drawings can allow for conversations about music to happen between teachers and children.



With the current emphasis on developing 21st century skills, music class isn't just about learning to play an instrument or sing a song. The music curriculum plays an important part in helping pupils learn to express themselves creatively and critically.

"It is a skill that we need to develop, and the arts provides for the ambiguity and for children to recognize that it is not a black-and-white world. It is about how things shift in and out," Chee Hoo explains. "That is a valuable skill unique to arts education."

That should be music to the teachers' ears.

A Perspective of Music in Singaporean Children's Lives

Some of the drawings by the pupils in Chee Hoo's project have been uploaded onto the [project's website](#). The drawings help us to understand how music is viewed by these pupils in different schools and various levels.

Dr Lum Chee Hoo is a Assistant Professor with the [Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group](#) at NIE. He teaches courses related to research in music education and primary music education. He is also the Head of the [UNESCO-NIE Centre for Arts Research in Education](#) (CARE) which seeks to promote education in and through the arts in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Building Character by Getting Physical

The teachers at Beacon Primary School value Physical Education so much that they have it daily. While emphasizing fitness, they also seek to inject character education into the lessons.

The pupils at [Beacon Primary School](#) look forward to attending school each day. This is the result of the school's unconventional curriculum of daily Physical Education (PE) lessons that last for at least 30 minutes.

For Beacon, PE lessons are not just about fitness. Other than locomotive skills and games concepts, teachers also tap on this platform to impart values and develop character.

"You can really see one's character through PE and sports," notes Mr Nasrun, Dean of Co-curriculum. "They are the best platforms where character can be developed, practised and exercised.



Building Pupils' Character

Of the 5 days of PE lessons, 1 day is dedicated to team-building activities. A typical team-building lesson sees pupils encountering real-life challenges and negotiating their way through them.

Working in teams and getting into small arguments are a natural occurrence. Teachers at Beacon balance their role as mediator to reduce the tension and as facilitator to identify teachable moments.

"I think these are the kinds of opportunities that if we don't grab, we will lose it," Nasrun says. To allow pupils to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, briefing sessions are a necessity.

"We will ask the pupils, 'How do you think you can express your feelings better?'" Nasrun shares.

Pupils are also asked how they can encourage their friends to perform better in sports games, and how they can rephrase their sentences to sound less harsh to their friends. For example, rather than telling someone, "You're slow," they can learn how to say it in a positive manner.

Assessing Physical Education

As with most academic subjects, Beacon focuses on three main aspects when assessing pupils learning outcomes in PE: the physical, cognitive and affective.

Physical: The easiest of the three to assess, this involves observing pupils practising physical acts such as kicking and rolling.

Cognitive: Pupils are asked questions to assess their understanding, such as, "What are the cues for throwing an overhand?" The ability to answer clearly shows their understanding.

Affective: Often the hardest to assess, this involves the pupils' emotional domain. For example, a child's reactions when he or she loses or wins a game, or the way a child cheers for a friend. In this aspect, pupils are expected to understand that it is not just about winning or losing a game – it is about taking care of one another.

Bringing Life into Lessons

To further enhance these pupils' learning experience, Nasrun and his team of PE teachers decided to "physicalize", as Nasrun describes it, other non-academic subjects.

In 2008, Nasrun and his team were tasked to revamp Beacon's PE curriculum. During their discussions, they asked a fundamental question: "Do we want to constrain ourselves to just PE lessons, or can we expand it to other experiences?" They opted for expanding.

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Subjects like Health Education (HE) and Civics and Moral Education (CME) were physicalized. Rather than merely explaining the theories, pupils are asked to act them out instead.

"It is a way we can teach the pupils and have them physically active as well," Nasrun adds.

For example, a HE lesson on the subject of road safety consists of various fun-filled activities. Making use of the large space in their school all, traffic lights, road junctions and toy trolleys are set up to enact a real-life road scene. Pupils take turns to be motorists and pedestrians.

During CME, teachers purposefully create conflicts among pupils while teaching the topic of Respect at the same time. Discussing about what happened after the lessons helps pupils see real-life issues from many different perspectives.

PE and sports...are the best platforms where character can be developed, practised and exercised.

*- Nasrun Bin Mizzy,
Beacon Primary School*

Pupils welcome the novelty of having lessons beyond the classroom and are often more engaged and refreshed. Being in a FutureSchool, these pupils are highly exposed to technology. Having physicalized lessons then helps strike a balance between the virtual and the real for these young learners. At the same time, teachers become well-rounded through the variety of their daily tasks.

Creating Well-rounded Teachers and Pupils

"It requires the teachers to be more than just a teacher," Nasrun says. "The teacher has to be an observer and a facilitator to be able to tease out the problems." Also, physicalizing lessons involves a tremendous amount of planning because not all teachers are trained in PE.

"We plan timetables such that non-PE-trained teachers will be with PE-trained teachers," Nasrun explains.



This allows non-PE-trained teachers to pick up skills from the PE teachers. After several combined lessons, the non-PE-trained teachers will eventually be comfortable with conducting the entire lesson on their own.

In assessing pupils' learning outcomes, teachers look at three different aspects: physical, cognitive and affective (see box story, "Assessing Physical Education").

"We are not just PE teachers," Nasrun says. "We are character developers, and we create leaders as well."

Resilient, focused and independent – these are the characteristics of a leader. Such an active learning programme in Beacon helps pupils develop these traits, allowing them to excel in both sports and academics.

And for these young learners, coming to school has never been more fun.

Online Extras!

These are some examples of Beacon's HE lesson plans for their Primary 1 pupils:

- [Lesson Plan 1](#)
- [Lesson Plan 2](#)
- [Lesson Plan 3](#)

Beacon uses a [Understanding by Design Overview](#) and [Scheme of Work](#) to design their HE curriculum for a school term.

Mr Nasrun Bin Mizzy is a PE teacher and Dean, Co-curriculum at [Beacon Primary School](#). Founded in 2008, Beacon is one of the pioneer schools in the [FutureSchools@Singapore](#) programme.

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Developing Champions with Character

The simple act of skipping may seem like child’s play to some, but not everyone skips the same way, or knows how to skip well. To educators at the Singapore Sports School, nothing is taken for granted. It’s not just about physical training, it’s also about championing learning.

While keeping fit is the ultimate goal of Physical Education (PE), the teachers at the [Singapore Sports School](#) (SSP) believe it also presents many opportunities for learning.

They want their students to learn games concepts, acquire skills and gain multi-sports exposure. At the same time, character development is also deliberately factored into each and every PE lesson.



Back to Basics

“Learned Champions with Character” is SSP’s motto. They aim to nurture all-rounded student-athletes who excel in both academics and sports. Juggling academics and sports has become a natural part of their students’ lives, as they are expected to maintain a high level of performance in both areas.

To develop sports-knowledgeable student-athletes, all lower secondary students are put through a customized PE programme called [SportSmart Skills](#). This 2-year programme brings them back to basics, by focusing on the fundamentals of sports.

“We are looking at things like agility, balance, speed and co-ordination (the ABCs),” explains Mr Rodney Yeo, who is Head, Physical Education and Development at SSP, and the architect behind this programme. Besides these fundamental movement skills, they also teach fundamental motor skills like locomotion, object manipulation and stability.

These skills are taught in the first year of the programme so that the student-athletes are equipped with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to enhance their sports skills. First-year modules include Athletics (RJT – Run, Jump, Throw), Gymnastics, Dance, Aquatics and Basic Sports Science education.

When they can appreciate these fundamentals, games concepts, tactics and the sport’s principles are then introduced in the second year to ensure in-depth understanding.

The Principles of Good Practice

Principal Mrs Deborah Tan believes that, “If you apply a principle well in practice, and you have a clear understanding of what constitutes ‘good deliberate practice’, you can help move a child from a state of giftedness (their potential) into an expressed talent.”

By and large, this idea may be applied to the domains of both sports and academic disciplines.



Through playing sports regularly, these student-athletes can develop a high level of metacognition. This helps them view aspects of training and competition experiences from various perspectives. It

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also provides them with opportunities to question assumptions and a basis for decisions made on the court or the playing field.

"A good grasp of games concept and a critical analysis of evidence and feedback gathered from training or competitions have helped student-athletes evaluate their own training and performance more effectively," notes Mrs Tan.

"Significant improvements in their performance are usually preceded or accompanied by the 'Aha! moment', when they gain insights into the way they play the sport," she adds. "These skills are transferable to academic disciplines."

Gaining Competence and Confidence

To broaden their understanding of skills transference, these student-athletes are exposed to other games and sports beyond their main sport. This multi-sports exposure helps them raise their ceiling of athletic achievements. At the same time, it develops them multilaterally so that they can apply the learnt skills and knowledge to their current sport involvement.

"I want my students to be a competent mover," says Rodney. "If I ask you to kick a ball or pick up a racket, you will do it – and you will do it confidently!"

To achieve this, during the school's off-peak competition season, the student-athletes are taken through a Cluster Sports programme. This programme exposes the student-athletes to complementary sports and activities, which allows them to acquire relevant skills and concepts which are applicable to their chosen sport.

This transference of skills helps them better their performance in their own sport. In addition, it serves to further motivate them. For example, Badminton players may be taught the triple jump, with a focus on the triple extension and co-ordination, which can be transferred to the playing of Badminton.

In the course of multi-sports exposure, some student-athletes have discovered new talents in other sports. One such student joined SSP as an endurance runner and was eventually discovered to be a good shooter.

"Her temperament, with a slow heart-beat rate and psychological make-up, fit very well. She has everything that makes a good shooter," shares Rodney. She was given the option to make the change – and she did. Today, she is one of the school's best shooters and is representing the national youth team.

Lessons from Champions



Every fortnight, SSP invites notable sports personalities, both local and international, to speak to their student-athletes. Named "Lessons from Champions", these guest speakers – including two-time Olympic medallist figure skater Michelle Kwan – share life lessons to motivate and encourage the student-athletes in their pursuit of excellence. They also remind the young athletes of the important place that character plays in their development.

For example, alumni Keith Saw, a national kegler who was recently named Bowler of the Year, spoke about personal responsibilities as a team player during tournaments. During the session, he reminded the student-athletes that team performance should take priority over individual brilliance.

Other themes include Sportsmanship, Integrity, Excellence and Resilience, which are also in line with the school's values.

"These are occasions in which the sport gives us tremendous opportunities to think about our own thinking, and then explicitly commend and celebrate those who model and inspire the living out of these values," Mrs Tan explains. "To us, this is deliberate practice in action."

"Undergirded by these values in action, I think it is no small feat that an average of 95% of our graduates have gone on to post-secondary education, with 65% enrolled in universities locally or overseas," she adds.

The results speak for themselves. SSP continues to be a significant pipeline for our high-performing athletes going into the national youth and senior teams. "This, on top of the fact that we have an inclusive academic admissions policy, accommodating student-athletes from a wide range of academic abilities while supporting their sporting aspirations."

By emphasizing the value of character and rigour, it is possible to pursue excellence in both sports and studies.

A Safe Environment to Grow

All student-athletes are given every encouragement – and the time – to train in their specialized sports. “What is unique about our school is the integration and customization of programmes, and this is applied across sports, academics, and boarding,” says Mrs Tan.

A typical day in SSP starts at 6.30am and ends at 10pm. This includes the provision of seven meals a day, academic classes including remediation and make-up lessons, supervised study-time in the evenings, and sports trainings.



About 95% of the students opt to stay on campus. The boarding facilities allow closer collaborations among the student-athletes and the teachers. Small groups of 10–15 student-athletes are assigned a teacher-mentor, who monitors closely the development of the whole-child from the time of enrolment till graduation.

As the students are enrolled to the school as young as 12, and they can board for as long as 6 years, the teachers literally watch them grow up. The quality of engagement between teacher-mentors and student-athletes – as well as with coaches and parents – is usually very positive and the level of trust is often high.

“Every child who feels secure will generally progress well in whatever they are potentially good at,” notes Mrs Tan.

With the holistic education provided at SSP, these student-athletes can enjoy the many life opportunities that present themselves in both sports and studies. And for Rodney, “It makes coming to school worthwhile because you know you are coming in to impact the life of another young child.”

Useful Resources

Here are examples of SSP's [Lesson Plan](#) and [Fundamental Motor Skills \(FMS\) curriculum and rubrics](#).

About the Singapore Sports School

Founded in 2004, [Singapore Sports School](#) (SSP) is a specialized independent school that aims to develop well-rounded students who excel in both academics and sports. In addition to their impressive array of sport facilities – including two Olympic-sized pools, a 12-lane bowling centre, and a 30-bay indoor shooting range – the school offers their student-athletes a customized and structured programme consisting of classroom and remedial lessons, make-up sessions, sports training and meals.

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The Art of Touching Lives

At the **Academy of Singapore Teachers**, a new STAR is rising. The **Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts**, or STAR for short, is helping Art and Music teachers to shine. Academy Principal Mrs Rebecca Chew shares her vision of how arts education can help our society grow and mature.

Q: What is the place of Art and Music in the school curriculum?

Let me talk more broadly about the role of arts education. When we talk about this, we're really talking about what touches lives. It's about our psyche – our identity, our heritage, our rootedness, and sense of place. It has to do with our personhood in a larger societal narrative. And schools are the natural vehicles for developing this.

We often think of Art and Music subjects in silos. But teachers should not think about them simply as subjects but as touching lives. And what's the place of teachers in this larger narrative in society? They are the critical success factors in the building of tomorrow.

Arts educators build social and cultural capital. What then, is the purpose and meaning of what they conceive and carry out in the classrooms, and how does it fit into the larger landscape?

So it's a clarion call to teachers to see their professional work and up-skilling themselves. This is the continuing work of STAR. STAR develops the capability of Art and Music teachers by providing structured extended learning opportunities in the specialized domains. We want to help make the arts educators' thinking visible and help them question their own assumptions, about what they know and the role they play in that larger narrative.



Q: What can teachers do to develop themselves?

They can tap into STAR's resources – register for the milestone programmes as arts educators, "like" the very active Facebook page which has updates about events in the arts community, and blog and share about their shared experiences, making teaching and learning both meaningful and connected.

STAR helps teachers plug into the larger community of arts educators where they find greater support and good critical friends for their teaching ideas and approaches. When people organize themselves according to their specialized arts interests, they do it wholeheartedly. It's transformative renewal from within.

You can differentiate the teacher–artist as opposed to the artist–teacher. The artist–teacher is usually the artist, who may share foremost the studio practice experiences through workshops, forums, or performances at events. The teacher–artist, on the other hand, is the educator. What the teacher–artist does is first finding meaning in what is learned as a reflexive approach, and then connecting the applied learning into meaningful approaches for the differentiated classroom.

So there is depth, and there's also breadth. We're going beyond community to building a fraternity of arts teachers – that's something more difficult to achieve.

School leaders must value the Art and Music teachers in their midst, and know that these people are very precious.

- Rebecca Chew, Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts

Q: How can schools encourage and support arts education?

School leaders must value the Art and Music teachers in their midst, and know that these people are very precious. Their role cannot be underestimated because they bring collaborative practice, critique, core studio habits into the teaching routines.

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We're talking about a total curriculum – Art and Music are respected as equal subject disciplines as part of this total curriculum. It's about understanding the transformation that arts education can bring about.

School leaders are pivotal because they are the ones who can drive transformation and innovation through the stewardship of these arts educators they have in their staff complement. They can ensure sufficient resourcing, enable enlightened timetabling schedules to support studio time, and deploy staff who have the skills required to enable sustainability of the values taught within the rigour of these subject domains.



Q: From your experience at SOTA, what is the value or impact of such an education on the students?

The first batch of students from SOTA graduated last year. And from what the parents tell us, they are surprised to see how much their kids have grown and matured suddenly. There is a strength of mind and inner resilience. Children are by nature very curious, but these students are not afraid to ask questions or to probe deeper.

Perhaps these habits came from the way they were taught – through critiquing, spiralling questioning, the many reiterations they have to do for each piece of work. Some people call it critical thinking, but I see it as more than that. They develop analytical and lateral thinking, and they are able to take a position for themselves.

As an educator, you see these students you nurture applying their artistic skills to lived reality, linking with the community. We had eight students who went to document 100 Acehese families' stories of what the tsunami did to their families. These students returned to make beautiful illustrated books to be sent back to the Aceh primary school, to help the community tell the stories for those kids as a piece of their heritage story.

We need skilled teachers who are enlightened to see purpose and meaning, to see the transformative role that Art and Music can play, and who encourage experimentation, expression and discovery. Through what they do, they contribute a larger voice to that narrative, to our heritage as a Singapore society.

Useful Resources

For STAR's resources, visit their [website](#).

Mrs Rebecca Chew is a passionate advocate of the arts. She has been in the teaching service for the past 25 years, and was the first Principal of [Singapore's School of the Arts \(SOTA\)](#) from its inauguration in 2008. Now as Academy Principal of the [Singapore Teachers' Academy for the aRts \(STAR\)](#), she is committed to the professional development of Art and Music teachers.

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