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EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS

Getting The Right Perspective

JOHN N.S. KOH

Introduction

The term extra-curricular activities or ECA tends to give teachers the mistaken notion that they are being called upon to shoulder additional work in school. Hence, the concept of ECA often does not go down well with many teachers as it conjures up feelings of increased workload and loss of freedom. Some school administrators have even considered changing its name to a more palatable one. As a result, terms such as CCA (co-curricular activities), IMA (intra-mural activities), EMA (extra-mural activities), and PGA (personal growth activities), to name a few, have been bandied about. Regardless of the terminology used, what matters most is one's attitude towards it.

Being involved in ECA has become an essential and important part of a teacher's professional responsibility in Singapore as it is in many other countries. The current Ministry of Education (MOE) policy on teachers' involvement in ECA states clearly that "ECA is part of the official duties of teachers, and every teacher is expected to take on ECA duties and specialise in one" (MOE, 1981).

Over the years, ECA has been employed as a vehicle to carry out various national policies. Thus, in the late 1960's the concept of a rugged society was vigorously promoted to enhance the rapid build-up of national defence, and participation in sports and games became compulsory for all secondary school pupils. Likewise, the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and the National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC) became mandatory activities in secondary schools in 1975. The main objectives were to develop physical fitness and instil discipline through mass participation in all ECA. As the momentum of participation gathered, schools

found themselves critically short of trained personnel to man all the multifarious ECA programmes.

Realising this manpower need, the Institute of Education (IE) in 1980 made it compulsory for all its pre-service trainees to participate in ECA induction programmes with a view of preparing them to shoulder ECA duties immediately upon graduation. This matter is currently being reviewed by IE and the College of Physical Education.

2 Getting Started

The total involvement of the school administration, the staff and the pupils is a crucial factor for a successful ECA programme in any school. The pertinent question is "How do we get started?" The answer to this lies mainly in the time-tested strategies of:

- Goal-setting
- Planning
- Organisation, Implementation & Supervision
- Evaluation

3 Goal-setting

Mager (1962) says "If you're not sure where you're going, you're liable to end up some place else – and not even know it." Hence, identifying and selecting appropriate programme goals are important. However, prior to the formulation of both long- and short-term goals, a review of the existing programme and its shortcomings is useful.

Wijeysingha (1975) pin-pointed some typical shortcomings of ECA programmes in schools as:

- Inadequate range of activities,
- Retention of activities which have little or no pupil appeal,

- Poorly balanced programme – either weighted in favour of one area or disregarding others,
- Either too taxing on some pupils or completely neglecting some,
- Focusing on the gifted few at the expense of the mass,
- Lacking in the calculated use of manpower,
- Poor and inequitable distribution of duties to teachers,
- Inadequate equipment made available, and
- Inadequate supervision and control to ensure positive wealth.

Other common weaknesses are:

- Inadequate monitoring of student performances,
- Poor maintenance of pupil records,
- Inadequate evaluation of teacher effectiveness, and
- Poor programme evaluation.

The existing **ECA** Policy for secondary schools (MOE, 1982) are:

- Every secondary pupil will need to do only one ECA.
- Sports is no longer compulsory as the physical fitness component will be developed in the new PE programme.
- Pupils will choose their one ECA from any of the Group A Core Activities such as Sports and Games, Uniformed Organisations, and Cultural Activities.
- Pupils may participate in a second activity if they so desire; the second activity must be chosen from the Group B list of ECA.
- Schools are given the freedom to decide on the number and type of activities to select from among those listed in groups A and B (see page 4).
- Band, NCC (Boys) and NPCC (Boys) will continue to be mandatory.

The present **ECA** Objectives for secondary schools (MOE, 1981) are:

- To help develop the physical and mental health of pupils.
- To help pupils develop healthy recreational interests and cultivate a proper use of leisure.
- To contribute to the cultural and aesthetic development of pupils.
- To help pupils develop qualities of discipline and leadership.
- To help pupils develop team spirit, group loyalty and other desirable social traits.
- To train the talented in the various fields covered by the ECA programme.

The present **ECA** Policy for primary schools remains unchanged. Participation by pupils from P₃ upwards is voluntary and P₁ and P₂ pupils are exempted.

The present ECA policy and objectives, as promulgated by the MOE, are sound and serve as a useful guide. It is up to the individual school to translate these longer-term goals into more tangible short-term learning objectives.

4 Planning the **ECA** Programme

There is much flexibility in planning the ECA programme and it varies from school to school. The suggestion by the MOE that schools should try to maintain a 30-week programme for each activity per year is a good one. This year-round involvement will allow for a systematic development of pupils' interests and abilities.

The existing ECA scheme which covers a wide range of learning experiences are classified into two broad groups, viz.:

- Group **A**: Core Activities
- (i) Sports and Games
 - (ii) Uniformed Organisations
 - (iii) Cultural Activities

Group B: Optional Activities such as:

Clubs & Societies, Careers, Geography, History, Library, Gardening, etc.

Some Guidelines for Planning **the ECA** Programme

- (i) Schools with small enrolments should not take on more activities than they can cope with; larger schools should offer a wider range of activities.
- (ii) The ECA programme must be well-balanced with activities from both the core areas and the optional grouping.
- (iii) The activities selected must be consistent with the overall ECA objectives and compatible with pupil interests and needs.
- (iv) The chosen activities must be consistent with existing facilities, pupil-teacher ratio and teacher expertise.
- (v) Activities for which there are inter-school competitions should not be over-emphasised at the expense of those which have more intra-school appeal such as recreational games, clubs and societies.
- (vi) Where inter-school competitions are concerned, more than one school team in a particular activity should be entered.
- (vii) Activities should be selected on the basis that they can cater for large numbers of participants.
- (viii) Preference should be given to those activities that have carry-over values as leisure-time pursuits.
- (ix) The activities selected should enable the teacher to inculcate desirable social, emotional and psychological habits and attitudes.

5 Organisation, Implementation and Supervision

The organisation and implementation of an ECA programme in school require proper coordination, management and supervision to attain the desired outcomes. The following guidelines will be useful to those who have problems in these areas:

- (i) For the programme to get off the ground it is essential that there is strong administrative support.
- (ii) Financial support is critical and it is also crucial that facilities must be adequate and equipment and other resources are readily available.
- (iii) Team work is essential and one-man shows should be discouraged.
- (iv) An ECA Coordinating Committee or Council comprising the Principal or Vice-Principal, Senior Assistants, the Sports Secretary, the Assistant Sports Secretary and other staff representatives would be useful in seeing to the proper planning, organisation, administration and implementation of the ECA programme.
- (v) The Sports Secretary and his assistants should act as key liaison personnel. They should establish and maintain close working relationships with all staff members concerned with the various phases of the ECA programme.
- (vi) The Coordinating Committee should ensure the smooth running of the ECA programme for both the morning and afternoon sessions in two-session schools, and for primary and secondary sections of full schools.
- (vii) There should also be a smooth flow of communication among pupils, staff and the administration. Such communication channels should also be kept open for parents and parents' associations.

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- (viii) Constant check against over-participation must be made. The pupil's studies must not be adversely affected. The ECA programme must not be allowed to dominate the overall school programme.
- (ix) Both the quality and quantity of participation must be stressed. Quality, however, should not be attained at the expense of mass participation.
- (x) The **ECA** programme should not **be** designed for the benefit of only the gifted minority. A good programme is one that caters for the full benefit of all pupils while still allowing the talented to be developed further. Building a broad base is more important especially with our limited resources.
- (xi) Most schools assign a teacher with two activities – a major and a minor. The allocation of ECA duties to teachers should be based on the following principles:
- The teaching load and ECA duties should be taken together to determine the total workload of the teacher. A teacher who is not prepared to shoulder a given ECA should be given a slightly heavier classroom load. Similarly, a teacher who is assigned a heavier ECA load, both in terms of effort and time, should be given a lighter teaching load.
 - Within the constraints of the teaching quota, principals should be given the flexibility to allocate ECA and teaching duties so that the workload is as equitable as possible for all teachers.
 - Teachers who have attended special ECA in-service training should be given that ECA as a major.
 - The experience, competence and special interest of teachers in an activity should be taken into account.
 - As a rule, the senior subject teachers are assigned to take charge of clubs organised under subject areas.

6 Evaluation of the **ECA** Programme

Finally, we need to evaluate the **ECA** programme in terms of

- (a) pupil involvement and achievement,
- (b) teacher effectiveness in manning the programme, and
- (c) the programme itself

Pupil Involvement and Achievement

- Pupil involvement in ECA should vary according to the type of activity and the level of participation. There are two distinct levels of participation namely, the **intra**-school level (e.g. inter-class, inter-house, club meetings, etc.) and the inter-school level (e.g. inter-school competition in sports, bands, debates, etc.).
- The development of physical fitness should not be the thrust of the overall ECA programme. Pupils' physical fitness should be achieved through a good PE programme.
- The school should help each pupil to decide the extent and level of his or her ECA involvement.
- The main focus should be on broadening the pupils' range of experiences so that a good foundation of basic skills in a wide range of healthy leisure pursuits could be developed.
- Where the intra-school programme is concerned, pupils should be encouraged to help in the organisation of activities. This will help reduce teacher-allocation as well as enable pupils to benefit from the experience.
- Records of a pupil's participation, personal conduct, level of skill attainment, knowledge and understanding, must be kept and maintained cumulatively throughout the pupil's entire school career.
- Care must be taken to see that the ECA grading scheme is properly implemented and not abused. This is because

the grade can be used in application for scholarships, bursaries and admission into pre-university centres.

Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness

A teacher's **ECA** performance can be assessed in terms of

- (i) the extent of his or her involvement.
- (ii) the quality of the involvement such as:
 - being highly responsible
 - having the ability to lead
 - having initiative
 - able to manage pupils, resources and time
 - teacher expertise and knowledge
 - success of intra-school programme
 - success in inter-school competitions
- (iii) interpersonal relationships

Programme Evaluation

The following aspects of the **ECA** programme as a whole needs to be evaluated:

- whether the programme objectives have been achieved
- the quality and quantity of pupil participation
- the effectiveness of staff involvement
- administrative and budgetary support
- adequacy of equipment and supplies
- review of facilities
- policy appraisal
- others

Conclusion

It is heartening to note that the teaching profession in Singapore has, over the years, learned to accept ECA as an important and integral part of the educational experience of children. As such, the "extra" in "extra-curricular activities" is no longer regarded as something outside the domains of education that demands additional work from teachers. ECA is now seen as playing a useful role in the total school curriculum. Like mathematics, science, art and other academic subjects, ECA has become an important educational medium. It needs to be carefully adapted and responsibly controlled so that it will provide immense pleasure and experience to growing children. In this regard, it helps to contribute to their physical, mental, social and emotional development.

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