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In the Service of Nation-building

The beginnings of outdoor education in Singapore can be traced to the days of its independence. In order to have a contextual understanding of outdoor education in Singapore, it is crucial to look not only at its historical development but, more importantly, to consider what people are learning from it today and where it may lead us in the future.

Outdoor education in Singapore arose from the need to build its defence capability. After its independence, Singapore had two battalions that were under the control of a Malaysian brigadier and there were elements in Malaysia that wished to reverse Singapore's separation (Neo & Chen, 2007). Thus, building up the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) became a top priority. In 1967, all able-bodied male Singaporeans had to enlist at age 18 for National Service, and thereafter remain operationally ready as part of the reserves for another 20 years. The announcement in 1967 of the impending withdrawal of the British troops made the formation of the national army even more urgent.

The build-up of Singapore's defence capability was carried out quietly so as not to unduly antagonise neighbouring countries. It was an uphill task as there was a need to reorientate people's minds to accept the need for a people's army and to overcome their traditional dislike for soldiering (Lee, 2000). Extra-curricular activities[1] (ECA) such as the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC) were set up in all secondary schools so that parents could identify the army and police with their sons and daughters. This was to dispel the fear and resentment towards the army and police as symbols of colonial coercion. Therefore, the onus was on the Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve the physical condition of youths by getting them to participate in sports and physical activity of all kinds, and to develop a

[1] Organised activities that students engage in after formal school hours. All secondary school students need to enrol in at least one ECA and points are awarded to the students for their participation. The MOE changed the terminology ECA to CCA (Co-Curricular Activities) to highlight their significance in the holistic development of the child.

positive attitude toward adventure and strenuous activities. Schools started organising adventure courses for their students in response to Singapore's leaders' call for the building of a "rugged and dynamic" (Lee, 2000, p. 25) society. In those days, most of these courses were organised by the British Army and were mainly based in Pulau Ubin, a less developed island close to the main island of Singapore. Therefore, the early days of outdoor education was in the form of adventure courses to build ruggedness in the young to prepare for Singapore's military defence.

Outward-bound

In 1967, Dr Goh Keng Swee, the Minister for Defence and Interior, mooted the idea of an Outward Bound School (OBS) in Singapore. Two New Zealanders, Hamish Thomas and Al Cameron, were invited to help set up OBS that year. The OBS was intended to help build the "rugged" society (Outward Bound Singapore, 2007). The first OBS course in February 1968 was improvised with few resources. When Thomas and Cameron returned to New Zealand, local instructors began to develop more localised OBS courses in 1969. For instance, the instructors built an obstacle course in the waters surrounding Singapore in addition to the conventional land-based obstacles courses. They learnt from kelong operators how kelongs were built, and then used those techniques to build an obstacle course that extended from the beach into the sea (Outward Bound Singapore, 2007). The management of OBS moved from the People's Association (PA) to the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) in 1971. This change had a number of significant implications, such as army officers replacing the pool of OBS instructors. Under the training division of the army, the OBS became a conduit for the provision of adventure and leadership training to young men and women, and also provided a way to give ordinary Singaporeans a taste of military life. From 1982, all male students in the NCC were to be exposed to the rigours and challenge of tougher training (Koh, 1982). Thus, other than the courses at OBS, their training included foot-and-arms drills, rifle range practice, map-reading or orienteering, topography marches, campcraft, section training and annual weekend camps. According to Nancy Koh (1982), the aim was to develop rugged and confident boys who would find it easier to adapt to national service when enlisted. However, such uniformed groups and OBS activities were gradually extended to girls. Launched in 1989, the National Camp that was held to coincide with the National Day

celebrations, brought together students from eight uniformed groups (Chua, 1989). Outdoor activities such as canoeing, orienteering, telematches and campfire were conducted during the National camps to toughen the students both physically and mentally. Even today, these camps remain as platforms for members of various uniformed groups to meet and discuss national issues.

In need of a rugged society

Taking a leaf from the British Empire, the ruling elites in the once colonised Singapore persisted with the early 20th century notion that outdoor activities should be used to develop fitness for war and ruggedness in our young. On more than one occasion, the first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, called on Singaporeans to work to be a "rugged society" (The Straits Times, 1990, p. 1). He said that if the trend of rising obesity were left unchecked, it would have adverse effects for the nation as a whole and the SAF in particular. The need for a rugged society came into sharp focus once again in 1990 when then First Deputy Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong observed that more Singaporeans were becoming "flabby" (Chua & Tan, 1990).

The emphasis on building a rugged society led to the Physical Education (PE) curriculum coming under close scrutiny. In 1990, the PE college appointed a specialist from Britain, Malcolm Gilbey, to head the outdoor education department. According to Sharon Lim (1990), the department had four lecturers teaching sailing, orienteering, canoeing, campcraft and personal development. The idea was for PE teachers who had been through the course to introduce these outdoor pursuits as ECAs in schools. It was uncertain if such adventure activities that had been developed for an individualistic culture like that of United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA) would be appropriate for a Singaporean society that places emphasis on community and interdependence. Nevertheless, these activities seemed to have been widely and uncritically accepted.

With rising interest in adventure activities among young Singaporeans, the number of adventure clubs within community centres rose from 11 in 1985 to 20 in 1990 (Tan, 1990). In support of the nation's call for a rugged society, the MOE endorsed a policy to ensure that every secondary school student goes through at least one residential

camping experience in his or her school life. As a result, camping became the most popular outdoor education activity offered by schools. A survey conducted by the MOE in 1991 showed that 98 per cent of primary schools conducted camps for their students (Extra-Curricular Activities Centre, 1991). Therefore, since the 1990s, camping has been established as an important aspect of the education system in Singapore.

In 1991, the management of the OBS was returned to PA (Outward Bound Singapore, 2007). The aim was to offer Singapore's young people exciting activities to develop their physical and mental ruggedness. To support the nation's efforts, MOE formalised OBS programmes for secondary schools by setting aside a yearly budget to subsidise their students (Ong, 1990). However, not all students would have a chance to go through the OBS due to its limited capacity. Therefore, MOE resourced two adventure centres at Jalan Bahtera and Ponggol with outdoor adventure facilities to cater to schools' outdoor camping programmes. A climbing tower and other team-building activity stations were added to the camping and canoeing facilities. About 40,000 students up to the junior college level each year were able to get a taste of outdoor living and adventure at these centres (Phua, 1996).

Almost all schools in Singapore offer their students some form of adventure-based programmes, ranging from camping to overseas expeditions. To maximise the usage of the MOE adventure centres, each school was allocated a three-day two-night slot for their camps. Indirectly, this led to the growing trend of schools organising camps that span over a three-day period, accommodating about 300 students each time. The design and nature of schools' programmes vary from school to school, largely dependent on the availability of each school's financial, human and physical resources. The camps are typically adventure-based and include activities such as campcraft, campfire-making, orienteering, team-building, challenge ropes courses, abseiling and rock-climbing. Many private vendors have also entered the market in servicing schools' requirements in organising camps for students.

Surge of outdoor activities

In 1999, outdoor education was included as one of the learning activities at the

college level in the revised physical education syllabus produced by the MOE (Wang, et al., 2006). In the same year, an outdoor education department was formally set up in ECAC under the MOE. The large amount of resources committed to schools' outdoor education programmes and a department to oversee its implementation underscores the important role it plays in the Singapore education system. Along with the surge in camping programmes organised by schools, another emerging trend was for schools to take students on overseas trips to learn more about other cultures. According to Sandra Davie (2001), 264 schools conducted 786 study trips overseas in 2001. Most of these trips were conducted during school holidays and combined lessons with outdoor pursuits and community service. Schools were sending students abroad to pick up skills they could not learn in the classroom in a bid to "toughen up" the country's youths (Almenoar, 2005a). According to tour operators, adventure trips overseas have become popular with secondary school and junior college students. In the past few years, hundreds of youngsters have headed for the jungles of Thailand, the mountains of New Zealand and the deep waters off Malaysia, and the numbers appear to be rising (Almenoar, 2005b). The trend is not surprising. According to Maria Almenoar (2005b), the ministry has set aside $4.5 million a year to help finance such programmes for students to become more rugged.

Since 2004, the MOE launched two new and purpose-built adventure centres to cater to the adventurous teens. The management of the MOE adventure centres has been outsourced to private operators and they run programmes for schools throughout the year, catering to about 70, 000 students annually (Lui, 2006). This move has unwittingly resulted in more schools taking up the standard three-day two-night camping packages for their students. The outsourcing of outdoor education programmes may have worked against MOE's intent of creating a more diversified landscape in education. The camping packages offered by these vendors are usually targeted at mass participation and they offer schools quick-fix solutions to meeting the MOE's policy of conducting at least two camps for each secondary school student.

In fact, the adventure centres were part of an effort to address the view that Singaporean youths were becoming too soft (Ng & Chan, 2004; Soh, 2004), a situation which former Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam described as a bigger challenge for the country than the economic one (Goh, 2004).

Shanmugaratnum stressed the importance of providing our children with a holistic and broad-based education, with a strong emphasis on activities that develop tenacity and strength of character. He felt that sports and rugged activities, such as outdoor camps or expeditions and uniformed groups, lend themselves to building these qualities (Shanmugaratnam, 2004). This deviates from the earlier emphasis on building defence capability through outdoor education. The emphasis appears to have shifted towards inclusiveness so that each child can develop the tenacity to thrive in the globalised environment. Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Linda Lantieri (2005) point out that the climate of contemporary education where teachers focus mainly on the academic matters, leave little time for children to pursue such meaningful connections that could lead to responsible global citizenship.

The PE syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2006) that was implemented from 2006 effectively marginalises outdoor education as "other physical activities" (p. 40). The document states that outdoor activities could be included in the PE programme as a means to attain the expected learning outcomes, for example, rock-climbing can be used to develop muscular strength. Other than listing such activities as these, there is no mention of the objectives, scope, content and intended learning outcomes of outdoor activities in the PE syllabus document. A recent Singaporean primary school review by MOE (2009), however, acknowledges that the fundamental task of education is beyond academic achievement. The MOE review committee is of the view that learning is holistic, and understanding emerges from active experiences that make sense to learners. In the same review, outdoor education has been selected as one of the means of teaching the concepts, values and skills of global education, because it can provide students with authentic experiences that engage them actively and holistically.

Perceptions of learning outcomes

Peter Martin (from La Trobe University, Australia then) conducted a survey on 300 Singaporean teachers' perception on the learning outcomes of outdoor education in 2006. The survey suggested that the range of beliefs about the outcomes of outdoor education in Singapore was rather narrow (Martin & Ho, 2009). According to the survey, Singaporean teachers ranked outcomes related to recreation the lowest in

priority and outcomes related to personal and community development the highest in importance. The Singaporean respondents considered outdoor education as most importantly pursuing educational outcomes such as resilience, group co-operation and personal responsibility. They also considered academic outcomes of enhanced critical thinking or problem solving to be more important than environmental outcomes, such as promoting environmental appreciation.

Teacher competencies

Another of our (Martin & Ho, 2009) finding is on the topic of teacher competency that may have implications on the delivery of outdoor education in schools. Majority of the Singaporean outdoor educators surveyed expressed that the outdoor education field requires specialist knowledge and skills (88%), and many (39%) felt unsure about their qualifications and experience to teach outdoor education. This finding is hardly surprising as there is no avenue for teacher training in outdoor education other than in-services courses offered by the MOE. With the establishment of the outdoor education department within MOE in 1999, a number of in-service courses on outdoor education were offered to teachers and school leaders. These courses focused on developing teachers' competencies in risk assessment and management systems, abseiling, climbing, expedition management, and facilitation skills. This was done with the hope that more teachers who have a passion for the outdoors will also be equipped with the skills and competencies to conduct camps and overseas trips. However, we contend that this will not fill the void in pre-service teacher training and it remains one of the pressing challenges for outdoor education in Singapore.

In search of meaning and vision

To pursue the outcomes derived from the survey conducted at the second MOE outdoor education conference, a group of outdoor educators shared a four-day outdoor expedition in July 2007, to deliberate further on the roles of outdoor education in Singapore schools. Discussion notes and email correspondences were used to develop consensus on a draft statement of the purpose for outdoor education in Singapore which comprises three complementary and equally important components: ecological literacy, resilience and critical thinking (Martin & Ho, 2009). The statement

acknowledged the importance of resilience but also included educational imperatives suggested by climate change and the need for cultural harmony in a multi-cultural and multi-faith population.

Following the World Economic Forum in Davos in early 2008, Prime Minister Lee noted that the effort to improve Singapore's environmental record will prepare the nation for the future, taking into consideration that energy is likely to remain costly and that climate change will continue to be on the global agenda (Fernandez, 2008). His view supported our (Martin & Ho, 2009) argument that Singapore, as a first world nation, has to be proactive in addressing climate change, limiting carbon emissions as well as addressing the root causes of excessive consumption. Thus, changes to notions of affluence in a world more driven by ecological criteria will demand resilience. We argue that outdoor education could play a pivotal role in re-orienting young people to alternative worldviews.

There is a need for outdoor educators and teachers to continue this conversation and to envisage outdoor education's purposes in the ever-changing educational landscape of Singapore. This conversation certainly needs to be extended beyond the current definition of outdoor education by the MOE (2008) as "a means of achieving the desired outcomes of education through guided direct experience in the outdoors" (p. 1). For outdoor education to sustain and flourish in Singapore, where education is still very much in the service of the society, its contribution needs to be grounded in time, place and culture.

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