

**CARAVAN Local Activity –
Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles**

02 March 2009

HANDICIRQUE
or
**Circus with mentally and
physically challenged students**

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INTRODUCTION

In the framework of the networking project CARAVAN, supported by the Youth in Action programme of the European Union, Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles organised an expert conference on the theme of "HandiCirque". The goal of this Local Activity was to bring together experts in the artistic and social work with mentally/physically challenged students so as to share experience and knowledge. The result of this one-day workshop will be shared with the members of the CARAVAN international association (i.e. Amsterdam, The Netherlands – Circus Elleboog, Bagneux/Paris, France – Plus Petit Cirque du Monde, Belfast, Northern Ireland – Belfast Community Circus School, Berlin, Germany – Zirkus Cabuwazi, Brussels, Belgium – Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles, Luxembourg, Luxembourg – Zaltimbanq', Tampere, Finland – Sorin Sirkus), as well as with all organisations active in the circus, artistic and social field or working with mentally/physically challenged students.

PARTICIPANTS

The first working session of the Local Activity was dedicated to the presentation of the participants. They presented in details the specificities of their project and answered numerous questions. The list of participants can be found hereunder; for more information, please consult the websites of the participating organisations or contact them directly by email.

Cirk Divers

Venue: Antwerp, Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.circusokee.be" www.circusokee.be

Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles (ECB)

Venue: Brussels, Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.ecoledecirquedebruxelles.be"
www.ecoledecirquedebruxelles.be

Delphine Tollet

(film-maker on « HandiCirque »)

Website: www.handicirque.be

Ecole de cirque de Gembloux

Venue: Gembloux, Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.ecoledecirquedegembloux.be"
www.ecoledecirquedegembloux.be

Plus Petit Cirque du Monde

Venue: Bagneux/Paris, France

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.petitcirque.org" www.petitcirque.org

Ecole de Cirque de Marchin (Circabulle)

Venue: Marchin, Belgium

E-mail: xavier.coster@belgacom.net

La Pommeraie (Bénédicte Bouillon, kinésithérapeute)

Venue: Tihange, Belgium

Website: /

Espace différence

Venue: Liège / Verviers / Herve, Belgium

E-mail: espace.differences@fmsslige.be

CREAHM Bruxelles

Venue: Bruxelles (Espace Catastrophe) , Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.creahm.be" www.creahm.be

Carabistouille

Venue: Quevaucamps, Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.carabistouille.be" www.carabistouille.be

Cirkus in beweging (C in B) (and CircusCentrum)

Venue: Leuven (and Flanders) , Belgium

Website: HYPERLINK "http://www.cirkusinbeweging.be"
www.cirkusinbeweging.be

PART 1 – What is HandiCirque?

BACKGROUND

The HandiCirque project started in 1990 in the Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles. The idea was to turn circus arts into a service for mentally and physically challenged people.

The coordinator of a specialised institution came to us with a special request. He was looking for an activity that could give self-confidence and renewed energy to a group of deaf and mute teenagers who were endlessly, due to their handicap, confronted with situations of failure.

Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles went full steam on this new adventure and took to heart the challenge.

The youngsters learned circus techniques (such as dynamic and porté acrobatics, juggling, trapeze, acting and balance techniques) through a progressive approach adapted to their capacities. It enabled them to find pleasure in moving their bodies, going beyond their fears and their handicap. To this day their institution continues to integrate circus arts into their pedagogy, to such an extent that they have equipped their sports hall with circus props, and a circus trainer joined their team.

Following this rewarding and conclusive experience, other institution joined the HandiCirque project. The results turn out to be very surprising for both the specialised teachers and the circus trainers!

They observe with satisfaction the obvious progresses accomplished by the handicapped learners, who light up through the acquisition of new techniques.

Today, almost 200 children, adolescents and adults come weekly to Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles to take part in HandiCirque activities. Some of them also come to the school for holiday workshops.

In 1998, Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles started a partnership with Handicap International to allow the less favoured people or institutions to also benefit from HandiCirque.

PHILOSOPHY

"Enabling the handicapped person to go out of his/her ghetto, out of the four walls of his/her institution, taking off from him/her the label of "abnormal person", often watched, pointed at, excluded... Showing that he/she can, and wants to express him/herself like any other, but sometimes with other means or in another way... But the need for expression is there and remains vital. A circus school is a place where artists train, practice and create, and where the handicapped person is welcomed: he/she mixes with the artists, and the artists observe and respect him/her. The person is encouraged, supported, helped. The artist gives him/her the possibility to come into an imaginary world, whereas the handicapped person offers the artist his/her free and spontaneous ways of expression. Little by little, the barriers between "normal" and "abnormal" vanish and is replaced by a strong bond of creativity."

PUBLIC

The objective of HandiCirque is to include into circus projects any person suffering from a physical/mental handicap, without any discrimination (wheelchairs, visually impaired or hearing-impaired people, hyperactive children, etc.). It is suitable for adults and adolescents, as well as young children.

REASON

Circus arts contribute to the development of the individual by stimulating:

- his/her motor and psychomotor abilities
- his social capacities

HandiCirque encourages new discoveries, the surpassing of oneself, and facilitates the creation of a positive self-image.

They also offer a means of expression, stimulate creativity and develop body awareness. One learns to surpass him/herself, to work on him/herself, to find his/her own means of expression and to find happiness. They contribute to the well-being and the opening of individuals, while at the same time

favouring their autonomy.

They accentuate the work with one another, with the group (learning how to trust and be trusted), and therefore encourage socialising and enable integration.

That's how circus arts contribute to the development of the mental and physical health of any individual.

METHODS

The teaching methods of HandiCirque derive directly from the pedagogy developed by Ecole de Cirque de Bruxelles. Since 1981, the school has constructed empirically its own savoir-faire. It was enriched through team working and based on reflections, experiences and research. It is inspired from different theories, like those from Dr. J. Leboulch, B. Aucouturier and Véronica Sherborne. This savoir-faire is a true work in progress.

The work proposed is based on tolerance, proposing open and varied situations, developed in a playful spirit and favouring confidence, respect and pleasure.

The different techniques can be adapted to the various handicaps. Progresses are evaluated on the basis of the capacities of each individual, without focus on performances and competition.

OBJECTIVES

Develop body awareness through movement

- Learn to concentrate on what goes on in one's body
- Learn to listen to one's body to know and control it

Develop expression and creativity

- Use one's body as a means of expression (non verbal language), stimulate free and spontaneous expression so as to create one's own mode of expression and creativity

Develop sociability

- Learn to work with others with respect for one another
- Build assurance and confidence

Favour inclusion and "de-marginalisation"

-Leaving the institution to go to the circus school is already a form of inclusion, enhanced by the fact to practice arts like anyone else. Ordinary and extra-ordinary people practice indeed the same art form. They mix, observe each other, help each other, find their place and have mutual respect.

PART 2 – Round table

During the afternoon, participants to the Local Activity worked in sub-groups and shared their ideas, reflections and experiences on three different subjects:

- Are circus workshops accessible to any handicapped person?
- Performing groups workshops
- Inclusion of handicapped persons

A list of questions was proposed to each sub-group to guide their discussion (see below). The goal was not to come up with an exhaustive set of answers, but to establish elements of answer regarding this vast sector, so as to favour its development.

This account sums up the different points of view of the participants, but does not offer systematic answers to the list of questions.

Are circus workshops accessible to all handicapped persons?

What observations can we make about circus activities offered to handicapped people?

Is circus practice conceivable for all? What kind of activity for what sort of handicap?

If circus activities should be beneficial for all, can we say it has a positive effect on both handicapped people and their trainers?

Are these circus activities always experimental, or is it conceivable to define clearly the project and its main axis?

When does circus become therapeutical? How far can we go?

Due to its diversity, it is not easy to propose a general account of the HandiCirque sector. For instance, a same group of students sometimes gathers people with very different handicaps. This reality implies there is a great heterogeneity in the groups, which is a first characteristic of the HandiCirque groups. Mixity of the groups is indeed important for participants to develop personally through contact with the others. They can help and stimulate one another.

Still as part of the general observations, it seems obvious that the objective of HandiCirque activities are not intensive production or high artistic performances, but the personal development of the individuals. As such, circus shows put in place with handicapped students are not a goal per se, but a means to favour the personal development of the students.

Finally, we can observe that circus activities have a "little extra thing" compared to other athletic or artistic activities. Circus indeed is linked with magic, wonders, costumes and strass! According to the social workers from specialised institutions, this "magic touch" makes circus particularly attractive to handicapped people, which enhances their motivation and facilitates their progression.

It appears that learning and practicing circus techniques is suitable to all handicapped persons, but that trainers are not suited to work with all types of handicaps... The notion of handicap is indeed a very large one, and the personal sensitivity of the trainers must be taken into account when a group is attributed to them. For instance, a trainer can be naturally suited to work with mentally handicapped students, but might find him/herself distraught when having to work with a group of students in wheelchairs...

The types of handicaps can be classified into three major categories: mental handicaps (+autistic persons,...), physical handicaps (wheelchairs and others) and sensory handicaps (such as deafness and blindness). We note as well it is not rare to see several handicaps combined, or to have to work with multi-handicapped people.

This great diversity implies that it is not possible to establish one common, systematic work method for the HandiCirque sector. Except perhaps for some sensory handicapped people, such as the deaf who all share some characteristics (balance problems, withdrawal from the group...) and for which specific techniques can be put in place, there is no magic recipe to use when working with handicapped people.

The work depends on the group of participants, on the trainer, on the institution the participants come from, and on the individuals of the group. The objectives should be reassessed every year, so as to continuously adapt to the group.

We can finally say that three types of activities appear to be at the core of the HandiCirque sector:

"Occupational" and leisure workshops (no specific objectives in the proposed activities)

"Pedagogical" workshops, with the personal development of the participants as their main objective (precise goals, for the social and physical

development of the participants)

"Performance" workshops, in which several forms of artistic expressions are used to reach the creation of a show (professional artistic objectives)

It emerges that the notion of "intermediary" is essential in the HandiCirque sector. This concept can be understood in two different ways.

It implies first that the trainer is an intermediary, i.e. a link, towards the institutions and the family of the handicapped persons. If the relationship between the latter and the trainer is based on trust, the trainer can offer some relief for a while from caring for the handicapped person. He/she can also testify of the progresses made.

But "intermediary" also evokes the idea of "taking over". Working with handicapped people calls for a lot of energy, as well as a physical investment and emotional devotion on the side of the trainer. It is then sometimes necessary that the trainer steps backward and takes time to find renewed energy. It can be done for example by organising a HandiCirque class on another topic than circus (such as rhythm and movements), organised by someone else. The trainer will hence be able to see his group in another light, and regain enthusiasm and dynamism.

Regarding the beneficial effects for the participants, beyond their personal development, we should underline the importance for the handicapped persons to go out of the specialised institutions. The small field-trips to the circus workshop allow them to meet new people and to be confronted with to everyday life.

As stated before, it is impossible to determine a single, systematic working method for HandiCirque, since trainers have to deal with very varied groups of students. These individuals do not follow the same patterns of development than ordinary children, which can be somewhat predictable.

Trainers must then undergo continuous research in their work. They must adapt, create, be imaginative, searching for the best for their students.

This concept also applies to groups of beginners, which the trainers must first get acquainted with; once they are familiar with the group, it becomes easier to set long-term objectives. To this end, it is in any event imperative to evaluate the project at the end of the year, so as to reassess the objectives that were decided for the group and for each individual. This pedagogical approach allows the trainers to offer more than a mere "occupational" workshop.

As a conclusion, it can be said that there is as many working methods than

there are handicapped people...

Regarding the "therapeutical" aspect of HandiCirque, it all depends on the definition you give to "therapeutical"...

It goes without saying that HandiCirque trainers are humble enough not to think they are going to cure diseases! But if one considers that circus practice implies the notion of joy and pleasure, that it enables to work both on the body and the mind, and that it favours the well-being of the students and their gaining of self-confidence... then learning circus can be considered as therapeutical. And it is so as much for handicapped people than any other...

Performing groups workshops

Creating circus arts shows with handicapped people is still a relatively new experience. Identical endeavours have been undertaken in the theater and dance fields; on the basis of the latter, is it possible to lay the foundations on which to develop this new approach of HandiCirque?

What conclusion can be drawn on the several possible approaches and how should we safeguard the integrity of the handicapped people?

What kind of handicapped person is suitable to take part in a performing group? (Ideal profile? Need of autonomy? Mastering techniques?)

What is the objective underlying performing groups projects? (Performance? Personal development of the participants? A show staging handicapped people so as to start a debate, a discussion - in what pedagogical grounds?)

What about the marketing aspect? (Should a show including handicapped people be sold as any other show? If so, at what price?)

Setting up a performing group

Under the pretext that participants to the performing group are handicapped persons, concrete objectives are not always set from the start. It is nevertheless possible to maintain the highest standards and have the same vision of excellence than with a group of ordinary students.

It matters greatly to "take the students to a higher level", i.e. to offer them accessible work steps that will enable them to make progresses, while at the

same time maintain the same demands as for ordinary students. To this end, one can choose between two options:

1. Taking the whole group to a higher level, which implies a process of "auto-regulation" through which participants who do not suit the adequate profile will withdraw from the project (natural selection in regard to the demands of the project)
2. Taking each individual to a higher level, taking into account every person in the group and accompanying personally those with slower achievements

These two trends necessarily imply very different objectives for the project.

During the process of creation, the notion of time is very different for a group of ordinary students and another group made up of handicapped students; the latter need much more time to achieve anything and to assimilate what is requested from them. In other words, the three phases of show production (preparation, creation and performance) are much longer in an HandiCirque project.

Handicapped students are very often not able to work and rehearse autonomously. It is necessary to be with them and stimulate them so that they will keep on learning. This factor must also be taken into account when designing the project and its objectives.

There is a thin, undefinable line between the beneficial effects of being on stage and the use of the image of the handicapped people. Consequently, the following questions are raised: as from when HandiCirque students are ready to face the public, and in which context? To find an answer, one must first answer another question: what ethics for what project?

Elements of answers can be found by bringing back the handicapped people to the centre of the project, as well as through discussions with the handicapped people and through the observation of different signals:

Is the behaviour of the handicapped student always positive?

How does he/she act and feel during the rehearsals and the trainings?

Is he/she able to stand back and be aware of his role as an artist?

(Even if this is not easily done, this process is essential)

The issue of the context of presentation is linked to the issue of the public (informed or not? large or intimate?), which brings us to the promotion of the show: How should it be announced? Should the public be informed about the artists' profile, the context and the objectives?

The quality of some shows presented in France gives the possibility to skip announcing that the artists are in fact handicapped. Shows presented in Belgium do not correspond to these standards, it is then important to still explain to the public what they are going to see.

Participants' profiles

It is impossible to define the typical profile of the participants to such projects, since each individual is different and has different handicaps. Nevertheless, some criteria of observation and selection can be brought to the fore:

- Personal skills (memory, physical skills, weaknesses)

- Motivation

- Support from the family

- Autonomy (necessary if the person is to accomplish certain tasks linked to creation)

The importance of these criteria depend on the objectives of the project.

In the framework of performing groups workshops (like those of CREAHM), no specific profile is established. However, there is a natural selection due to the length of the project and the necessary steps of creation. Some participants lose their motivation, do not train assiduously or cannot cope with the rhythm of work. Finally, only a hardcore of students will remain, making it useless to go through a selection process.

It would be more comfortable for trainers and their aides to work only with autonomous handicapped students. Nevertheless, this would imply to abandon those who are not autonomous or do not possess the necessary skills... It is then important to realise projects at different levels, so that everyone is satisfied. This reflection is also valid for ordinary students, of course!

Commitment and investment

The commitment of handicapped students within performing groups workshops depend of several factors.

Once again, the autonomy of the student plays an important role. Since the student cannot be entirely autonomous, the role of the parents can make a difference.

All depends on the kind of education they have given to their child. If they have been over-protective, it will be difficult to take him/her to a higher

level. There is also no stimulation possible with parents who, perhaps due to excessive fatigue, see the performing groups workshops as a relief from their parental duties. However, some parents accompany their child and enable him/her to progress. These parents have a role to take in the achievements of the workshop, by offering help or assisting the trainer. Committed parents enhance the success of a project and its continuity in the long run.

Inclusion of handicapped people

What are the means to be put in place for the organisation and development of HandiCirque projects?

What conclusion can be drawn on the positive aspects of inclusion?

What are the limits of such inclusion?

What are the necessary skills and competences on the part of the trainers?

Do they vary according to the type of handicap?

The inclusion of a handicapped student is almost always achieved with the help of a specialised assistant. This person is in charge of integrating the child within the group of children, and should not be confounded with the trainer (who leads the workshop).

The concept of integration can take different forms. It can be the integration of a handicapped child within a group of ordinary children, the integration of an ordinary child within a group of handicapped children, and even the integration of a group of handicapped children within a group of ordinary children. In other words, the HandiCirque groups of students can gather people with very different handicaps.

It is not an easy task to establish a list of necessary competences for the assistant, since these competences vary greatly with the personality and condition of the child he/she is in charge of.

However, several criteria can be underlined:

The assistant must be familiar with the handicap of the student, so as to help him/her adequately

The assistant must adapt the techniques that are taught so that they become accessible to the handicapped child

The assistant must work with his/her team (keeping the trainer and parents informed of the difficulties of the child, benefit from advice from other assistants...)

The assistant must continuously look after the safety of the handicapped child,

because some techniques imply some kinds of risks

The integration will be positive and successful only if the difficulties of the child are explained to the rest of the group (without necessarily naming the handicap), and if the assistant is discreet and knows when to step aside.

There are multiple beneficial aspects to the integration of a handicapped student to a group of ordinary children. Here are the main aspects that should be underlined:

The integration enables the handicapped child to feel like any other child (he/she can finally "be")

The handicapped child can make faster progresses when working with ordinary children (since learning goes at a faster pace than in specialised institutions)

The notion of competition becomes questioned by the other children of the group ("to be the best" becomes, when working with handicapped students, "to overcome one's own limits")

The integration favours gaining self-confidence, whether one is handicapped or not

The integration enables ordinary children to become acquainted and familiar with the notion of "difference"

Circus seems to be an ideal discipline for inclusion workshops, since it is a very diverse creative and physical activity. Moreover, circus techniques can easily be adapted to all forms of handicaps, while remaining "presentable" in a public show. Finally, the notion of "assistance" is central to the work with handicapped people, as it is inherent to circus work. The integration is nevertheless positive only if parents remain coherent with the difficulties of their child: for instance, for an autistic student, the focus will be more on developing social relationships than on mastering techniques.

There are however several limits to integrating handicapped children. For example, it is not always possible to work with handicapped students with violent behaviour, since it would put in danger the rest of the group. In the same vein, it is useless to work with handicapped children who do not develop personally thanks to circus, or who are simply not interested in circus.

The ideal situation would be for the trainers to be informed of the medical record of their handicapped students, so that they know the influence of the handicap on their behaviour. A trial period should also be proposed to the child and his/her parents before his/her commitment in the workshop.

Miscellaneous questions

Several questions were raised during the discussions. Participants to the Local Activity will strive to answer them during subsequent meetings...

As from when can circus practice by handicaped persons be actually considered as "circus"?

Is it important for the trainers and activity leaders to have an in-depth knowledge of the handicaps of their students?

What pedagogical approach to follow for a HandiCirque workshop?

How to stimulate the creativity of handicaped people?

How to deal with concerns about the health of handicaped students in the framework of a circus workshop?