

Learning social circus: jumping through hoops to achieve success

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Abstract

This paper explores the outcomes of evaluations of two similar alternative education activities built around social circus. The activities, based in the Australian State of Tasmania, were the result of a collaborative effort between three non-government organisations and schools. An Australian Government initiative designed to support vulnerable families, funded the activities. The paper presents findings of the two social circus activities and goes on to discuss the implications of these findings for policy and practice, particularly as they relate to arts-based alternative learning programs. The collaboration required significant commitments from each of the organisations involved—in a sense the effectiveness of the activities was reflected in the processes of planning, preparation, negotiation and mutual support that underpinned the activities—akin to skills associated with ‘jumping through hoops’. The paper will be of use to arts-based educators who work with marginalised students.

Note: this is a pre-publication version which will be removed on acceptance by a journal.

Introduction

One of the bigger challenges facing policy-makers, educators and those working in fields of community development and social justice is how to engage vulnerable children in meaningful learning that recognises their vulnerability and at the same time respects their rights to an education and enables them to participate fully in the broader society beyond their experiences at school. These children at the margins of society are often labelled as different. Their behaviour does not always conform to what is expected of them, they find it difficult to engage in academic learning, their friendships often link them in with ‘the wrong crowd’, and they are more likely to come to the attention of police and be engaged in the criminal justice system. Their life experiences have sometimes been traumatic, and they tend to be part of a lower socio-economic ‘class’.

The subject of this paper is an evaluation of two social circus activities delivered in the Australian State of Tasmania. The activity was designed to work with parents, carers and their children in an effort to engage them in an alternative educational activity that would build bridges between schools and families and offer opportunities for creative expression and learning success outside the classroom. The activities were evaluated during 2011 as part of an Australian Government initiative designed to support and build capacity in vulnerable families.

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the learnings that emerged from the evaluations and to add to a body of research that already exists, which support the value and need for community arts initiatives. The paper begins with a review of literature which frames the activities in context and then goes on to discuss relevant issues for alternative education programs and outcomes of community arts programs. Because the activities were conducted in Australia, a significant focus of the literature review is on learnings from the Australian context.

Literature

The site for collaborative work

Three organisations were involved in the social circus initiatives discussed in this paper. A ‘facilitating partner’ non-government organisation auspiced the Australian Government initiative, of which the social circus program was one of many activities. A specialist community-based social circus organisation ran the activities. In the first activity (described in this paper as ‘Activity 1’), a non-government organisation, which worked with vulnerable families (in the context of the State child protection system) identified suitable families and provided ongoing support (described here as a family support service). In this activity families were drawn from more than one school and the activity was held outside the school, but within school hours. The other activity (‘Activity 2’) was developed in conjunction with a single school without the support of the third non-government organisation.

In each activity there was strong support from the leadership of all organisations for the activities. There was commitment at the outset to ensure that adequate resources for the activities were in place, including coordination with families. In both activities, families could choose not to opt in to the activity. However, in the activity supported by the family support service (Activity 1) that choice may have had less desirable case management implications for the families.

Both activities were based in the north-west Tasmanian city of Burnie, which on a number of measures can be described as disadvantaged. According to the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), 27.5 per cent of Burnie’s children in their first year of school are considered vulnerable on one or more developmental domains. This compares with 23.6 per cent for Australia. About one in 7 children (14.9 per cent) are developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains, compared with 11.8 per cent for Australia (Centre for Community Child Health & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2011). Of particular concern is the ‘emotional maturity domain’ (which relates to pro-social and helping behaviour, anxious, fearful and aggressive behaviour, hyperactivity and inattention) where the AEDI records less than two-thirds of children being ‘on track’. The ABS Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) Index for Education and Occupation shows Burnie with a median range of 875-900 compared to 975-1000 for Australia (ABS, 2008). National Economics (2012) in its *State of the Regions Report 2012-2013* ranked the north-west region of Tasmania 6th out of 67 regions in

terms of the proportion of the population receiving cash benefits from Centrelink. The Report indicates that the region experiences long term unemployment rates 35 per cent above the national average. Additionally dependence on disability support and parenting payments are on average more than 50 per cent above the national average.

The need for alternative education programs

In the State of Tasmania where this evaluation tool place, the *Education Act 1994* provides the mandate for the Department of Education to manage the delivery of education services to school aged children. The Act provides reasons for exclusion and suspension from school, particularly for behaviour, which is ‘not acceptable’. Regardless of this, there is an justice and equity imperative for all children, regardless of behaviour. The Organisation for Economic Development in its *No More Failures* report suggests that:

There is a human rights imperative for people to be able to develop their capacities and participate fully in society. The right to education is recognised, for example, in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child and in the constitution of most nations. (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007, p. 11)

A second premise is based on principles of social inclusion. Exclusion has its own set of social dangers including increased risk of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health issues, unemployment and crime (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998)— it is both a product of disadvantage as much as it is a contributor to disadvantage (Oroyemi, Damioli, Barnes, & Crosier, 2009). From a social *inclusion* perspective it would seem logical that educational approaches that help families maintain connections and build networks within their community would be more likely to be productive in the long term and more likely to reduce intergenerational disadvantage (Australian Government, 2009).

A third premise is based on the imperative of meeting the needs of children at risk. Risk factors which influence emotional and behavioural development are complex and cumulative, the more risk factors the higher the probability of poor outcomes (Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi, & Hertzman, 2010). Risk factors include poor child-parent attachment, poor social skills, poverty, marital disharmony, socio-economic disadvantage and a lack of support services (see also: (Bell, 2006; Scougall, 2008). Similarly Smart et al. (2005) state limited social skills, behaviour problems, substance use and the quality of child-parent relationships and parental supervision are ‘powerfully linked’ to adolescent antisocial behaviour.

Beyond these arguments, the need for alternative learning programs could be justified in a number of other ways. From a theoretical perspective (for example Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey), it is well understood that not all children and young people respond well to the pedagogical assumptions of mainstream schooling (Hollowell & Moye, 2010), which are in turn built on structures inherited from an ‘industrial model of schooling’ (Gerver, 2010, p. 59), and which in some ways have changed little. Indeed, as Robinson (2011) suggests, the sciences are often given precedence over the arts in schools because the philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment prevail over those of the Renaissance. He argues (as does the evidence from the evaluations presented in this paper) that the arts are equally important as the sciences in a modern education—particularly for children who are ‘at risk’.

Teachers working in the context of alternative education programs require a special set of skills: they ‘need to psychologically detach themselves from the immediate stress of their jobs’ (Goodman, 2010, p. 555). ‘Beyond simply being decent, alternative educators must be noble’ (Hollowell & Moye, 2010, p. 541). Alternative education is not for all educators. The prospect of reintegrating marginalised students into mainstream classrooms makes some mainstream teachers cringe—and indeed may not be in the students’ best interests (Hayes, 2012). The focus of the teacher sometimes shifts from teaching and learning to behaviour management and supporting behaviour change (Thompson & Carpenter, 2010). In this context teachers may lose sight of learning goals (Boyanton, 2010). In the context of a school that has alternative education programs for ‘at risk’ students, while the idea of classroom exclusion may appear to work against the rights of children, the importance of an education that caters for the different learning needs of students should not be underestimated. The role that regular classroom teachers play in these activities may differ, but clearly there is a role for others (including those who are not trained educators) in achieving the learning needs of these students.

Outcomes from community arts-based interventions

The connection between participation in the arts and personal well-being are well-documented in the literature. Several studies both in Australia and internationally have demonstrated the linkages. Hunter (2005) for example, in a review of arts in education, basing her assertions on a number of arts in education studies in Australia, suggests that participation in the arts has a positive impact on literacy and numeracy, social and personal development, attitude to learning, and a range of generic competencies including planning, leadership and communication skills. Similarly, a recent Australian study points to international literature showing that involvement of students in the arts not only leads to improved academic performance, school attendance, psychological indicators, improved self-concept and improvement in behavioural indicators such as empathy, cooperation, collaboration, communication and tolerance (Vaughan, Harris, & Caldwell, 2011). The study itself, drawing on extensive quantitative data from schools supports these assertions of impact through statistical comparisons of schools participating in *The Song Room* programs, and similar schools that did not participate.

It is not surprising then, that the arts—and more specifically, community arts—have been used in a programmatic way to effect the kinds of changes described above. An evaluation of Big hArt's *Lucky* project points to crime prevention outcomes for example (Palmer, 2008). In another report about *Lucky*, Wright (2009) asserts that the program exemplifies the importance of the arts in:

forming well-rounded and well-functioning individuals able to enjoy life and take part in society; promoting social justice; promoting individual and collective creative abilities; and strengthening and affirming identity and citizenship. (p. 45)

An evaluation of a *Community Arts Development Scheme* in Victoria concluded that the program, which included a social circus activity, 'demonstrated significant mental health and wellbeing outcomes' and 'contributed to promoting social inclusion and civic engagement' (Kelaher et al., 2009, p. 32). Similarly, an evaluation of a trial participatory arts program for women supported by Mission Australia, showed a range of personal development, skills and capacity outcomes along with expanded social connections and networks (Mission Australia, 2009).

There is however, some contention in the arts community about the use of the arts for producing outcomes, for reasons which go beyond the intrinsic value of art for the sake of art. John Dewey, in his seminal work *Art as experience* (2012) makes comment about the role of art in education or vice versa. He suggests: 'we are repelled by any suggestion of teaching and learning in connection with art'. White (2009, p. 202), discussing the arts-health connection, similarly argues that 'participatory arts, as distinct from art therapy, does not focus directly on a health outcome; it aims to produce work of artistic quality through a mode of engagement that may also have beneficial social outcomes...'. Badham (2010), urges those who are fearful that the focus of 'community art' will be subsumed by policy pressures to see art as a vehicle for 'community development'. While she sees this as an 'unwarranted fear', she does raise this trend as an issue for the arts community:

the challenge... is to define aesthetic integrity within a practice that often gets lost in its social policy rhetoric. Without a strong commitment to artistic processes and outcomes, the merits of creative collaborations and their 'social impacts' will suffer. (p. 93)

The intrinsic value of participation in the arts is explored in a 2004 United States study titled *Rediscovering the Meaning and Value of Arts Participation*. The organising schema which resulted from the study serves as a useful model to explain the complex interplay between the various benefits that emerge from arts participation (A. Brown, 2004, p. 16). These elements include a range of cognitive, aesthetic, physical, spiritual, political, emotional and socio-cultural outcomes. The schema highlights the value of participation, well beyond some of the non-arts outcomes described above.

The other part of the contention arises from how to effectively measure social and economic impact of the arts, with some suggesting there are no reliable ways of determining economic or social benefit of engagement in the arts (Reeves, 2002). Evaluations sometimes make assumptions about causal effects without adequately testing them. Catterall (1999) cautions against drawing conclusions from associations of variables that may be used to assume causation. An example of this is found in an

Australian evaluation of the *Lucky* program, cited earlier, which worked on the assumption that ‘where it is established that ‘good practice’ exists it can be safely assumed that, in the long term, it is likely that positive crime prevention outcomes will occur’ (Palmer, 2008, p. 10). Leaving these assumptions untested calls into question the assertion of causal linkages. A comprehensive meta-analysis of studies presented by Hetland and Winner (2001) suggest that in terms of academic outcomes, only three causal linkages can be made for children engaged in the arts at school: a) to spatial reasoning; b) temporal reasoning; and c) to verbal skills—and these are predominantly limited to participation in music and drama.

A subset of the community arts sector is social circus. One of the more oft-quoted works in this field is the doctoral thesis of the late Reg Bolton, who argued that circus works as both a remedial and developmental activity for children because ‘a child involved in circus has a chance to make good some deficits, by experiencing constructive physical risk, aspiration, trust, fun, self-individualisation and hard work’ (Bolton, 2004, p. Abstract). While the intrinsic aspects of social circus—and more generally, arts based programs—should not be underestimated, it is important to recognise the importance of program planning and structure. In a study of a program called *Artplay* based in Australia, Anderson et al (2007, p. 48) conclude that: ‘The learning environment, including the time given to the activity, as well as the space, materials and atmosphere also appear to be impacting on participants’ engagement’. The point to take from this is that engagement does not ‘just happen’—it needs to be intentionally designed into a program.

McCutcheon’s (2004) thesis, which explores *how* circus works for disadvantaged youth mainly in the Australian State of New South Wales, points to a range of outcomes including physical fitness, individual and community pride, alignment of individual projected and actual selves, and a decrease in violent and antisocial behaviour. In Victoria, an evaluation of the *Brimbank Children’s Circus*—a program undertaken by Westside Circus Incorporated under the Communities for Children program—reported evidence for a number of outcomes including: *increased confidence and self-esteem; positive parent–child relationships; awareness of local services; a sense of belonging to a community; and a reduction in social isolation for both parents and children* (Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia, 2009). In another Victorian evaluation built around occupational therapy in a *Circus in Schools* program, the evidence suggests that circus: Provides a fun, motivating and intrinsically reinforcing experience; increases positive risk taking both physically and emotionally, in a safe and supported environment; promotes physical health and body awareness through activity; enables participants to acquire a broadened skill base relating to circus as well as more generic ‘life skills’; increases self-confidence and self-efficacy; improves social connectedness, teamwork, and leadership skills within the group; provides opportunities for calming rhythmic activities, increased sensory feedback, a focus on balance, and coordination; and creates a space in which participants feel a sense of belonging (Maglio & McKinstry, 2008, p. 289).

Again, there are concerns that the emphasis of engagement in circus is not usurped by those who would see it purely as a vehicle for non-arts outcomes. For example, Rivard et al (2010) in their study of the *Cirque du Monde* (CdM) program in Mexico point to the need to see circus not necessarily as the agent of change, but rather as the locus of change for disadvantaged youth: ‘CdM does not confine itself to seeking change, it is the site of change’ (p. 191). Along these lines, Smith-Gilman et al. (2010, p. 383), suggest that the environment is critical for learning—it becomes the ‘third teacher’: ‘when children work in an environment that allows them to collaborate, decide and follow areas of interest, the results are different’.

While not denying the outcomes of participation, they may be emphasising the grounded nature of circus as a catalyst that produces a perhaps unpredictable, context dependent change process that is difficult to pin down into discrete, measurable outcomes. The dilemma for educators is not how to bring the arts into education, but rather how to bring education—or schooling for that matter—into the arts. Robinson (2011) points to the often untested assumption that school is about academic mastery rather than about fostering creativity. Educators are sometimes so constrained by the imperatives of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the infrastructure of the system that they may fail to imagine learning that does not include school at its foundation. Innovative thinking for the

more marginalised members of the community will imagine and create transformative learning spaces that may not include the four walls of a classroom (Leadbeater, 2012).

It is within this contested space that the circus activities reported here sit. The intent of the activities is undoubtedly to effect change in individuals and families. It may be tempting to try and prescribe or predict changes (as was done in the theory of change model shown at Figure 1 below) but if the lessons from the literature are to be heeded, the organic nature of circus as that locus from where change emerges, should not be missed in the analysis of findings.

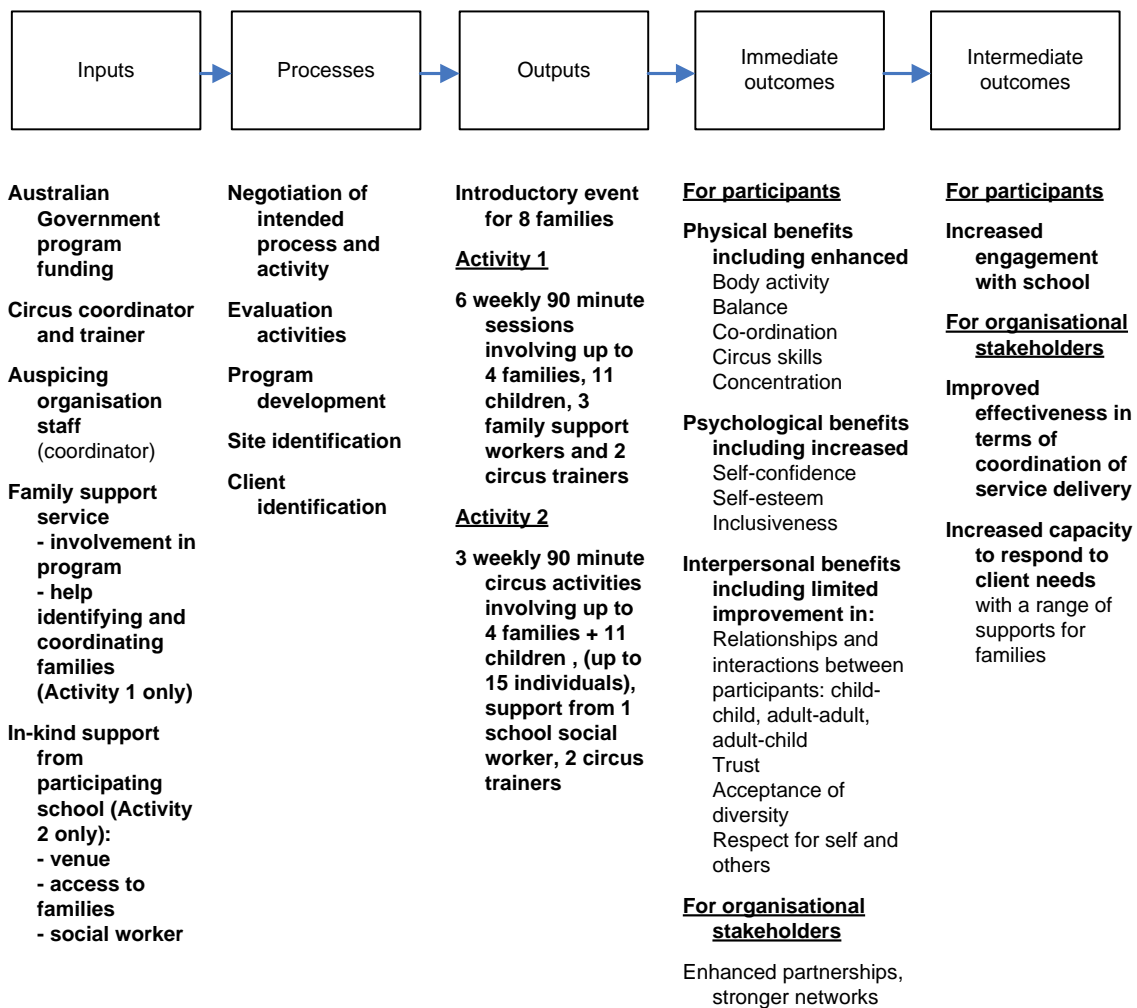
Evaluation methodology

The evaluation of social activities reported here, was designed around qualitative methods, which are designed to determine more about the ‘how’ and ‘why’ rather than the ‘what’ of the program. In other words the qualitative outcomes are more important in this case, than the quantitative outcomes.

Qualitative research is highly interpretive—it is about creating meaning and generating theory (Chase, 2005). By using the narratives—or stories—of stakeholders, the perceptions of interviewees can be collated and synthesised to tell an overarching story about a particular program or activity. The evaluation of both activities used pictorial and video evidence to allow for critical review by the evaluator. The validity of this approach is increasingly accepted in program evaluation methodologies as a way of producing credible evidence (Mathison, 2009; Rose, 2011).

Both evaluations used the same ‘theory of change’ model as a basis for assessing outcomes (see Figure 1). The immediate outcomes expected from both activities were described under headings of 1) physical benefits for participants; 2) psychological benefits for participants; 3) interpersonal benefits for participants; and 4) enhanced partnerships and networks for organisational stakeholders. The array of tools used were designed to assess these outcomes, notwithstanding the possibility that other outcomes could be achieved.

Figure 1. Proposed theory of change for social circus activities



Data collection in both activities included use of a reflective process, drawing on the shared observations during the programs by the evaluator and trainers. Activity 1 included participant surveys at the end of the six week activity and a process of critical reflection using a structured focus group technique to consider the perceptions of the organisational stakeholders. This focus group was recorded and transcribed. The organisational focus group was not included in the data collection for Activity 2. Families were also surveyed about their experiences after Activity 1. This process was not used for Activity 2. Table 1 summarises the data collection tools used for both activities.

Table 1. Summary of data collection tools used for evaluation of Activity 1 and 2

Data collection tool	Activity 1	Activity 2
Evaluator observations using photographs and video recordings	Yes	Yes
Reflective process with circus trainers (using journal)	Yes	Yes
Focus group with organisational stakeholders	Yes	No
Focus group with participants at conclusion	Yes	Yes
Survey of participants on completion	Yes	No

The analysis process in qualitative research is inductive—data are used to identify patterns in the ‘text’ or images generated through photographs or video of the story, which are then used to postulate a theory (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This theory, ‘grounded’ as it is in the data (Charmaz, 2006), results in a synthesis of findings that is generalisable within the context from which the data is

sourced and which can be further tested in other contexts. Importantly the intent of the evaluation methodology is not to prove whether circus works. Rather it is to provide a basis for the developing use of the arts in general and social circus particularly, within the context of alternative education programs. That basis is built in part on the empirical evidence of the evaluations and in part on the existing evidence base as found in the literature.

Findings from evaluations of two social circus programs

The social circus programs evaluated were funded under the same program and therefore had similar goals related to addressing the needs of vulnerable families. In particular the social circus activities under investigation were designed to support families and students connect with their schools (and vice versa). There was also an expectation that parents would engage with their children in the activities. This was a prerequisite for the children to be able to participate. There were however, two major differences in the ways the activities were run. The first was conducted over six weeks at a hall away from school and involved a family support service. The second was conducted over four weeks at a primary school and did not include involvement of a family support service.

Table 2 is an attempt to summarise the qualitative nature of outcomes observed in both circus activities. All of the outcomes listed in the table were observed or reported in Activity 1. However, as noted in the third column of the table, not all outcomes were observed or reported in Activity 2.

Table 2. Outcomes recorded in Activity 1 and 2

Outcome observed	Description of outcomes observed	Were outcomes observed in both activities?
Better behaviour from children	More cooperative, helpful, greater concentration, calmer	No, only in Activity 1
Changed attitude	Focus, changed demeanour, becoming more positive	No, only in Activity 1
Experience to remember	Shared experience, something to reflect on	Yes
Interaction within family	Mums interacting with children, changed dynamics, more open, children interacting with each other	Yes, but in Activity 2 only one adult participant was a primary carer
Mutual support	Support and encouragement within the group	No, only in Activity 1
Organisational learning and relationships	Building relationship between organisations, experimental, new insights, cohesion, learning new ways of doing things	No, only in Activity 1
Physical activity	Getting more active, physically engaged, exercising	Yes
Rapport, relationship	Stronger relationship between workers and families	No, only in Activity 1
Self-confidence	Increased confidence, self-esteem, less shy	Yes
Skills and capacity	More adaptive, having a go, doing things not previously attempted	Yes
Social networks	Friendship, connection, inclusive	No, only in Activity 1
Trust	Trust within and between families and of workers	No, only in Activity 1

Before considering the differences, there were a number of common outcomes in both activities. Firstly the circus activities themselves created a space for physical and creative expression regardless of the location. It was also evident that in both activities, participants increased in their self-confidence and capacity to perform circus tasks that were taught. In addition, as participants reflected on their experiences at the end of the sessions, there were memorable moments in both activities, both for adults and students who participated.

There were however notable differences in outcomes. Firstly it was apparent from the observations of Activity 1, that as the sessions progressed, so too did the children's behaviour and attitude. There was

evidence of increased cooperation, greater focus on tasks, increased mastery, a more positive attitude. These reflect the expected personal outcomes of the theory of change model.

Secondly there was evidence of interpersonal outcomes in Activity 1 that were not observed in Activity 2. In Activity 1, interactions within and between families changed markedly. Relationships between family participants and family support workers also improved as the sessions progressed. In addition, there were signs that the weekly interactions were generating friendships, mutual support and encouragement, growing trust and increasingly a feeling of inclusive play. Again, these outcomes reflect the anticipated interpersonal benefits identified in the theory of change model.

Thirdly, the first activity generated considerable organisational learning between the three organisations involved. This was reflected in the growing cohesion in the group, the exploration of new ways of doing things and the developing relationships between the different people involved. These outcomes were also expected in the theory of change.

Implications for arts-based alternative education programs

A number of implications arise from this brief discussion of the outcomes of two social circus activities. There are important lessons for program delivery. These will be considered in the light of the literature cited earlier. Before considering those lessons it may be helpful to consider why one activity worked very well and the other did not achieve the range of outcomes that were expected.

What contributed to outcomes in Activity 1 and not Activity 2?

The discussion that follows in this section arises from the critical reflection that occurred after the activities were conducted. The discussion points as much to what did not work (mostly in Activity 2) and what did work (in both activities).

Planning and preparation: the importance of collaborative work

While both activities were planned for in similar ways, the extent to which staff involved at the school (Activity 2) were briefed about their roles was somewhat limited. In addition the expectations of teachers about the activity were not as clearly articulated as they could have been. Staff became somewhat frustrated when children, who were nominated to join in, could not attend because their parents did not come. By contrast, staff in the family support service (Activity 1) were fully integrated into the program and understood the importance of parent involvement.

Critical mass and group dynamics

While numbers fluctuated in both activities, at week 1 of Activity 2, only two families attended. By contrast there were four families in Activity 1. The difference in group dynamics between the two activities was evidenced by the inability of the circus trainers to engage groups in teamwork tasks in Activity 2. While the intent was to have four families attending, the smaller number of families in Activity 2 may be a further reflection of the effectiveness of planning and preparation.

Venue: a safe space for engagement

As noted earlier, Activity 1 was held in a community hall away from school while Activity 2 was held in a school hall during school hours. Children who were withdrawn from class for a 'special' program may have been subject to more scrutiny (and maybe teasing) from their peers in this activity and perhaps more importantly, teachers may have seen the withdrawal of children with difficult behaviours as a reward for their misbehaviour. Further, the neutrality of a community hall may have made it easier for otherwise disengaged parents to engage in a friendly and supportive environment where their child's success was not subject to the scrutiny of teachers.

Activity duration

Activity 1 lasted for six weeks and Activity 2 ran for four weeks. The evidence from the evaluation (not discussed in detail here) suggests that it was not until week 4 of Activity 1, that the more significant changes appeared. Having sufficient time to develop mastery in skills and trust with other participants may be an important factor that allows for success to emerge.

Lessons for arts-based alternative education program delivery

While the learnings offered here are not exhaustive, they provide some important guidance for educators and performing arts practitioners who are keen to use the arts generally—and social circus particularly—as a medium for alternative education.

Recognise the intrinsic value of creative learning

One of the lessons from the literature is that there are times when art should be produced for art's sake, not for the sake of some other outcome, such as academic performance (for example Badham, 2010; White, 2009). There is ample evidence to support the view that participation in the arts results in a range of social, educational, identity, cultural and psychological benefits (B. W. Brown & Liedholm, 2004). For those wanting to use participatory arts in alternative education programs, this is good news. However, a focus on outcomes beyond the creative performance itself may miss the main point and value of the art. Students who are at the margins of the education system tend to have some difficulty—be it behavioural or intellectual—engaging in the process of learning that is mandated by schooling. The students involved in the activities described here fall into this category. Within the classroom, they have been labelled as failures. In circus, all can succeed. The celebration of success, which was a strong element of Activity 1, is an important component that must be built into a strong arts-based educational activity such as social circus. The way that success looks though, may be different than the success that is often celebrated in schools.

Outcomes cannot be assumed to flow from a programmatic approach

There is a risk that programs such as the social circus initiatives discussed here, are assumed to work on the basis of 'the evidence'. Examples of these assumed causal assumptions are evident in the literature (see for example Palmer, 2008) discussed earlier. As an evidence based approach, Activity 2 ticked most if not all the boxes for a good participatory circus program. But it had limited impact and was not as effective on a number of qualitative (let alone quantitative) measures of success as represented in the theory of change model (Figure 1). If educational or family function outcomes are important, then they need to be measured or assessed against expected outcomes. Without denying the intrinsic value of the performative art, a critical assessment of its purpose and outcomes must take place at a number of levels. It happens within the group by reflecting on the question "how can we do this better?". It happens among the trainers when they reflect on the question "how are students learning?". It happens among teachers when they reflect on the question "what do these marginalised children need in order to learn better?". What is needed then, is a built in evaluative approach that considers the importance of the art itself together with its impact on learning.

Intentional design of the creative space

For activities like those evaluated here (where vulnerable families are intentionally selected), schools may not be the ideal location for creative learning to take place. As noted in the literature (Rivard et al., 2010; Smith-Gilman et al., 2010), there is an argument drawn from theory and practice that suggests that space is important. While not wanting to deny the possibility that school-based programs may work, it is suggested by this data that the learning space—as a neutral, comfortable, safe environment—needs to be intentionally designed to promote the kind of learning that is required. It may be that school is not the best place to locate a social circus activity in the context of alternative education.

Involvement of teachers

While there are exceptions, the role of a teacher in a mainstream school is not that of a performer. There are creative and innovative teachers, but teachers in mainstream classrooms will inevitably be constrained in their pedagogy by their training and by the imperatives of the education system with its focus on literacy, numeracy, academic achievement and assessment. As discussed in the literature, disruptive students may result in teachers losing sight of learning goals and focusing on behaviour management (Boyanton, 2010). However, teachers of marginalised students need to be engaged in the critical reflection processes that are important for assessing impact and improving outcomes. They may also be able to identify how the alternative learning program meets areas of the curriculum and perhaps more importantly, meets the needs of students involved. Therefore, in their assessment and

reporting of student outcomes, their awareness of what the student has achieved (as opposed to how they have failed in the classroom) will be important in providing a fully rounded report on a student's learning progress. That aside, teaching of the arts requires expertise in the arts. Teaching of the arts in this context needs trainers with an ability to engage students who may have learning and behavioural challenges.

Conclusions

The evaluation of two social circus activities discussed here highlights some key learnings about what works and what does not. There was a range of program elements that proved effective. There were some that were counterproductive.

These evaluations add to an increasing body of research which supports a view that 'circus does work' as an alternative education tool. There are provisos though. In the context of alternative education, social circus works when schools, trainers, funders and families work closely together to make it happen. Social circus works when group dynamics allow for effective interaction, teamwork and social connections to build trust and mutual support. Social circus works in safe spaces where participants feel free to experiment and build confidence, build skills towards mastery, and interact creatively with their environment without fear of criticism or failure. Social circus works to reduce exclusion and marginalisation when trainers and other participating role models affirm successes and achievement. On the other hand social circus may not necessarily work where these elements are not attended to or where the focus is purely on the incidental outcomes that may be desired by the education system. The key to social circus' success is not in the program. Rather, it is in the interactions between the participant and the creative performance that require considerable effort to pull off—potentially jumping through a lot of hoops—on the part of all stakeholders involved: families, support staff, educators, trainers and funders.

What we can say is that social circus can work at a number of levels to effect change—in terms of identity, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships and to some extent the mental health and well-being of individuals. In the examples drawn on for this paper, it is perhaps too early to say whether the impact is sustained to effect lasting change in terms of family functioning or educational outcomes measured in terms of academic achievement. What was observed though, based on the evidence of data collected that in the space of six weeks of regular participation, students' views about what is possible *can* change. Their relationships with significant adult role models such as support workers, *can* be enhanced. Their perceptions about where they fit within their family and in the broader social world *can* change. Their engagement with meaningful learning *can* be inspired.

Social circus though, is not an educational panacea for at risk students. The evidence from the evaluations presented here shows that running a social circus program in a school—or out of school—is not a quick fix for improving educational outcomes. There are pitfalls to avoid. Importantly, the intrinsic value of participation in the arts must be respected. Further, the lessons learned from evaluations suggest that if schools are to use circus as part of an alternative education program, they need to do it well. That means having the right trainer, planning and preparing thoroughly, engaging the right mix of families, providing a safe space and providing adequate support throughout the life of the program.

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