

Circus Immersed in Schools

by Winsome Tse

Spinning plates “bling”, Chinese yo-yos whirr and the juggling with balls fill up the playground at many schools these days.

Circus skills are getting popular in schools in Hong Kong. It has been added to Physical Education (P.E.) classes and extra-curricular activities at some schools. Sing Yin Secondary School is one of these.

Holding the Chinese yo-yo, moving them back and forth, up and down or even along the arms and legs, the students tried to create their own way to play with it.

Alvin Chim Lei-shun, a form two student which has played circus activities for half a year, said that his motivation and interest in playing them were through peers' sharing and stimulation.

“When I saw others using these skills, I wanted to learn them as well so I asked them to teach me,” he said.

Wong Fu-hong, the health coordinator at the school said that students are stimulated to learn and practice when they see someone do something that they cannot.

“When students learn something that others can't do, their confidence gets a boost,” Mr Wong added.

However, according to Mr Wong, learning circus skills is less popular in Hong Kong than in Taiwan and mainland China.

“This may be due to the fact that Hong Kong was previously a colony

of Britain. As the circus is a part of Chinese traditional culture, we had less of a chance to experience it in the past,” he added.

Tracy Tam Chek-ze, the Youth Services Coordinator for the Kely Support Group, a non-government organisation that introduces circus skills to local schools, said, “There are circus equipment like Chinese yo-yos or spinning plates in every stationary shop in mainland China and Taiwan, but not in Hong Kong.”

Miss Tam added that circus skills is included the P.E. syllabus for primary schools in the mainland and Taiwan and therefore most of them are very familiar with it.

In its program “Get Active, Be Empowered” last year, Kely which has introduced circus activities into 45 schools since 2005, gave workshops to 100 teachers in the hope that they would introduce circus skills in their P.E. classes.

Kely has another program “Defeat Failure, Get Positive” involves training students in circus skills. The organisation hoped that after the training, students would teach their friends their new skills.

The teacher-student relationship can also be improved through circus-skills training. Miss Tam said in the program there was a primary school girl who learned circus skills with her school teacher. The girl could perform a skill which her teacher could not do.



“Patience is important in learning circus skills. Only those who are willing to learn can do it.”

“This teacher felt frustrated. Then the girl said, ‘Do not give up! Keep going! You can do it!’ This teacher finally learnt the skill,” Miss Tam said.

“Later on this teacher needed to teach another teacher the same skill, the other teacher faced the same problem and felt frustrated. This teacher said to him, ‘Do not give up! Keep going!’” Miss Tam added.

Circus skills can be learned through other organisations. According to Dr Li Chung, the associate professor of the Division of Physical Education, Department of Creative Arts and Physical Education in the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED), a summer program “School for PE teacher 2009” will provide circus workshops for 60 P.E. teachers.

He said that similar workshops were offered last year for 48 primary and secondary school teachers. Sixteen P.E. teachers were interviewed afterwards, 13 of them were willing to insert circus skills into school P.E. lessons.

Dr Li said that teaching circus skills in P.E. lessons could improve students’

coordination, cooperation skills and creativity in group performance.

He added that cultural education could also be achieved when teaching students the history and development of traditional Chinese circus.

Although circus skills is being popularised in schools, it may be a challenge for teachers to get students to become involved.

Like the circus skills class in Hong Kong Taoist Association the Yuen Yuen Institute No. 3 Secondary School (HKTAYY3), while some students were standing at the front left of the classroom practising circus skills, others were lying on the table at the back.

Students from secondary one to four are required to choose one activity course out of 62 which they had to attend every Friday. As a result, some students might pick one randomly, but not intend to practise the skills for long.

Timmy So Ho-yin, a secondary one student who sat at the back of the classroom said, “We had to choose one

activity course anyway, so I just chose the one which seemed interesting.”

He added that later on he did not find the course interesting because he had to keep practising the same skills over and over again.

Mark Man Kwok-chuen, teacher in charge of extra-curricular activity classes, said that some students chose circus skills as their activity, but after they had attended the classes a few times, they lacked the patience to keep practising.

Although some students lacked interest in learning circus skills, others enjoyed it a lot. Ken Chow Kin-lung, a form six student who is the chairman of the Circus Society at the school, told us of his recent experience.

As Mr Chow knew how to juggle, he liked to throw objects into the air anytime he felt like it. “Last time I was in TOYS’R’US and I picked up a few soft toy balls and juggled them,” he said.

“Patience is important in learning circus skills. Only those who are willing to learn can do it,” he added.



Under Kely Support Group’s program “Defeat Failure, Get Positive”, students can learn circus skills.



Students are concentrating on practising circus skills in the classroom.

Tato Cheng Hoi-tung, the social circus trainer at Dream Social Circus, said that whether circus skills are easy and enjoyable really depends on students’ attitude towards doing it. If they are patient and willing to learn, they can pick up the skills easily.

He said that young people have many more choices, so they may not be willing to learn skills that you need to practise. “Some of them prefer to play computer games at home rather than practising hard at school,” he added.

Mr Cheng said that circus skills are getting more popular among schools because schools have more resources than before. Their demand for different types of activity courses has increased.

This demand is not only limited to primary and secondary schools, but

also to special schools like B.T.C.F.S. Yeung Yat Lam Memorial School which admits students from six to 16 years old who have got a mild intellectual disability.

Standing still, with arms holding a stick aloft, eyes staring intently at the plates, students of the school were concentrating on learning the skills of spinning plates.

They did not just learn and practise, but share.

Wong Pui-kei, a primary five student of the special school said that six months ago, she has been taught by the coach, but now she can teach her friends herself.

Iva Ho Yim-hong, the school’s social worker who is in charge of the after-school circus program said that two years ago the course was

sponsored by TREATS, a nonprofit organisation which focuses on children’s social integration.

“Later, I noticed that the students have changed a lot,” Ms Ho explained that they have become tougher and did not give up easily.

“One of the students failed to rotate the disk, but she kept practising and succeeded in the final lesson of the course, and at that moment everyone cheered her,” she said.

Stage performances could also boost students’ confidence and social skills. In the past Ms Ho’s students have performed in Ocean Park and the Hong Kong Cultural Centre.

She added that she would definitely continue with the circus program, even though it was no longer funded by TREATS. ▣



1-2: Students enjoy practising circus skills. They are playing with Chinese yo-yos and juggling with soft balls.