



# Outstanding Youth in Education Award

## Navigating students to discover their best self

By Mr Ang Kok Wee Alex

Mr Alex Ang taps on his students' sense of adventure in exploring the outdoors to learn about values, leadership and a love for the environment.

### The Outdoors, a Natural Teacher

Each time I lead my students to climb up a mountain, I make them carry a watermelon. They take turns to carry this object, which will be their reward when they reach the summit. Once, due to exhaustion, the team had to put the watermelon down for a while, and the poor fruit rolled down the mountain slope and smashed into bits. This was a quick lesson in shared responsibility — each team member must pull their weight to do a job right.

This experience, among many others, only reinforced what I have long believed — the outdoors is a great platform for character development. This is what I hope to share with my students: invaluable life lessons to help us navigate the ups and downs of life, in school and beyond.

My love for the outdoors began when I joined the Boys' Brigade when I was in secondary school. I learnt how to kayak, rock-climb and navigate, all the while building lifelong memories with my friends and experiencing personal growth myself.

Once, while trekking in the Pacific Northwest Mountains, I almost slid off its snowy slopes... but I was saved at the last minute by my ice-axe and some quick thinking. Thanks to years of outdoor education, I was able to stay calm and think on my feet.

Now, my students and I hike and cycle across multiple terrains and vast green spaces during camping trips. We have been whiplashed by rain, missed our dinners, and crawled into tents, muddy and soaking wet.

Nature teaches us to be adaptable and resilient in the face of that which we cannot control. This is a helpful lesson not just for the outdoors, but when juggling the multiple demands of school and life in general.

During PE lessons, when I conduct rock climbing and abseiling sessions, I witness my students develop grit

as they learn to conquer their fears. This helps them develop self-confidence and build strong bonds with one another as they overcome challenges as a team.



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### Helping My Students Find Their Way in Life

I am a great fan of Orienteering as a life skill. In Northbrooks Secondary, I teach my students to navigate small and big spaces — from the basketball court to the school campus and then to neighbourhood parks.

They acquire skills on how to make good choices as they learn to read the map, survey their environment and pick the best route to reach their checkpoints in the shortest time possible, all the while avoiding pitfalls and challenging terrains.

After each run, the students' timing is clocked. This immediate feedback on their performance helps them

reflect on the choices they made, and this motivates them to navigate better and faster next time.

Orienteering teaches us how to stay focused in a new environment, and how to sustain a high level of self and environmental awareness. These skills promote a growth mindset and an understanding not just of oneself, but of others.

It teaches many other lessons as well. For instance, one can also learn about wildlife. In 2019, I partnered with Wildlife Reserves Singapore to give our students the opportunity to navigate the Singapore Zoo and find out more about how animals adapt and live within the dense Mandai tropical rainforest — an outdoor lesson incorporating Science and ecology concepts.

I have led my students to kayak and clean up the beach at Sembawang and Pasir Ris, by partnering PA Water Venture to raise awareness about the environment and conservation. In addition, our student environmental ambassadors have also cleaned up the Marina Reservoir. With Ground-Up Initiative, a non-profit organisation, we have conducted activities in Yishun such as farming and harvesting vegetables that we give to the local community.

Through these experiences, I want to inculcate in my students a love for Singapore's habitats and a desire to preserve them for our future generations.

### National Orienteering Race/ Mentoring Future Leaders

In 2016, to enable more students to benefit from orienteering, I led a team to organise the National Orienteering Race, which is open to all Singapore schools.

The aim was simple: provide a platform for kids to share their love for orienteering, race in a safe and convivial setting while honing their skills and developing friendship and sportsmanship. The participation rate has been growing steadily, from 300 to 450 students over 4 years.

What gives me joy is to see my students blossom and grow through the various training platforms and events.

Irfan,\* a former student in my form class, went from a shy teenager to a confident Vice President of the Student Council and then to valedictorian.

Another student, Queenie,\* was struggling with discipline issues. Orienteering training gave her the motivation and structure to stay in school, and she eventually represented Singapore at the Asian Junior Youth Orienteering Championships.

Student leaders, under my care, have stepped out of their comfort zones. They have gone on overseas trips to ASEAN countries. They have seen how others

endure hardship and challenges in their countries and experience the world differently. They have shared meals with their hosts, scaled mountain peaks, and explored the arts and culture of their Asian counterparts.

From being mentored, they have mentored others to develop leadership competencies in facilitation and event management.

From guiding primary school prefects on how to contribute to the community to planning Outdoor Education leaders' conferences and camps — my student leaders have stepped up in many ways.

### Empathy Goes Both Ways

As teachers, we are role models to our students. When they see us striving for the same goal, this triggers their empathy.

I have enlisted my fellow teachers to engage in strenuous outdoor activities like dragon boating and kayaking, which has a surprisingly positive multiplier effect!



### Engaging fellow colleagues in outdoor activities such as dragon boating

When our students see us struggle through the same difficulties, it makes them believe they can achieve what they want if they set their minds to it — and that we teachers will walk alongside with them in their journeys.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the students*

