

'Lost' Children, Stolen Bananas and the Art of Creative Teaching

Marie-Thérèse Splett-Sialm, the 'mother' of the Swiss School in Singapore, was in Singapore recently for the massive undertaking of chronicling and digitising 50 years' worth of memorabilia. We spoke with this incredible lady.



BACK TO THE BEGINNING

A beautiful, bright-eyed lady with an energy that belied her 75 years, Marie-Thérèse spoke with fondness and vivid clarity about the early days of the Swiss School. She recalled that school started with just eight students in kindergarten and 11 in primary school. Class numbers swelled and the first year ended with 40 students.

When asked about the challenges she faced, she said, "The challenge was to open a school from the very beginning, with nothing. Children came from different schools and we had to form a community, a family. We founded the school with the children, incorporating their ideas as well as ours."

Marie-Thérèse laughingly remembered how she panicked when children went 'missing' on the first day of school. Within minutes, they were located wandering down a path, just a short distance from the edge of the jungle. She recalled that nature and human nature were constantly interacting. Scorpions, snakes, monkeys and birds, which cheekily mimicked her speech, were frequent visitors to their open-air classrooms.

FROM SWITZERLAND TO SINGAPORE TO CHILE, WITH LOVE

In preparation of the opening of the Swiss School in Singapore, Marie-Thérèse and her first husband, co-founder of the school Werner Kaufmann-Sialm, studied the syllabuses of all 26 cantons in Switzerland. Weaving in the best practices of the Swiss syllabuses, and drawing on their

own teaching specialties of music and art in the case of Marie-Thérèse, and sports in the case of Werner, they developed a syllabus that openly sought to develop creativity.



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Marie-Thérèse

"This creative focus united the children. Art starts conversations, and drama brings children out of themselves," she recalled. This creative approach was applied to her last official teaching appointment in a school in a small village near Winthertur, where she overcame the skepticism of her detractors and created a truly different school where all the different classes worked on one subject together, from kindergarten to upper primary school. The system is still in place today. After her retirement, Marie-Thérèse volunteered to teach in a less-privileged school in Chile in 2008. Ironically,

she introduced the students to the traditional art of their culture. Under her tutelage, the children blossomed. Her successful methodology was observed by a professor from the University of Santiago, and incorporated into the syllabus of the teachers' training college in Chile.

AWESOME ALUMNI

Several of Marie-Thérèse's students recently attended the jubilee celebrations at the Swiss School. When asked if she was privy to the paths their adult lives had taken, she proudly recited a litany of achievements. One is the founder of a Montessori school in Switzerland, another is the director of a large prison in Switzerland, and another works tirelessly with the Red Cross.

A MESSAGE TO THE STUDENTS OF TODAY

When asked to convey a personal message to the students of today, Marie-Thérèse offered this heartfelt advice.

"Always look for a master – someone who is better than you, someone you can learn from," said Marie-Thérèse. "And never feel small."

At the end of our chat, Marie-Thérèse showed us the enormous tree that the Swiss School had first planted in 1968, when the new school building was officially opened. It was lovingly transplanted a decade later, in the inner courtyard of the school, where its mighty branches stretch upwards like a giant hand. Marie-Thérèse sees it as a unifying symbol of the school itself. It is sheltering, yet inspiring, encouraging its students to reach for the sky.



Students Get a Move on with Parkour Lessons at SSiS

At the Swiss School in Singapore, we are trying to provide more ways for our students to get outside and get moving. One of the ways we are doing this is through our Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) programmes and specifically our parkour programme.

FROM THE FRENCH MILITARY TO THE SWISS SCHOOL...

Parkour is a training discipline that was developed from military obstacle course training in France. This programme will allow the students to see the environment around them in a new way and to imagine the potential for navigating it. Among the movements that students will be learning to use are running, climbing, swinging, vaulting, and rolling.



This is the first time we have offered a parkour as an ECA, and the response to it has been amazing. We are working with an external company, Superfly Monkey Dragons, to offer the best quality ECA possible. Superfly Monkey Dragons have been teaching parkour classes in Singapore for five years now, and their instructors have a wealth of experience in this field.

SAFETY FIRST!

One of the most important components of this ECA is the safety of the students. During the ECA lesson, there are three instructors watching over the students. Each lesson starts with a review of the safety rules learned in previous lessons. The rule that is repeatedly emphasised is – if you are tired, don't try it!

After the safety review, a typical lesson continues with some warm-up stretches and running exercises. After the students are warmed up and ready to go, the instructors split them into smaller groups so that they can enjoy a more focused lesson.



Max Isenbeck, Primary 4 student, shared with us what he thought of the parkour lessons. "It is hard now, but it will be really fun when I learn how to do more," said Max.



... BECAUSE THE ENVIRONMENT IS MEANT FOR EXPLORING!

We really hope that the students enjoy this new variety of ECA that we are offering this semester. We believe that it is very important for students to be outside and actively moving around. From the popularity of this class, it seems that most of the students agree. Hopefully, after taking part in this ECA, our students will start to see the environment around them in a new way and will be encouraged to get out and explore more.

Article courtesy of Jason Moran
Photos courtesy of Superfly Monkey Dragons and SSiS