



# Unpacking a place-based approach – “What lies beyond?” Insights drawn from teachers' perceptions of Outdoor Education



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Explored Singaporean teachers' conceptualizations of a 'place-based approach'.
- 'Place-based approach' as moving closer to home and extending the school backyard.
- Teachers recognize their lack of understandings of 'place-based' learning processes.
- Teachers are encouraged to invest time to deepen understandings of local 'places'.
- Teachers are encouraged to focus on uniqueness of place and 'community'.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explored Singaporean teachers' understandings of Outdoor Education. Drawing from 84 in-service teachers' questionnaire surveys and 14 in-depth interviews, we constructed three analytical categories capturing the teachers' understandings of a newly introduced 'place-based approach'. In conceptualizing outdoor spaces as moving away from remote sites and closer to local schools, the teachers recognized their lack of understandings to fully engage with learning processes underpinning place-based pedagogy. We suggest that teachers need to invest time in understanding the history, culture and ecology of specific local 'places', and anticipate that deeper connections with local communities may extend the teachers' nascent place-based visions.

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## 1. Introduction

Outdoor Education (OE) has increasingly gained traction within school settings as a vehicle for promoting student learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom. According to Lugg (2004), OE refers to programs and curricula that utilize outdoor experiences for educational purposes, which includes environmental education and personal and social development. In the case of Singapore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has positioned OE as a new vehicle to complement the learning of academic subjects; focusing on

learning in settings beyond the classroom, the recent reform agenda stresses widening students' experiences in ways that may promote holistic learning. Holistic learning, in this case, refers to learning within disciplinary subjects to foster pupils' cognitive development, as well as a more expansive development of '21st Century skills' that necessarily places emphasis on citizenship and character education (MOE, 2010; Heng, 2014, c.f. Allison, Carr, & Meldrum, 2012; Cosgriff, 2015); core competencies to be inculcated include values-based outcomes such as a confident person with a sense of right and wrong, a collaborative team-player, and a concerned citizen with a strong sense of civic responsibility (see Atencio, Tan, Ho, & Chew, 2015a for more details). Within this context where knowledge and skills acquisition are explicitly aligned with personal, moral and social development of pupils, OE and outdoor learning are used as vehicles to propel the vision. As

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part of the reform initiative, OE was introduced formally into the curriculum within the domains of physical education (PE) beginning in 2014.

Despite the gaining of interest in OE as an integral aspect of recent educational reforms, such as in Scotland (Beames, Atencio, & Ross, 2009) as well as in Singapore (MOE, 2010), there have been competing visions around OE provision in terms of its outcomes and processes that inevitably impact upon curricular innovations. One of the dichotomies exist in terms of conceptualizing OE in terms of adventure-based formats, while the other positions OE in regards to student engagement with local community, history, and other features unique to specific places, that is, a more place-based approach. These competing visions may attest to the vast domain and complexity of outdoor educational experiences. However, when these ideas are cascaded down as part of governmental policy-driven initiatives, they run the risk of confusing teachers and perpetuating misinterpretations that could hinder reform efforts. In the context of this study, our apprehension therefore is that these barriers may result in PE teachers, charged with delivering OE, feeling disempowered in their enactment of the new curriculum. Then, we are concerned with the possibility of teachers relegating potentially powerful ideas for transformations in student experiences to no more than a few modifications to the teachers' existing pedagogies. We respond to Penney's (2013) critique regarding the need for re-examining and re-articulating existing discursive knowledge and social meanings that have been officially legitimized in PE. We extend Penney's argument by locating such an endeavor within teachers' own experiences and beliefs.

In a similar vein, Lugg (2004) raises the concern that the predominance of PE teachers teaching OE has subsequently led to the approach of developing OE practices as adventure activities and thus serving as potential barriers to other OE approaches. Lugg concomitantly attributes this condition to how OE has historically been perceived as a branch of PE. Consequently, a fundamental issue raised by Brookes (2002) is that any curricular discussions about OE and its potential contributions to teaching and learning must address the specificity of location – via a place-based approach, although this is not typically addressed under the conditions of PE. In a similar vein, Stewart (2004) avers that outdoor educators should develop more sophisticated knowledge of how specific spaces are underpinned by rich histories as well as unique cultures, communities, languages and relationships. Brown (2012) then asserts for teachers understanding the teaching and learning process and the connection of place to student learning as well as personal identity.

In response to the concern regarding PE teachers' capacity to teach OE in more local or place-focused ways, this paper is purposed to specifically explore Singapore PE teachers' understandings of a 'place-based' approach given its very recent introduction within the domestic curricular landscape. In this highly centralized education system where 'place-based' OE forms one of the underpinning premises of the new curriculum, it becomes pertinent to explore how teachers respond and interpret these curricular initiatives within their own local contexts. This line of analysis is compelling in view of how literature has emphasized the importance of developing curricular knowledge that is relative to specific place, time and social circumstances (Brookes, 2004). Thus, the primary research question is: *What are the different ways by which Singapore teachers conceptualized a 'place-based approach' to OE?* The guiding questions used to further develop this line of analysis include:

- What are the teachers' understandings of place-based pedagogy in OE?

- What do teachers focus on when they describe a place-based approach?

Borrowing perspectives from Reid's (2006) concept of curriculum deliberation, we situated the study within the pivotal role of teachers framing their own pedagogy and student experiences, as well as bridging curriculum designed by central authority with the enactment of the prescribed curriculum in teaching practice. Then, in mapping the different ways teachers have conceptualized a place-based approach through phenomenographic methods (Marton & Booth, 1997), we explored teachers' understandings through an introspection of their 'ontological' and 'epistemological' views. We also used a *multidimensional framework* (Tyson, Venville, Harrison, & Treagust, 1997; Venville & Treagust, 1998; described later) to capture teachers' perceptions that are nested within their belief systems in ways that are interrelated and meaningful to them, thus enriching a phenomenographic mode of analysis.

Our research team comprises two researchers (authors) as well as two collaborators who are OE curriculum specialists at MOE. Our collaborators are directly involved in the conceptualization of the new OE curriculum and are in charge of the professional development to help prepare teachers for the curricular changes. Thus, insights gained from this study could be used to inform the next phase of professional development workshops that focus on introducing deeper notions of, and developing teachers' capacity to adapt, a place-based approach in the context of the Singaporean OE curricular framework.

The study is also valuable in view of how OE began in Singapore only four decades ago; local teachers' understandings and experiences in this domain are limited except for a few recent studies (Ho, 2014; Martin & Ho, 2009; Atencio et al., 2015a; Atencio, Tan, Ho, & Chew, 2015b). In comparison with the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and many other European countries, the relatively short history (Ho, 2014) and thus limited experiences with OE in Singapore necessitates greater examination of how teachers interpret and adapt ideas in outdoor learning. Lugg (2004) also suggests that teachers need to critically reflect upon their practices given that many practices of OE have been developed in mainland Europe and the United Kingdom that "raises questions of educational relevance to the Australian context" (p. 5). In a similar vein, then, this paper pays close attention to the views and practices of Singaporean teachers who are positioned as institutional actors and change agents under a raft of significant educational reforms occurring in this nation.

The study contributes to wider OE and curriculum reform by extending the growing interest in how teachers' perceptions, dispositions and experiences influence the goals and enactment of curriculum, as well as the inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and the designed curriculum. Indeed, as noted by Thorburn and Allison (2013), teachers' attempts to implement OE via new curricular frameworks can fail despite enhanced decision-making powers, as well as clarity of aims and practices; they consequently suggest that within the Scottish context, "only limited evidence was found of policy-related innovation and considerable evidence of policy stasis" (p. 418). Given the tensions of curricular innovation through OE, then, we aim to reveal Singapore teachers' visions, experiences and challenges as manifested in their understandings, and as they relate to recent OE policy implementation. We discuss three analytical categories that captured the teachers' understandings of the newly introduced 'place-based approach'. The variation in perceptions is attributed to different assignments of the ontological categories of 'physical space' and 'learning' that influenced teachers' epistemological views. Then, we highlight how the teachers lacked deeper understandings to fully engage with the learning processes

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