

Sporting and Academic Excellence in the Singapore Schools Environment

新加坡學校：一個卓越運動和學術的環境

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Abstract

In the light of recent interest for world-class sports achievement in Singapore, the responsibility of the local schools is to engineer the environment for academic and sporting excellence. By then examining existing literature, the authors identified various themes that have been frequently attributed as necessary ingredients for pedagogic and coaching success. These variables – school culture, role of the principal, teachers, peers, facilities, and recognition – were then validated through a case study of an eminent local student-athlete. The writers hope that the validation of these variables will inspire schools towards sporting and academic excellence in Singapore.

摘要

有鑒於新加坡近來對世界級運動的熱烈追求，本地學校有責任塑造一個有利於卓越學術和體育的環境。在參考了現有的文獻後，作者指出幾個教學法和實踐教導的成功要素。這些要素通過一個出色學生運動員的個案加以驗證。作者希望通過這個驗證個案，能讓學校受到啟發，朝向卓越體育和學術的方向邁進。

“A first world economy should produce a few world class sportsmen.”

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (Straits Times, 23 Aug 1999)

The Prime Minister's challenge for sports excellence at the 1998 and 1999 National Day Rallies has fired up Singapore's imagination for winning Olympic medals and international sporting glory. The critical role schools play in this vision is obvious. It is from among our students where talents must be identified, inspired, moulded and trained so that they would mature into

national sportsmen. While our education system has produced laudable academic results, schools could certainly contribute more towards the national sporting goal. And, sporting excellence does not necessarily preclude academic standards. In fact, in material Singapore, schools and the sporting fraternity will do student-athletes a great disservice if education is compromised for sports.

Enough local sportsmen – Benedict Tan, Lim Seok Hui and Tay Khoon Hean – have proven that academic and sporting excellence could be simultaneously realised (Chua, 1994). In the light of our national sporting vision, the challenge – indeed, the responsibility – of our schools is to create the necessary environment to allow student-athletes to perform in their studies and sports. This has been proven feasible by ample examples of schools, like Raffles' Institution, Raffles' Girls' School, Chinese High School, etc., which have consistently been doing well in both. This paper will identify some variables for schools to aspire for academic and sporting excellence.

There is a wealth of literature outlining models of academic excellence. Edmonds included emphasis on skills acquisition, high expectations, strong leadership, monitoring of progress and orderly learning climates (Edmonds, 1978; Hopkins *et al.*, 1994). Rutter listed having a balance of able and less able pupils, rewards to induce progress, good working conditions, opportunities for responsibilities, confidence in abilities, teachers as role-models, effective classroom management and firm leadership (Reynolds, 1982; Rutter, 1980). Purkey and Smith presented two categories (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Structural variables included school management, instructional leadership, staff stability, curriculum articulation, staff development, parental involvement, recognising success, maximising learning and community support. Process variables are collaborative planning, sense of being in the community, high expectations and order. Locally, the *Principals' Report: Towards Excellence in Schools*, drafted after a study tour of top institutions in the United Kingdom and United States, was comprehensive (Ministry of Education (MOE) (1987). The school should have a capable headmaster, a responsible board, the headmaster given ample latitude, effective and committed teachers, selective enrolment, favourable teacher-pupil ratio, broad-based pastoral care and curricular programmes, wide range of extra-curricular activities (ECA, now core-curricular activities, CCA), adequate physical resources and single session. As these works focus on academic distinction, sporting excellence was not on the agenda.

One study had identified the variables for sporting excellence, emphasising the roles of the principal, school culture, institutional tradition, community involvement, facilities, teachers and coaches, rewards, student body and religious influence (Seet, 1995). The sports' specialisation, however, precluded discussion on the equally important academic realm.

The aforementioned literature, their specific focus notwithstanding, does provide a pool of factors for consideration. Characteristics for pedagogical and sporting distinction could be identified. Consolidating from these, key variables could be drawn to provide a model for academic and sporting excellence.

School Culture

School Culture is the behavioural norms, shared values, beliefs and attitudes beheld by members of the institution (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Taylor, 1990). Its importance in forging excellence is highlighted in the *Principals' Report* (MOE, 1987). Top British and American schools were governed by a culture of high standards, achievement-orientation and recognition for efforts and accomplishments. However, Bloom's caution on the internal consistency of various school programmes must be remembered (Bloom, 1981). By implication, the objectives of CCA and curricular programmes should not be fundamentally different, if not totally harmonious, to facilitate academic and sporting excellence.

The Principal

The Principal is critical in effecting academic and sporting excellence (Davis and Thomas, 1989). One of the most highlighted characteristics of effective principals is their vision, *ie.*, the image of what their institutions can be and what they want to achieve (Colton, 1985; Davis & Thomas, 1989). Particularly, strong vision would establish a climate that progress towards goals and expectations (Rutherford, 1989). Indeed, forging a positive atmosphere is an important leadership function. Effective principals tended to cultivate a sense of community, emphasising shared values, common goals and high expectations while rewarding progress (Cohen, 1983; Davis & Thomas, 1989; Good & Brophy, 1985). The *Principals' Report* summed it up: *elite* US and British institutions are driven by the philosophies of quality principals (MOE, 1987).

Teachers

Teachers are important for educational excellence (Gilchrist, 1989; Tursman, 1981). Some teacher behaviours have especially induced learning, including encouragement, expectations, responses to low and high achievers, *etc.* (Parkay & Stanford, 1992). Particularly, teacher's expectations towards students could manifest in his behaviour towards them, conveying to them the performance anticipated, thereby influencing them to act accordingly (Davis & Thomas, 1988; Good & Weinstein, 1986; Parkay & Stanford, 1992; Taylor, 1990). A teacher's high expectations could consequently inspire students' performance. Teacher's interest in student-athletes' classroom performances has also contributed to their academic improvement; their feedback to coaches on their charges' classroom performances could then familiarise coaches with the athletes' total development (Snyder, 1985; Williams, 1986).

Peers

Peers command considerable influence on one another, given the large amount of time adolescents spend with their friends – four times as much interaction than with parents (Buhrmester & Carbery, 1992; Santrock, 1993). Given that outstanding sports performances could usually made them popular, teens usually value athletics higher than academics and devote more time and effort to refine their sports (Coleman, 1961). The potential effect of peer influence should be maximised to reach for academic and sporting excellence.

Facilities

Facilities have contributed towards the distinction of top British and American institutions (MOE, 1987). The effectiveness of infrastructure – classrooms, offices, laboratories, computers, halls, canteens, libraries, workshops, *etc.* – laid not so much in abundance or newness but in good management and constant upgrading (Scheerens, 1992). The significance of facilities has also been amply demonstrated locally. Schools' strive for sporting paragon has been hampered by lack of facilities while student-athletes' pedagogic and sporting performances would naturally be limited when time and energy are expended commuting between schools and training venues (Seet, 1985; *Straits Times*, 9 Oct 1992).

Rewards and Recognition

Rewards and Recognition for achievements undoubtedly induce students (Gilchrist, 1989; Rutter *et al.*, 1979). Intrinsic rewards could appeal to the human need to feel competent while extrinsic rewards, conveying information on his level of competency, could further arouse intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). However, extrinsic rewards could reveal to the recipient lack of control over his behaviour and decrease his motivation. Nonetheless, rewards are certainly relevant, as shown by the use of extrinsic rewards to motivate students in various schools with exceptional sporting performance (Seet, 1995).

To validate these variables for academic and sporting excellence in schools, a single case study was undertaken (Quek, 1997). A case study is preferred over experimental and investigative design because of the abundance of factors impacting on pedagogic and sporting performances in schools and the lack of control over them (Stevenson, 1975; Yin, 1993). Single-case study is preferred over multiple-case study in view of the latter's demand for extensive resources and time (Yin, 1989). Moreover, the uniqueness of student-athlete – the depth and wealth of information

that could be gleaned – justifies a single-case study (Patton, 1990; Yin, 1989).

Methodology

The research methodology began with the selection of the subjects. A top junior sailor, the subjects also did remarkably well academically. His bronze medals at the 1993 Southeast Asian Games and the Asian Optimist Championship – over a host of local awards – led the National Olympic Council to name him Sportsboy of the Year, one of the highest national honour achievable by a student-athlete. At the same time, the subject scored distinctions in eight subjects at the 1994 GCE Ordinary Level Examination. Yet, his mediocre score of 239 out of a possible of 300 at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) had disqualified him from his preferred secondary school. One of the top institutions, with an entry requirement of 240 and above that year, the school eventually made special concession to admit the subject. But he had one of the lowest PSLE scores among the cohort. Nonetheless, he apparently worked hard to produce one of the best academic results in the school and country by the end of his secondary education. His remarkably improved academic and sporting accomplishments led to interesting questions – and deemed him a suitable candidate – for this research. Specifically, what were the factors in the school environment that allowed the subject to excel in the academic and sports realms?

With this aim in mind, the research proceeded with a series of interviews with the subject. The questions posed were generated after a critical analysis of the literature surveyed. The enquiry focused on the research theme and avoided intruding into the subject's privacy. A similar framework guided other interviews with personalities related with the subject, including his parents, teachers, coaches, teammates, schoolmates and friends. This was necessitated by the need to maintain objectivity through verifying the subject's testimonies and gleaning alternative perspectives to his views.

Documentary sources relevant to the subject's academic and sporting performances were also examined. These included his examination records, such as PSLE and GCE certificates and report books, to trace and analyse his academic progress. Remarks by form teachers on his conduct and general progress also provided insights into the subject's academic life during the ten years of primary and secondary education. His awards and trophies were also consulted for references on his sporting achievements. Reports in magazines and newspapers also helped track the subject's sporting progress.

The data collected from these interviews, documentary sources and other observations was then collated and analysed. The findings validated the variables as instrumental in facilitating academic and sporting excellence in schools.

Findings

A *School Culture* of academic and sporting excellence undoubtedly contributed to the Subject's success. Founded in 1876, the School has long been ranked among the best in GCE results and known as a "Top Sports School" (*School Magazine*, 1984; *School Magazine*, 1991; Cheong, 1987). Verses from the School Anthem, "For here we've learnt and striven too, And played the sportsman's game" (*School Magazine*, 1982), reflected the entrenched tradition: sports is held together with pedagogical instruction and character-building as essential for ideal all-round education. In fact, the School's budget for 1984 reflected an almost equal allocation of funds to instructional programme and ECA (*School Magazine*, 1984). While it is instinctive for the typical school to concentrate on academics, the School's belief in all-round education saw a parallel devotion to sports. The School's principal admitted to an

environment that helps the sportsmen. ... When they do well in sports, equal recognition is given so they ... [do not] feel like a 'second-class citizen'... compared with somebody else who can do very well in their studies. (Interview 8)

The Subject agreed: "[the School population] understand what I am doing — they would look up to people who do sports." (Interview 4) His classmate pointed out:

if you go to most other schools, they will only emphasise ... academic results. So he [Subject] may either concentrate too much on his training and neglect his studies or study too much but neglect his sailing. ...since all-round education is encouraged in the School, it...helps him by providing the right environment to train and to excel in academic results (Interview 10)

The Subject was facilitated by the School's culture of academic and sporting excellence.

The Principal was posted to the School in March 1990, nine months before the Subject's admission, and transferred out in December 1994, when he graduated. His tenure coincided with the Subject's education in the School.

During that period, the Principal's belief in all-round education was evident in the School's culture. Such an educational philosophy,

the Principal agreed, was influenced by his own sports background: he played badminton for his university as an undergraduate (*Straits Times*, 9 Oct 1992; Interview 8). Towards this all-round education vision, the Principal was instrumental in further instigating the School's culture for academic and sporting excellence. A new instrument, called the Profile, was implemented shortly after his joining the School to provide

feedback to both administrators and the students about the all round development of the student population. In addition, it can also motivate the individual to strive for better results (*School Diary*, 1996).

The annual All-Round Student Award, presented to the pupil with outstanding academic and CCA performances at the Speech Day, was reinstated after several years' lapse. The Meritorious Awards and Commendation Awards were also introduced to "recognise different levels of achievements and contributions." (*School Magazine*, 1991)

Academically, the Principal was creative in helping students, particularly sportsmen. By postponing the mid-year examinations from May to July, the students could focus on their GCE O Level Second Language examinations in June. The Subject was particularly appreciative:

I think the most important thing was my Chinese [Second Language] ... I took my Chinese in June and got my A1. By getting an A1 in Chinese — which I have never gotten before, I always got B3 or A2 — after all the work I have put through for one month ..., so I thought maybe if I do the same thing for my other subjects, I could get my A1s as well. Before, I was thinking that, 'Oh! So what if I study so hard. I am going to get maybe 6 or 7 A1s but my Chinese has always been a B. I will never get my A1 for Chinese no matter what.' ... But after I got my A1 for my Chinese, then I said, 'Hey, now there is a chance to get maximum score [8 A1s].' So I thought, 'Why not give it a try?' (Interview 7)

Another innovation was the 'post-prelims time-table', allowing students to return to School on days when lessons on their weak subjects were conducted, thereby giving them time for their own revision. The Subject, consequently, was given "a lot of flexibility ... to organise his revision.... he didn't have to come for a lot of such lessons, so he has a lot of free time to do his own work at home." (Interview 10)

More informally, the Principal's flexibility impacted the Subject directly. His willingness to admit the Subject despite the latter's not making the qualifying grade gave the Subject entry into the School and all the ingredients for eventual academic and sporting triumphs. The Subject was very thankful:

The Principal's decision to admit me to the School made a big difference because if I had gone to any other school, I would not be able to get good results. The structure ... the environment would not have been there.... If he had said 'no', you probably would not be seeing me today. (Interview 7)

The Principal rationalised:

very frankly, at that particular point of time, I did not really know how good he was. But, of course, there is no evidence of a strong correlation between PSLE results and GCE O Level results. ... In his case, he only missed by a couple of points. ... it shouldn't make very much difference so long as the boy is a good student....when I took him in, one reason...is I am supportive of games people. ...I believe if a person can excel in one sport... he has certain qualities for success, he will be able to utilise those qualities to be successful as well in the academic programme. (Interview 8)

After making concessions to admit the Subject, thereby beginning his distinguished student-athlete career, the Principal also allowed special arrangements to accommodate his competition schedules. His grant of leave for the Subject to participate in overseas competitions during term time provided the exposure and continuous training for the Subject to remain honed. The Principal reasoned:

I knew from the results he obtained from secondary 1, 2 and 3 that he has been doing very well. Knowing that he is a very self-disciplined boy, being away from school for a couple of days doesn't really make a difference. ... it all depends on the boy himself. ...if he is a hardworking type, ...I think missing lessons for a couple of days, ... should not be a problem at all. (Interview 8)

The Subject relished such understanding and support:

If I was to go overseas [to race] the next day after having been scolded by the Principal ... about how I should bring my work there and do my work, ... I would not be able to have a very clear mind. (Interview 11)

In fact, when the sailors in the School discovered that the mid-year examination coincided with the National Yachting Competition, the Principal arranged

for us to take our Literature examination earlier. It was only two of us, so it was quite troublesome for the teachers to arrange. But they went ahead and did it anyway so that we could compete.... (Interview 6)

As much as there was a climate of academic and sporting excellence and strong support for student-athletes, the Principal must be credited for mobilising the staff towards the vision

of all-round education. His teachers were conscious of his efforts to involve them as stakeholders in the School. On numerous occasions, the Principal publicly credited the "Dedicated Teachers the Prime Movers in the School's Progress." (*Straits Times*, 9 Oct 1992) His deputy's accolade, at the farewell assembly when the Principal was posted out, was particularly insightful:

While I agree with the Principal that it was due to the collective effort of the Heads of Departments, teachers and pupils, everyone knows that he played the major role. He inspired teachers to give of their best, viewing them as professionals and accountable to shared values and commitments.... His appreciation of the effort and hard work put in by the teachers encouraged them to exert greater pressure on themselves and the students resulting in achievements beyond their expectations.... (Vice-Principal, 1994)

The Principal, through his belief in all-round education, inculcation of this ideal into the School culture, support for sports, creativity towards academic pursuits and sterling leadership, was instrumental in the Subject's academic and sporting excellence.

Teachers were credited for the School's reputation as a ranking academic and sports institution. The Subject's father complimented, "*the teachers in the School are very dedicated to the teaching profession and also wanted the students to do well. Because of that ... the Subject benefited.*" (Interview 9) The teachers subscribed to all-rounded education, not succumbing to the prevailing obsession with academic results. The Subject did not "remember getting too much homework." (Interview 4) His friend elaborated,

The teachers in the School were good because the homework they gave was not too much and not too little. They gave us enough to understand the subject and left us time to pursue other ECAs. So it was a very good balance. (Interview 6)

A teacher reasoned, "*I don't call him [Subject] for remedial. Once he passes his tests and is consistently above average, I don't call him back very often.*" (Interview 2) A schoolmate attested:

Many teachers that I've known do not understand why I have to spend so much time in ECA. But the teachers in our School, they didn't make so much noise as long as I did well. If I had any problems, all I had to do was to go to the teachers.... They were very, very helpful. (Interview 6)

Indeed, the Subject was assured that,

as long as I have a question, I can always go up to my subject teacher and I think they give me rather good advice.

I never have problems finding them in School.... they encourage you, they keep you going and always invite you to see them when their help is required. (Interview 7)

Such encouragement would clearly help student-athletes. The Principal explained:

Let's say a boy is not doing well. He is involved in certain sports or certain games. The teacher may be able to provide a little additional help, and maybe get some pupils to help the boy in the studies, to provide additional help. In that sense, I think the boy will be more encouraged. (Interview 8)

Dedication, belief in all-rounded education, helpfulness, encouraging – difficult as it may to manifest all these qualities, the Subject's experiences proved the possibility of and need for good teachers for academic and sporting excellence.

Peers had a salutary effect on the Subject's drive towards academic and sporting excellence. He pointed out that “*during that age [it] matters a world of difference whether you get into a good school or a lousy one.*” (Interview 5) As the student population he was mixing with were among the best in the country – the mean PSLE score for the School's intake between 1990 and 1995 was between 247 and 252 (*School Brochure*, 1996) – the Subject thought:

it was not possible for me to go astray because of the environment that I was in. Some of my friends ... were not as privileged as me to be in a good school. Some of them mixed around with peers who were not so focused and picked up smoking and drinking. ... in this School, the people I mixed with were pretty straight. (Interview 5)

Specifically, the Subject benefited from the company of the *crème de le crème* in his final two years. When he scored above 70% in secondary two to enter the ‘A band’ class, he joined the top students in the country's ranking schools (*School Diary*, 1996). Other than being well behaved, posing no disciplinary distractions to teaching and learning, the Subject and his classmates impressed their form teacher to be “*independent and very committed in their work, serious learners.*” (Interview 3) Being with the best pupils spurred him on: “*My classmates ... are always a step ahead of me. To keep up with them, I just need to work hard....*” (Interview 7) The atmosphere was collaborative, though: “*I have a good friend. ... He is better at Maths and maybe some sciences. I am better maybe in History or some other areas. We just asked each other.*” (Interview 4) Having peers who are among the country's top students helped the Subject focus on academic and sporting excellence.

Facilities in the School were regularly updated to provide the best educational infrastructure. When the School shifted to its current premises in 1985, the then newly-constructed campus was equipped with the latest pedagogical and sporting facilities. In 1992, a four-storey block was added, increasing classroom capacity to allow the School's shift to single session. More funds, made available by the 1994 grant of Autonomous status, saw these facilities constantly enhanced. Such updated infrastructure helped the Subject's learning and training. The in-campus workshops, for example, saved him from travelling to specialised schools for technical lessons, allowing him to dedicate the time and energy conserved to his studies and sports (Interview 7). He also used the library:

I would go to the library during recess to read the newspapers. Then I would go down to the tuck-shop when the queue is shorter to buy my food ... [otherwise] you'll waste a lot of time queuing up. (Interview 7)

This visits to the library, to avoid the long food queues initially, allowed him to maximise his time, keep abreast of current affairs and enhance his language. Undoubtedly, the Subject's academic and sporting excellence was helped by the School's updated facilities.

Rewards and Recognition, in various forms, were offered by the School. The highest honour was the prizes presented to top students at the annual Speech Day (*School Diary*, 1996). Each year, the most outstanding student-athletes were awarded the Top All-Round Student Award and the Sportsman of the Year Award. Their names would be inducted into the honour rolls, displayed strategically in front of the school building as added recognition. The School also nominated top sportsmen for awards by the Schools' Sports Council. Less formally, sporting feats were announced during assemblies, lending recognition to the student-athletes responsible. Their names and triumphs would also be recorded on an Achievements Board, reported in quarterly newsletters and highlighted in annual magazines. Other than such recognition, student-athletes have also been rewarded with the occasional overseas trips or celebratory dinners.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify and validate some key variables for schools in pursuit of academic and sporting excellence. Naturally, accomplishing sporting and academic excellence does not solely depend on the school environment. In fact, the school environment must necessarily be considered together with the home environment and the sporting fraternity when seeking a more comprehensive model for pedagogic and sporting excellence. Nonetheless, this project has restricted itself to the school

environment. It has singled out some key variables and demonstrated that they are valid through a case study. Through these findings, this paper hopes to provide some ideas and inspiration for local schools to attempt academic and sporting excellence.

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Appendix: List of Interviews

No.	Interviewee	Date	Venue
1.	1 st Interview with Subject	7 Nov 1995	Subject's Junior College
2.	Subject's Secondary 2 Form Teacher	9 Nov 1995	Interviewee's Office
3.	Subject's Secondary 4 Form Teacher	10 Nov 1995	Interviewee's Office
4.	2 nd Interview with Subject	14 Nov 1995	Sailing Club
5.	3 rd Interview with Subject	20 Nov 1995	Interviewer's Office
6.	Subject's Sailing Teammate	2 Dec 1995	Interviewer's Office
7.	4 th Interview with Subject	27 Jan 1996	Sailing Club
8.	Principal, Subject's Secondary School	5 Feb 1996	Interviewee's Office
9.	Subject's Father	8 Feb 1996	University Canteen
10.	Subject's Classmate Coast Park	15 Feb 1996	Restaurant at East
11.	5 th Interview with Subject	3 Mar 1996	Subject's Home