

# GETTING INTO CIRCUS ACTIVITIES FOR SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION: A CASE REPORT

**Flora Sumie Takamori**

Prefeitura Municipal de Guarulhos, Guarulhos, São Paulo, Brasil

**Marco Antonio Coelho Bortoleto**

Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, São Paulo, Brasil

**Maikon Oliveira Liporoni**

Instituto Oripaba, Mauá, São Paulo, Brasil

**Mario Johannes Henricus Palmen**

Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, São Paulo, Brasil

**Thais Di Cavallotti**

Centro Universitário Herminio Ometto, Araras, São Paulo, Brasil

## **Abstract**

In this study, we show the experience in developing circus activities during Physical Education extracurricular lessons in a social project sponsored by the tax-incentive law, in the municipality of Mauá (State of São Paulo) during 2006. We describe, thus, how important is such sort of activity for the Physical Education lessons. It is also included here how we used the circus events, educational process, and suchlike.

**Keywords:** Circus activities - School Physical Education - Circus

---

## **Introduction**

**I**n this study, we narrate a Physical Education (PE) teacher's experience with circus activities in extracurricular lessons for low-income children at the municipality of Mauá (SP). It was performed from 24 March to 7 December 2006, as part of a project funded by Petrobras, named Programa de Criança (Programme for Children).

We used a methodological exploratory study, based on Dencker (1998), to build this paper, as well as secondary sources and informal observation. This study consists of interviews with the teacher. Afterwards, it was assessed and organised as case report. We considered in it (a) project organisation, (b) teaching-learning process, (c) lesson method, (d) interaction by age with applied events, (e) variety for the

space used and (f) relation between participants (teachers and students) and circus activities.

To put into context the circus events for Physical Education lessons, we searched for it in Silva (1996, p. 12) the history of circus. Thus, we observed that the teaching–learning process went ‘from father to son, transmitting the art orally’. It has occurred independent of the present type of circus (‘family circus’, ‘traditional circus’, ‘nouveau cirque’, ‘modern circus’, ‘theatre circus’). From 1940 to 1950, however, a gap started in how to transmit teaching circus with the arrival of circus schools. In this wise, the circus elements goes out of tents and people started to use it in different spaces, occurrence, social project and (including) at schools, inside PE subject (SILVA, 1996, p. 13).

Considering such subject contents, we can see that circus activities belong to an expressive activity group. Thus, it should be dealt with in lessons, following the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs) (BRASIL, 2007) simultaneously when principles lead the PE in the Primary School: Principle Diversity, Inclusion Principle and Content Categories (BORTOLETO; MACHADO, 2003). Thus, considering it is an expression of body culture, the circus art can be seen as organised, multifaceted, inter-related way to educate physically, recognised by the Law of Directives and Bases (LDB) (BRASIL, 1996).

Besides qualities required from law, other important factor and that makes Circus a necessary part of compulsory content for school curriculum is because it is considered as cultural heritage. This way, with the cultural references and preserving the identity of a people, it resists worldwide movements, which put identities away, blocking future generation to know such artistic expression. The circus culture links people historically and geographically. So, it eases teaching–learning process by reflecting on social identity of a group. It also mediates relations that integrate into reality, proposing conditions for sustainability.

Inserting circus activities into school, thus, allows to find out some mistakes from commonsense on such type of activity, eg that it is not serious, being deceitful, not organised enough, performed by people that do not deserve respect (BORTOLETO, 2003, p. 27).

Moreover, according to Schawrzt (2002), if a child likes motor cars for any activity, mainly being it playful and does not care if she is good or bad for an activity, then what concerns her is knowing if she has



(or does not have) pleasure in it. If circus art considers such principles, the child is adequate for school PE objectives.

Considering it, being the playfulness traits of the circus activity lessons performed by referred teacher is very important. It aims at 'breaking institutionalising the trained order typical from school social organisation', being it a place to build and re-build knowledge, practices and originality. It would also be out of the traditional sense, keeping the educational component and offering opportunity for new discoveries (SOARES, p. 64, 2002).

The introduction to circus elements in such lessons rose from teacher's circus curiosity. In order to do so, the teacher organised lessons in four moments. The meetings occurred with both initial students (6–10 years) and intermediary students (11–15 years), twice a week, on alternate days, within 1 h and 10 min per lesson. One of the results for such initiative was to create a circus show with students presenting it as a way of project final assessment. Moreover, the project Programme for Children encouraged other similar projects in the community Jardim Oratória<sup>1</sup> at Mauá.

Thus, along this study, we analysed meticulously such practical experience aiming at managing the method we used. We also considered that such notes can be useful as basis for other teachers or professionals who wish to introduce circus activities into PE lessons and/or their area.

### **Circus activities for PE lessons**

We are aware that we can apply the circus activities in different environment (schools, clubs, gyms, etc), with different age-groups and socioeconomic conditions. We present, then, a teacher's experience who finds space for such type of activity in the PE extracurricular lessons.

Teacher's interest rose a priori disinterestedly. During several months, many circus events were experienced, including juggling and balancing on objects (teeterboard), blending such knowledge with non-formal education from teaching on PE. Such decision was also made by other professionals influenced by such practice, as we can

---

1-Instituto Oripaba – Jarim Itaussu, Chacará das Flores – Euripedes Barzanulfo- Associação Amigos do Jardim Oratória II. <http://institutooripaba.spaces.live.com/>

see:

In Brazil, considering the (physical) circus activity also begins. There are some State and Independent Schools in some places (São Paulo, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, etc) which already include the circus activities as PE content on different levels. It occurs mainly due to professional's actions, and they are touched by such matter since they have already experienced something in such area. (BORTOLETO ; MACHADO, 2003, p. 45)

The idea to use circus activities was motivated by the own students' curiosity when they had casual contact with part of the teaching material, ie a devil stick. After a quick demonstration, the educator felt that could deal with such content, especially considering how good it was accepted by students.

During the first–six months, such educator announced gradually different materials and circus events which would be proposed afterwards. This way, it was created a great expectation, lessening escape and low frequency caused by lack of interest for physical activities. Such new content gave a fresh face for the teacher's project. The final content for students and circus activities occurred at the second half of 2006.

Then, we worked on the circus activities aiming at providing cultural variety, inclusion, autonomy, creativity, body expression, living within society with a ludic behaviour. When we finished the study, we presented a circus show made by the own students. Thus, we give up there the conventional ways for the PE lessons.

### **Describing project**

According to webpage of the founding corporate sponsor, the macroproject named 'Programme for Children' mountainously represent a social responsibility developed and applied within such macroproject:

It aims at improving children's life quality. It is a long project which since 1983 has been investing educationally to help 7–14 year–old needy boys and girls, in several municipalities of nine Brazilian States. The project organises activities — eg physical,

artistic, recreational; as well as provides basic knowledge on health and hygiene. Children take part in choir, orchestra, transverse recorder; recreational and physical activities; and folklore dance groups. They also have lessons of capoeira, maculelê, handicraft, circus art and pop culture. (PETROBRÁS, 2006).

The children (6–15 years), living in the municipality of Mauá, at 22 km from São Paulo (capital), helped by such project have low-income and some of them was indicated by the Guardianship Council. Two teachers and one PE trainee took part in such project. It met 230 children (100 for morning; 130 for evening).

The lessons were taught considering: the educators were divided into ‘beginners’ (6–10 years) and ‘intermediates’ (11–15 years). The time of lessons were 1 h and 10 min, performed twice a week. The project was started in such municipality from February, but the circus activities were applied from August to December due to bureaucratic matters and need to consider other PE contents.

The difficulty in accepting circus activities for the programme indicates an old discrimination lived by circus. It means that this practice is a fun without responsibility ‘that did not had intention to educate, just captivate’ (SOARES, 2002, p. 55).

It was observed that the project–participating children questioned (under gag and mockery) why they were learning the circus activities. Such pejorative speech for the circus practices was common among children.

Nevertheless, as children became involved in the project, such discrimination lessened apparently. They saw in such activity a possibility to work, co-operate, educate, rise selfesteem, accept (inclusion), respect, pleasure, fun, solidarity.

## Spaces

The spaces available to perform the PE lessons, mainly to develop circus activities, are differently shaped. As their traits, ‘the students will develop the tasks proposed by educators with more or less efficiency and assurance’. (BORTOLETO, 2003, p. 130); such reality was added in the experience we are relating.

According to the teacher, all events were experienced in the spaces

offered by the company which organised the project. Some differences in the teaching–learning process have occurred. There were circus events not enough appropriate for the available spaces.

We stress to reflect again on spaces not so much appropriate for circus activity performed by Bortoleto & Carvalho (2003, p. 60). They said that there is ‘controlled or stable spaces’ that is strict to be appropriate to, and ‘non-controlled or non-stable spaces’ that is not very recommended. Respecting it, we can say the spaces are stable and unstable. The space one, a flat-cemented sport court, but for restricted use, not very recommended for extremely sunny and rainy days due to lack of roof. The space two, the ‘great lawn’, full of irregularities and where in rainy days becomes a slippery mudbank, hampering the activities. The space three, a small room, can be considered stable and is restrict just to size and height, impeding great movements and jumps. Despite the restrictions exposed, developing the activity was relatively normal, respecting the initial programme for the project.

### Lesson schedule

We organised the lessons in order to provide children deal with and know the objects, in particular children’s curiosity and discovery.

There were many children regarding the available time, quantity of material for lessons and the amount of events which were taught. In order to soften potential obstacles, for each new lesson was included circus activities. All students took part in all activities as it was an ‘electrical circuit’, including opportunity to try all activities selected: juggling (clave, swing poi, contact ball, aerial hoop, diabolo, toss juggling, devil stick), balancing on objects (eg can stilt, tightrope, teeterboard), balancing objects (spinning plates – also named balance plates or Chinese plates), acrobatics (strength and balance, ground), interpretation (clowns), magic etc.

At the day-one lesson, the students met one of such events and they were divided into two groups: execution group and help group. During the lesson, the groups changed place: the help group became the execution group and vice-versa.

At the day-two lesson, was presented other event and the students were again divided into two groups: one group for each event. The groups were divided into execution group and help group. One of them was for the event already learnt and the other for the new event.

After a time, the materials and functions were changed.

At the day-three lesson, one more event was taught and the students divided into three groups: one lesson for each event, considering that each one of them was subdivided again into execution group and help group. One group was for the events learnt in the previous lesson. The other was for the new event. Therefore, such process occurred in turn, lesson after lesson, until all events selected were taught. This was the strategy we found for student's contact with so many circus events within scarcely any time and resource.

### The lessons

As we already said, students' meetings were within 1 h and 10 min, twice a week. The teaching-learning process 'must count on a logical progression and sufficiently flexible so that the persons who take part in it can acquire knowledge for safety constantly (BORTOLETO, 2004, p. 102). Therefore, all such lessons were divided into four moments.

I) At the moment one, the in-charge teacher presented the material to be used for lesson, described experiences and explained fundamental principles when dealing with the material. Afterwards, the teacher demonstrated some easy tricks.

II) At the moment two, the students could perform the tricks, using the group division we already mentioned. The tricks were taught in stages, respecting teaching-learning process, ie the teacher demonstrated just a manoeuvre and the students performed it afterwards. After students had learnt such manoeuvre, the teacher taught other one successively. The teacher kept it until all of them were included within such process and until students learnt the movement thoroughly of each circus element.

The interest in such process was to material shortage. Such situation produced moments of friendship for the students (material interchange, respect to differences, co-operation), resulting in collective activities, as said by Bortoleto & Machado (2003 p. 67).

In the case of such experience with lack of material, the teacher co-ordinated the lesson considering: the students were divided into groups and while first student started to perform the activities, the second student observed the execution and provided feedback to colleagues when necessary and vice-versa. During the lessons, the more skilled students aided the colleagues who had more difficulties.



III) At the moment three, when the students already knew circus elements, they potentially could try other activities made up by themselves (creation and investigation).

IV) Finally, at the moment four, the ‘renegade’<sup>2</sup> moment, there was not a programmed frequency and everything occurred according to lesson motivation.

The teacher challenged the students to present themselves to all classroom colleagues. Such proposal was so nicely accepted that the ‘renegade’ moment started to arise from the own students. It meant a challenge space in which the students could deal with imagination and think on the ‘possibility’ to become circus artists. In such phase, the students had a moment to choose a material to deal with freely.

### Assessing the events taught

You can observe that the circus events taught in this study were selected based on the possibility of: available material, in particular the alternative material which was selected by teachers and students; available spaces (great lawn, small room, sport court) and spaces appropriate to perform events; and appropriate age to learn the events.

EVENT	AGE			
	7-8 y.o.	9-10 y.o.	11-12 y.o.	13-14 y.o.
aerial hoop				
acrobatics: collective & individual				
toss juggling				
contact ball	+			
clave	+	+		
clown				
diabolo	+			
devil stick				
spinning plate			+	+
stilt				
swing poi				
teeterboard				

Observation: The black cells refer to the events which did not were applied to the corresponding age brackets.

Table 1: Circus events analysis

---

NOTA



During the lessons, the teacher and collaborators identified and recorded how difficult and easy was to develop each circus event; thus, it led again the activity planning. Based on such observations and records, we built the following tables including suggestions to produce alternative or adapted material.

EVENTS	POSSIBILITY TO CREATE ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL	SPACES TOP RECOMMENDED
<b>1. JUGGLING</b>		
clave	yes	court
swing poi	yes	small room
contact ball	no	small room
aerial hoop	yes	court
diabolo	no	court
toss juggling	yes	court
devil stick	yes	court
<b>2. BALANCE ON OBJECT</b>		
can stilt	yes	court
teeterboard	yes	court
tightrope	no	great lawn
<b>3. BALANCING OBJECTS</b>		
spinning plates	yes	small room
<b>4. ACROBATICS</b>		
collective acrobatics: balance and strength	not necessary	great lawn
acrobatics on ground	no	great lawn
<b>5. CLOWN'S INTERPRETATION</b>		
clown	yes	small room
<b>6. MORE</b>		
magic	yes	small room

Table 2: Circus events analysis

EVENTS	DESCRIPTION	ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL	APPLICATION DIFFICULT & EASY	
<b>I. JUGGLING — PART I</b>				
<b>swing poi</b>	Two weighted fabric balls with long coloured ribbons. They are swung by means of complex sequences to dramatic effect.	- Journal; - Crepe paper; - String; - Fabric.	It is not difficult to learn and teach.	It is easy to teach. It works by means of spinning movements. The beginners start with one object, afterwards they start to use two objects.
<b>contact ball</b>	One has to make the ball glide on the body, without losing contact with it. Size: from 100 mm to 120 mm. It must be hard.	The alternative material could be dodge balls (made of rubber). The production of sock balls or other material is not recommended, due to handmade ball presenting irregularities, and it affects the ball handling.	Balancing the ball on the body is extremely difficult.	Basic performances.
<b>aerial hoop</b>	Also known as the <i>lyra</i> , <i>aerial ring</i> or <i>cervoaui</i> . A circular steel apparatus for juggling (12 in), resembling a hula hoop (BORTOLETO, 2008).	- Cardboard (2 strips of cardboard; roll them up or masking tape).	At the beginning it is difficult, when it is launched. It oscillates easily, mainly by the wind.	It is easy to hold it due to the great surface available for such action.
<b>diabolo</b>	Such apparatus looks like two goblets, one fitted into the other. It is used with two strings at the end of two sticks.	Building it by hand is difficult and thus not recommended.	It is difficult at the changing moment, when it starts to lose its balance. It is also difficult when you have to throw it in the air. For younger children, the string must be shorter (adjusted).	It is simple when handling with it. The children did not show difficulty, ie to make it gain speed and roll it through the string.

Table 3: Events chosen and its details in the project

EVENTS	DESCRIPTION	ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL	APPLICATION DIFFICULT & EASY	
<b>I. JUGGLING – PART II</b>				
<b>toss juggling</b>	Material and size may be distinct: silicone, rubber or millet.	- Rubber; - Millet; - Plastic bag.	At the beginning not knowing the material is a difficulty, but controlled fast.	It is easy to deal with it and children have skills from their childhood, eg, from games as dodgeball.
<b>devil stick</b>	It is made up of three pieces — the baton and two control sticks.	- Broom stick; - Bicycle inner tube; - Hot glue.	It is difficult to manipulate it without the flower at the end, since the baton becomes faster.	It is easy to learn.

Table 4: Events chosen and its details in the project

EVENTS	DESCRIPTION	ALTERNATIVE MATERIAL	APPLICATION DIFFICULT & EASY	
<b>2. ACROBATICS</b>				
<b>body balance (individual &amp; doubles)</b>	Deal with strength, co-operation, trust and respect.	No material.	Too many children.	Co-operation among colleagues; and the inclusion of 'fat children' who are required to compose the figures.
<b>acrobatics on ground</b>	Simple ground acrobatics (rolling etc).	Mattresses are necessary.	It was difficult for children some inversion activities. Using security equipment was also other difficult item when the students had to go over 1 m.	It stimulates the co-operation during the execution aid. It does not require complex materials.

Table 5: Events chosen and its details in the project

### Monitoring the lessons

Concerning the students, we observed when monitoring the lessons the motivation, inclusion and respect to the difference of each one, according to the PCNs (BRASIL, 2006 — Inclusion, Difference and Content). The circus activities, hence, can relate the cognitive, physic, affective and social dimensions, since the students' physical characteristics do not affect the different event performance offered by the circus art.

All the reports built by teachers and the trainee in the project are kept by Petrobras. The activity monitoring was described by using photographic records, weekly reports and observing each teacher's lesson. Assessing and monitoring the students frequently made the teacher get relevant information regarding adapting circus events to the students' age bracket involved.

### Show closing: Preparing and presenting

The show was one of the assessing ways we found to verify the competences acquired by the students during the project Programme for Children. The participation of nearly all children met and their independence were relevant factors, in which we stated the project attraction revealed from the children.

Such presentation was created within a topic named Alegria (Joy) chosen by the teacher. In it, each student could choose the material they would like to present. Groups were composed based on their affinity to participants, and among participants was chosen the apparatus



us: each group was responsible to perform the act consisting of one or more circus activities learnt.

The available space to final project performance was the canteen of Petrobras employees in the own company at roughly 12 h. The children, hence, could socialise what they had learnt and the employees gaze at children's performance during the circus activities.

### Assessing the lessons

A process assessment always present within the project—it occurred weekly when teachers recorded the lessons and discussed the positive or negative changes occurred during it—was fundamental both to qualify the students' and educators' teaching–learning and adjust errors and wise moves in the process, as the citation recommends: 'understanding the assessment based on teaching–learning perspective, considering that one of the functions is to inform and advise for a better teaching–learning process' (COLETIVO, 1992, p. 105).

Other important point for the teacher at the assessing moment was to think constantly on students' individuality respect at the moment when they choose (for the circus show performance) the apparatus they had more affinity. Therefore, 'the understanding of a child at the kindergarten is not the same when she is already at the fourth grade or at the last grade' (COLETIVO, p. 33, 1992). In this wise, adequacy and freedom of choice when choosing the most affinity apparatus is a relevant factor for a significant assessment.

### Other project details

Some obvious facts occurred in the Project were that some students that felt excluded could find themselves with the proposal, as the case of student Gabriel<sup>3</sup>. He was 10 years old, 95 kg, was extremely afraid of PE lessons, but he found in the acrobatics event a space where he could perform his best: the pyramid support, ie he put a child on his shoulder who would have to perform the acrobatic movements.

Maria<sup>3</sup> was other case. She felt excluded since she was shy and quiet; however, she found at the juggling activity (toss juggling) a top space among her colleagues. In fact, the children's co-operation de-

---

3-The cited name was changed to preserve the student's identity.

veloped the solidarity among them at collective moments, creating bonds as a great family.

We also consider that the competitiveness at the circus activities showed a great ally to understand new movements using objects; thus, allowing to improve and create new ways for manipulation and body expression.

### **Final considerations**

This study showed factors we considered important regarding how work and apply the circus activities within recreative and educational context (formal and non-formal). It indicates the great affective–cognitive, social and cultural development furnished by the Circus when treated properly (DUPRAT; BORTOLETO, 2007, p. 174).

Considering some results from the Projeto Criança (Child Project), the persons responsible for it stressed that there was change regarding posture, behaviour, group co-operation and rising selfesteem. One of the observations made by Petrobras was that all children were prominent. This stated that there was conscious solution for conflicts.

The Projeto Criança, moreover, allowed significant constructions for other projects at the Comunidade do Jardim Oratório and State Schools at Ribeirão Pires.

Thinking on circus activities is to say that is possible to include the excluded people, respecting the differences present in Brazil and looking for a good-quality education. This encourages the creativity and independence by using the body movement and reflecting on it. Thinking on it is to consider new authors writing their own narratives and sowing their experiences, thus, we can adopt an attractive and revealing art including sundry perspectives, both at formal and non-formal environment.

In addition to the ease when inserting circus art within PE lessons, ‘we emphasise that in all areas the professional person on PE must care about human development, therefore, preparing students for a wide range of knowledge (DUPRAT; BORTOLETO, 2007, p.177). In such wise, the circus becomes an excellent content to be taught.

### **Perspectives**

The circus which goes by the world with its charm went through splendour and slander moments. Today, although for many persons it

has lost its meaning of source of income and survival, it crops up in new shapes. It is the case of school circus which gains more followers among students and educators.

Other activity encouraged in studying such topic was the chance and ease when creating one more playful corner at the toy & leisure library named Canto do Circo (Circus Corner). At this place, children would explore circus events and be interested in such art in the future.

We can understand, finally, that such study can be included in the proposal of Duprat & Bortoleto (2007, p. 176), Baroni (2006), and Bortoleto et al (2008) when they state that circus activity requires a specific education, or at least cared about its details. It means a huge challenge including new opportunities we offered for the PE teachers. Considering such fact, thus, we hope have contributed to circus art education for formal school PE.

---

### **Bibliographic references**

BARONI, J. F. Arte circense: a magia e/o encantamento dentro e fora das lonas. **Pensar a Prática**, Goiânia, v. 9, n. 1, p.81-99, 2006.

BORTOLETO, M A. C. et al. **Introdução à pedagogia das atividades circenses**. Jundiaí: Fontoura, 2008.

BORTOLETO, M. A. C. . Rola-bola: iniciação. **Revista Movimento & Percepção**, Espírito Santo de Pinhal. v. 4, n. 4-5, p. 100-109, jan./dez., 2004.

BORTOLETO, M. A.; MACHADO, G. de A. Reflexões sobre o Circo e a Educação Física. **Corpo-consciência**, Santo André, edição 12, p.39-69, 2003.

BRASIL, Ministério da Educação. Secretaria de Ensino Fundamental. **Parâmetros curriculares nacionais de Educação Física**. Brasília: MEC/SEF, 1997.

BRASIL. **Lei de diretrizes e bases da Educação Nacional**. Lei n. 9394/96, de 20 de dezembro de 1996.

COLETIVO DE AUTORES. **Metodologia do ensino de Educação Física**. São Paulo: Cortez, 1992.

DENCKER, A. de F. M. **Métodos e técnicas de pesquisa em turismo**. 8. ed. São Paulo: Futura, 1998.

DUPRAT, R. M. e BORTOLETO, M. A. C. Educação Física escolar: pedagogia e didática das atividades circenses. **Revista Brasileira de Ciência do Esporte**, v. 28, p.171-189 jan. 2007.

INSTITUTO ORIPABA. Disponível em: <http://institutooripaba.spaces.live.com/>. Acesso em: 18 dez. 2009.

SCHWARTZ, G. M. Emoção, aventura e risco - a dinâmica metafórica dos novos estilos. In: BURGOS, M. S.; PINTO, L. M. S. (Org.). **Lazer e estilo de vida**. 1. ed. Santa Cruz do Sul: EDUNISA, 2002. p.104.

SILVA, E. **O Circo: sua arte e seus saberes**. O circo no Brasil do final do século XIX a meados do XX. 1996, 172 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em História) – Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Unicamp, Campinas, 1996.

SOARES, C. **Imagens da educação no corpo** – 2. ed. rev. Campinas, SP: Autores Associados, 2002.

---

Recebido em: 21/07/2009

Revisado em: 24/01/2010

Aprovado em: 02/03/2010

#### **Endereço para correspondência**

bortoleto@fef.unicamp.br

Marco Antonio Coelho Bortoleto

Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Faculdade de Educação Física

Rua: Érico Veríssimo

Barão Geraldo - Cid. Univ.

13083-970 - Campinas, SP - Brasil - Caixa-Postal: 6134