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A Holistic Education

Big Idea

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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.

- Prof Michael Chia,
Office of Faculty Affairs



An Institute of



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Shaping Creative Expression through Music



Building Character by Getting Physical



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RESEARCH within REACH

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.

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.”

“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.”

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.

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.

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.

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.



Never underestimate the wisdom that young people have.

- Prof Chia on listening to students’ voices

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*.

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.



Peter and Eugene believe music can enhance learning

“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.

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 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.

Classroom

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.



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

- Nasrun Bin Mizzy,
Beacon Primary School

Assessing Physical Education

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



The teacher has to be an observer and a facilitator to be able to tease out the problems.

- Nasrun on the role of the PE teacher

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.

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 hall, 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.

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”).

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.

"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!

Check out Beacon's lesson plans for PE.

People

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.

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.



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

Useful Resource

For STAR's resources, visit their website: www.star.moe.edu.sg/resources

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.

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 Acehnese 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.

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Online Exclusives



Anchored in the Arts



Music to the Eyes



Developing Champions with Character