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Circus for Schools: Bringing a Circo Arts Dimension to Physical Education

Le cirque à l'école: Intégration des arts du cirque aux cours d'éducation physique

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Abstract

Although awareness of circus-type activity has increased in many Western countries, there is little evidence of 'circo arts' in school physical education programs and even less written about this activity genre. These activities have the potential to motivate and engage children in exploring and mastering a wide range of physical competencies. They can be seen to align to curriculum intentions and have the potential to expand on physical education program developments that have occurred in recent years. Circo arts may intrigue not only those who tend to 'opt out' of physical education but offer all children an option other than traditional sports, that has the potential to expand their abilities in physical skills, social skills, problem solving, creativity, confidence and sense of adventure.

Résumé

Même si un nombre croissant de pays occidentaux s'ouvrent aux vertus des arts du cirque, la plupart des écoles n'ont pas encore commencé à les intégrer à leurs programmes d'éducation physique. Très peu d'écrits portent sur ce sujet. Pourtant, les activités sportives associées aux arts du cirque ont tout ce qu'il faut pour inciter les enfants à explorer et maîtriser une large gamme d'habiletés physiques. Ces activités peuvent s'accorder avec les objectifs des programmes-cadres et s'inscrire dans le cheminement récent des programmes d'éducation physique qui tentent aujourd'hui d'élargir leur portée. En ce sens, les arts du cirque séduiront non seulement les « décrocheurs » des cours d'éducation physique, mais tous les élèves puisqu'ils offrent une alternative intéressante aux activités sportives traditionnelles. Les arts du cirque améliorent les habiletés physiques et sociales, facilitent la résolution de problèmes, stimulent la créativité, alimentent la confiance en soi et attisent l'esprit d'aventure des jeunes.

Introduction

Contemporary circus to me is a performing arts movement. It is a combination of traditional circus skills with theatrical techniques and music, to create illusion; the mystery of which intrigues the audience. Street performances

and busking as well as circus extravaganzas such as the many Cirque de Soleil shows have enhanced the popularity of these novelty circus-type activities (often referred to as circo arts). Since the 1990s, circus activity in its various forms has seen a particular resurgence among youth: circo arts courses have been established at educational institutions such as the Circo Arts School at Christchurch Polytechnic, self-trained individuals perform their own shows and international buskers' festivals, around the world, maintain high levels of popularity (Price, 2008).

This greater community awareness and the popularity that circo arts hold among young people, prompt consideration of incorporating such activities in school-based programs. Rationale for inclusion in physical education relates not only to young people's increasing recreational participation in these arts but also to the realization that the manner in which these activities play-out may align well with the curriculum-based goals of school-based physical education programs. It is the potential that circo arts have not only to motivate and engage children in exploring and mastering aspects of the physical learning domain but also to develop children's skills and attributes beyond the physical, which suggests the merit of including them in physical education.

In this paper I look to explore this notion with respect to the guidelines and values underpinning physical education in The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007), the curriculum of which I am most familiar. However, because these values are evident in the physical education curricula of other countries, I am confident that my observations here have relevance beyond New Zealand for physical education pedagogy. This paper also considers the above notion against several developments in and thinking about, school-based physical education programs that I contend are significant over the last few decades. The overall aim being to consider how circo arts complement values and developments in physical education programs and how relevant they are for incorporating into physical education in schools.

Circo Arts Activities Relative to Curriculum Objectives

Rather than being described in terms of a definitive list, circo arts can be positioned as a collection of novel, challenging activities that include the following:

Object manipulation - juggling (scarves, balls, rings, clubs), diabolo, hacky sticks, poi, hula hooping

Equilibristic activity - stilts, wire walking, rola bola, unicycling

Ground acrobatics - tumbling, hoops, acrobalance, contortion

Additional challenges associated with these activities involve clowning, dancing, using masks, and performing feats of magic and illusion. Because these activities and the skills they encompass tend to be "out of the ordinary" for most people, they have the potential to interest and engage learners; enticing them toward mastery of skills and gaining the satisfaction and confidence that comes from accomplishing something that is different.

Schools may need to provide some equipment to allow children to get underway. Equipment like sets of juggling items are not expensive, unicycles are more realistically priced (and are certainly far more available than they were a few years ago) and trampolines, common in Kiwi backyards, are great for training tumbling, co-ordination and balance.. The introduction to activity for

learners, involves little specialised teaching preparation beyond what could be sourced through contact with local circo arts performers, reviewing some of the many 'you tube' clips of circo arts fundamental skills (juggling, balancing ...) and teachers personally preparing by trying out such activities. A key responsibility for teachers in encouraging pupil exploration of circo art skills is monitoring of safety. It is true that generally safety is a significant consideration when using equipment in school programs. However safety considerations for these recreational type circo art activities are no more demanding or specialised than the safety aspects of other physical education program teaching. Some of the equipment that children will want to use may be items they already have or can obtain themselves; the advantage of this being that the gear is available to use when learners feel they want to practice, in their own time. However, as the children's interest grows in circo activities, schools may consider investing in additional equipment, for extension activities aligned with physical education or recreation programs.

However I believe that the challenge of incorporating circo arts into programs is far less about sourcing equipment and teacher led skill learning than it is about raising awareness of the learning opportunities these activities could provide - opportunities for children to explore a range of circus skills. Learning circo arts is not an issue of particular sets of activity or even a particular teaching approach – these are resources that could be used in a variety of ways. "Having teachers provide the inspiration and opportunity for children to share what they are achieving is perhaps the key role for the school in regard to circo arts" (Price, 2008, p.21). As children's interest grows, so will the skill and interest of teachers to facilitate further challenges and encourage ongoing development of skills of their pupils. It is an issue of providing opportunity for learners to engage in trying and practicing to be actively engaged, to work towards mastery of activity challenges.

My reading of reports on recent curriculum statements in Australasia, Britain and North America notes the guidance of teachers to consider not only the principles and objectives related to interest, engagement, and achievement of pupils but also to incorporate into teaching certain values as the basis of learning, throughout levels of the education system and across curriculum areas. The New Zealand Curriculum for example, presents teaching and learning expectations and outcomes for each subject-based curriculum as well as the principles and values underpinning delivery of all aspects of education for New Zealand children. Regarding physical education, The New Zealand Curriculum states that students are to "gain an understanding that movement is integral to human expression and that it can contribute to people's pleasure and enhance their lives. They learn to understand, appreciate, and move their bodies, relate positively to others, and demonstrate constructive attitudes and values" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 23). Circo arts, I contend, can provide opportunities for teachers to engage children in activities that assist them to explore and appreciate movement, developing positive attitudes about the new movement experiences they undertake.

With respect to the particular content of physical education programs, the New Zealand curriculum calls on teachers to ensure pupils experience regular vigorous activity at varied levels of intensity, a variety of activities, and challenges suitable to their developmental level. Circo arts can remind teachers

that a key dimension of physical education is to have children *explore* and *learn* through physical activity. Circo arts encourage learning through physically “doing”. They offer teachers an activity-based learning context, that I believe serves as well as other activity contexts, with respect to coverage of curriculum requirements but have the likely advantage for the children of novelty.

As a physical education teacher I believe that activities in a physical education program need to be simple to deliver, fun and enjoyable, and provide opportunity for spontaneity, creativity, and experimentation. Obviously how activities are introduced to children may be as significant as what the activities are, however the nature of the novel or challenging activity of circo arts could provide a valuable platform to address challenges posed by this curriculum. The New Zealand curriculum guides teachers to make sure all children participate, that children feel challenged but not threatened by what they are expected to do, and that children engage in activities requiring a competitive approach in a friendly manner. Among the particular values articulated for physical education in the curriculum document are *excellence* (aiming high and persevering in the face of difficulties), *innovation, inquiry, and curiosity* (thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively), *diversity* and *community and participation*.

Through his writing and popular presentations over recent years, Ken Robinson (2001) has challenged schools and educators to consider that education should be about developing the whole child’s individual natural abilities, talents and uniqueness. He contends that we need to encourage creativity in learners in all learning domains, including the physical. If it is important to educate to enhance creativity and abilities, then circo arts may well contribute valuable opportunities within school programs. Children are likely to be attracted to circo arts because of the novelty of the equipment and/or the challenges the activities present as well as opportunities to be creative in engagement in activities. For many children, these attributes sufficiently intrigue them to want to “have a go” in many circo arts and from that engagement to explore other varied physical activities (Price, 2008).

Essentially, physical education programs within the ambit of the New Zealand Curriculum are required to engage children in learning and developing diverse skills that will take them on to be successful citizens. There is thus an expectation that children will do more than learn a set range of physical techniques and skills. As Laker (2000) observes in his critical analysis of physical education programs in schools, the challenge for those developing and teaching programs is to set them up so that they contribute to “the complete development of the individual”(p.3). Children, he contends, need to take part in a wide variety of physical activities and to be engaged in them in ways that bring both skills-based and values-based dimensions to the physical education program. Circo arts activities, I believe, can help teachers’ transition to a stance that embraces a more holistic appreciation of what physical education can and should do for learners. An advantage of circo arts is that many of these activities can easily be incorporated into existing physical education programs. In part because they require little in the way of additional equipment or venue and in part because a number of activities have obvious associations with the types of physical education programs that have been taught for generations; notably gymnastics, dance and those that involve manipulation of objects. Some aspects of circo arts

activities also have evident links to elements that have been incorporated into school-based physical education programs over recent years.

Brain gym (Dennison, 1989), for example, is a system wherein participants engage in simple physical movements directed at stimulating brain function (whole brain learning, as it is termed) and, from there, enhancing thinking. Perceptual motor programs (PMP), developed by Bulluss and Coles in the late 1980s, encourage participants to use their senses and experiences to make “perceptual judgments” about themselves in terms of body image, laterality, space, and time (Bulluss & Coles, 2007). Many teachers, particularly those in primary schools in New Zealand have already incorporated the movement experiences provided through brain gym and PMP into their physical education programs. They see these activities as positive extensions to the activities traditionally associated with physical development. And I contend that a logical extension to the exploration and development of perception and movement inherent in a PMP focus, is that of providing other opportunities to extend experience of balance, eye–hand and eye–foot co-ordination, body rhythm, and memory skills; all of which feature in circo art activity (Price, 2008).

In line with the New Zealand Curriculum guidance, that physical education should be about developing more than physical skill; Maude (2001) observes, “The [physical education] curriculum should challenge the emerging physical, intellectual, aesthetic and emotional abilities of the child” (p.118). She goes on to say that children need to be guided towards what she calls “physical literacy,” so that they understand that physicality includes a wide range of abilities, not just physical, and come to appreciate and value their own aptitudes. These developments, Maude claims, give children a sense of accomplishment and pleasure when engaging in physical activity and, in so doing, boost their self-esteem. It is my contention that activities based on circo arts can contribute widely to the physical literacy of pupils by helping them achieve through relevant physical experiences.

I believe that circo arts have the potential to enhance many key aspects that teachers would hope to see children develop through a program of physical education: co-ordination, balance and manipulation skills which are central to many circo arts activities; determination, perseverance and focus, needed to set goals and to then achieve and master physical skills which again can be key features of many circo arts challenges; exploring problem-solving and developing concepts through learners being drawn into thinking about new ways to achieve their goals, such as using their imagination to create novel solutions or envisaging (inventing) and then designing and building apparatus; extending personal psycho-social skills through working individually, with partners, or in groups and through learning from and with others and teaching others what they have learned; being creative with their physicality through engaging in circo arts, children can build on current skills and interests (e.g., inline skating, dance, music) and then combine these abilities with new skills, tricks or illusions to develop something that to them is original. The beginning of these aspects is becoming apparent in school programs. Recently in schools I have seen simple ball juggling activities being incorporated into units taught by past students who were introduced to these skills through recent teacher education courses I have taught. As confidence develops to explore other circo art activities, I am hopeful teachers will introduce other challenges, such as rola bola, stilts, diabolo and

unicycling. As teachers become aware of the interest of their pupils and try out activities themselves, a community of skills begins to develop. There is a rich opportunity here for children to learn from peers and for enhancing self directed learning. I believe that circo arts is an opportunity for learning that doesn't necessitate a model of evidently high expertise of a teacher transferring knowledge to their pupils but rather the teacher providing/facilitating opportunity for discovery learning.

Alignment of Circo Arts with Less Traditional Models of Physical Education

Circo arts activities align not only with curriculum-based objectives for physical education programs but also, I believe, with thinking and teaching approaches that have been incorporated into physical education programs in the last 20 or so years. It is my contention that circo arts activities complement several developments that have influenced recent pre- and in-service training of physical education teachers; developments that are now consequently being incorporated into school programs.

In the 1980s for example, Hellison promoted an emphasis on social responsibility and values in physical education programs, whether in teacher education institutions or schools. He argued that these provided significant and valuable learning for children, beyond that gained from the fitness and skills development aspects of traditional program activities (Hellison & Templin, 1991). There would appear to be a greater acceptance of the social dimension of physical learning by teachers in New Zealand and aspects of this emphasis is now evident in physical education programs. Both the idea of learning, through exploring 'the game' (or a version of the intended end result of skill development), right from the beginning of the process and learning the significance of social interaction and responsibility, are approaches to physical education that to me align well with exploring circo arts; learning performable physical skills while also developing skills in the psycho-social domain. As a teacher educator visiting schools regularly, it seems to me that in New Zealand, many teachers are unsure how to move to incorporate content in their physical education programs that teach skills other than those focused on developing future participation in traditional sports – circo arts may well provide a useful context to move to engage learning away from traditional sport settings.

There are physically based activities that are being explored in the community that as yet appear to have attracted little interest in schools; elements of which could be incorporated into school-based programs through circo arts. This significant area of activity that has been increasingly explored in the wider community (particularly in more affluent societies) over the last 30 years is that of action/adventure sports (often referred to as lifestyle sports). In a similar vein to circo arts this area of physical activity appears as yet to have had little uptake in schools. This is doubtless for reasons relating to perceived risk and to the fact that they tend to encompass rules or techniques that are deemed unconventional when viewed from the perspective of the team sports that still dominate physical education (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002).

Although the reasons why these activities have not become a general part of school physical education programs are understandable, physical education teachers might want to consider the aspects that children find appealing about engagement in activity other than in team sports; engagement in activities that

offer challenge, fun and a more individual experience than that typically encountered in regulated traditional team sports. Circo arts can be understood in terms of participants experiencing, by oneself, the exhilaration and confidence that comes from using existing skill levels to meet the challenge of attaining skills or levels of skill beyond those typically encountered in physical education programs.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of "flow" helps identify what it is about an activity, that makes participation in it so enjoyable for learners. According to Csikszentmihalyi, activities involving flow offer learners clear goals and immediate feedback, and interest is inherent in the activity itself. Csikszentmihalyi argues that interest is elicited in children when they face the prospect of engaging in an activity that they perceive to be exciting and which they feel they can achieve. Children, he says, "learn to learn" through such activities not only because they develop the skills associated with it, through a process of self-correcting mistakes but also because they experience a situation where interest, challenge and ability level come together.

I contend that circo arts can be considered to offer this notion of flow. Circo arts can extend children's experience of achievement through a context free of the complexity of team or adult-guided "rule-governed" play. I consider that the fraternal nature of the modern circus (which is the foundation of circo arts) values the traditions of performance in which the focus is on laughter mixed with trepidation (e.g., can he or she continue to juggle those plates on sticks without dropping them?). The circus and by implication circo arts, values performance that showcases skills and creates the mystery of illusion, to intrigue the audience.

Alderman, Beighle, and Pangrazi (2006) contend children will only fully engage in physical challenges when they are motivated to do so. Like Csikszentmihalyi, they consider that interest is the key to motivation: children are most likely to engage in a physical activity when they find it has intrinsic interest. Alderman and her colleagues emphasise the need for children to be welcomed into physical education activities that are not only interesting, exciting and challenging but also provide opportunity for them to learn about themselves and what they can accomplish and give them opportunity to develop skills further. When, according to Alderman et al., children think they can accomplish mastery of an activity within their own perceived levels of physical competence, they will strive to develop and practice the activity to achieve mastery.

Circo arts offer a multitude of activities that see children striving to learn. There is challenge to first accomplishing an individual "trick". But challenge is ongoing after this point because children tend to continue, as an outcome of their own sense of achievement and satisfaction, to gradually master more complex manifestations of the tasks, or enhance their initial skill development. For children, the confidence that comes from recent success encourages them to bravely try the next new thing. Circo arts also have the benefit of providing children with a means to take their development of physical skills to a "performance standard". The pride they experience on achieving at this level is likely to encourage them to share what they have learned with others (Price, 2010).

Tinning, in his exploration of physical education pedagogical practice supports the personalization of learning for children. Tinning purports that if pedagogical practice relating to physical education is to have effective outcomes

for pupils, then what and how they learn needs to be “meaningful”, “connected” and “authentic”. Children, Tinning explains, “look” for these features when learning. If these features are absent in the activities children are guided into, “they consider the knowledge as irrelevant and/or boring” (Tinning, 2010, p. 60).

Tinning also claims that activities need to be relevant beyond the school context in which they are initially taught. Developing and mastering circo art skills gives children opportunity to engage in activity that they can practice and perform both at school and beyond. Incorporating circo arts into physical education programs has the potential to provide a valuable link between learning experienced at school and learning engaged in, through home and community life.

Conclusion

Consideration of content and curriculum focus of physical education programs relative to the activities and values encompassed by circo arts, leads me to contend that circo activity provides physical education teachers with another interesting and relatively easily implemented addition to the pool of experiences they can offer children. It is not within the orbit of this paper to offer specific guidelines to implement a circo arts component in a physical education program but rather to encourage teachers to consider the relevance and possible enhancement of their teaching with the inclusion of a circo arts focus.

Through physical activities of circo arts, pupils can explore and develop a wide range of experiences that will enhance their conceptual understanding of motor skills and help them develop physical acuity. As well as physical skill dimensions, circo arts can allow a journey to find new successes and build the more esoteric, psychosocial values of physical education curriculums. Although there is potential for circo arts to offer students who tend to “opt out” of traditional sports and games another means by which to develop skills, it is in the potential to be a valuable part of physical education and recreation for a wide variety of learners that is the evident value of this resource. For all learners there is opportunity to further develop their motor skills, enhance their concentration and self-esteem, and revitalize their involvement in learning in and through the physical dimension; to engage learners, each of whom may bring different activity interests to the physical education program and each of whom may display different but equally valued abilities. In short, because circo arts are more about achievement, confidence and challenge, rather than application of traditional movement contexts, they have the potential to add another valued dimension to many current school-based physical education programs.

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