



Outstanding Youth in Education Award

EVERYONE CAN GET UP AND GROOVE

By Willy Ong Wei Li

Mr Willy Ong shares his love for dance and inspires his students to move during PE lessons.

How I got my groove

I have always been an active person. As a child, I would climb trees and kick pong-pong fruits around if no proper soccer ball was available. Outside of school, a large part of my childhood was spent playing traditional games – *gor lee* (marbles), catching and *hantam bola*.

I tip-toed into dance in secondary school. Even though I was a scout, I had many opportunities to perform at campfires. I became more serious about dance when my fellow scouts decided to take part in a national dance competition called DanceWorks back in 2001. We had no instructor, so we choreographed all the moves ourselves, and represented our school!

In junior college, I was initially in two CCAs – soccer and dance – but had to pick one, due to the high commitment levels required for each. Since I was better at soccer, I decided to step out of my comfort zone and pursue dance. My peers were very surprised, especially since the dance club was almost entirely female, with the exception of two boys.

I am glad I made that choice anyway, as it paved the way for me to join the Singapore Armed Forces Music and Drama Company during my full-time National Service. The posting exposed me to more styles of dance and I seriously considered a career as a professional dancer. However, fate threw a tough choice in my path. I was offered a place at the National Institute of Education, and I had to decide between pursuing my passion for dance, and my dream of becoming a Physical Education (PE) teacher at a primary school.

Debunking stereotypes

I chose the latter, and I was able to share my love for dance with my students. As much as I loved performing, I found even more joy in teaching dance and watching others learn it. There were initial challenges, such as reluctant learners. These were

usually boys who believed that “dance is for girls”. The PE curriculum at the time also did not cover dance, so I had to figure out what aspects or types of dance to teach, and how to do it.

I became determined to prove that dance was not just for girls. I rallied some colleagues — mostly new teachers — to perform for the school’s Children’s Day concert in 2011. We danced to Michael Jackson’s hit, “Thriller”. The following year, we grooved to the beat of “Gangnam Style”. A video of that performance has since garnered more than 10,000 views on YouTube.

In subsequent years, more colleagues joined in, the choreography became more complex, and our ideas got bolder. In 2016, the concert included a surprise segment where all teachers and school leaders grooved their way to the stage from all parts of the hall. It culminated in a mass synchronised dance, and a bow to thunderous applause!



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Under Mr Ong's guidance, all can dance, including boys!

Getting students involved

As well-received as these staff performances have been, I knew I had to involve the students as well, to truly spread the joy of dancing.

This is why I have been anchoring a weekly 25-minute mass dance session for the school since 2011, where students and staff dance to different songs. Sometimes I use a series of videos with simple, repetitive steps. Sometimes I would teach the moves myself, and the children would mirror my movements. These days, my colleagues and I take turns to lead the mass dances twice a week. Over 700 students and staff are involved each time.

I believe we need to build confidence in dance young. So I walk around during the mass dance sessions to pick “Super Dancers”, who would be invited onstage to lead the school in moving. These students then stand a chance to represent our school in external dance competitions.

The first time I sent a team for a competition in 2013, I realised that the winning team had students from its dance Co-Curricular Activity (CCA). The next year was similar, with the same school emerging victorious. In 2015, I was tempted to pick students who were already in my dance CCA, especially the older ones, for a better chance at winning. In the end, I chose to stick to the “Super Dancers” who came from all CCAs as I wanted to extend opportunities to students across the school.

I coached students from various CCAs – Guitar, Art, Media, Green (Science) Club, Scouts, Basketball and other Sports CCAs, as well as students who were not in any CCA. I knew that in order to change mindsets and prove that everyone could dance, I had to provide a chance to all.

That year, my school was crowned the champion, and in the following year, we swept all top three positions.

“I stand by my belief that every child can enjoy movement and that no child should be left out from the joy of moving.”

I was bursting with pride.

Besides the weekly mass dance sessions, I introduced “Fernvale’s Got Talents” in 2012 for those in Primary 6 to showcase their talents. It has gone a long way in showing the school that dance is for both genders. Over the years, we have had several all-boys teams who have wowed the audience with their slick routines.

Dance as an inclusive activity

Beyond my school, I am grateful to be able to work with the ministry in developing teaching resources for dance, and using dance to develop students’ social and emotional skills. I am glad that many schools are using these teaching resources effectively, and more students are able to see that dance is an activity that caters to all.

Unfortunately, not everyone is lucky enough to be able to dance. Some, due to medical conditions, have difficulty moving. I once met a Primary 5 boy who suffers from a ruptured disc in his spine. This affects his control over his lower torso. He was an active child until he developed this condition, which resulted in him being reluctant to take part in PE.

I encouraged him to participate in lessons by adapting the tasks given to him. For instance, I gave him a smaller space to defend during modified sports and games, and allowed him to balance on his knees instead of feet while doing gymnastics.

His confidence grew with every little step and small success. He now looks forward to PE lessons. From athletics to games and sports, gymnastics and dance, he gives everything his best shot and I am very proud of him.



Mr Ong doing a demonstration on counter balance

I stand by my belief that every child can enjoy movement and that no child should be left out from the joy of moving.

