

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULTS PARTICIPATING IN
COMMUNITY CIRCUS CLASSES: THE SYNERGISTIC
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIRCUS AND
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

by

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Abstract

This participant-observer, phenomenological qualitative study explored the adult experience of a community circus class through an occupational therapy lens. Following 4 months of weekly participant-observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four adult beginner students in a community-based social circus class. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory approach to identify six themes. Two themes addressed the structural supports of the class: *Meeting People Where They Are*, and *Culture and Competition*. Four themes were based on participant experiences and perceived outcomes: *Releasing Expectations, Trying, Learning, and Fun, Making Friends, Making Community, and Feeling Better*. Findings suggest that through the fun aspects of circus participation, students were able to confront and overcome physical, social, emotional and cognitive challenges. In this way, personal growth and quality of life were promoted. External supports enabled students to adopt an individualized approach to participation that encouraged self-awareness and self-assessment across multiple domains. Due to the scarcity of research investigating adult participation in circus, the therapeutic benefit of circus participation merits further investigation. Circus and occupational therapy may develop a mutually beneficial relationship on the basis of shared common philosophy and values. By working together, occupational therapy and circus may enhance their ability to address occupational justice, inclusivity, empowerment, connection, play and quality of life. Keywords: circus, occupational therapy, adult, therapeutic benefit, community, Dr. Denise M. Nepveux.

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Table of Contents

Literature Review	1
Circus, Past and Present.....	2
Why Circus?	4
Motivators and Barriers for Adult Participation in Circus	4
Emerging Evidence on Youth and Adult Wellbeing through Circus	5
Occupational Therapy and Adult Wellbeing	9
How Circus Relates to Occupational Therapy Philosophy and Practice.....	11
Method.....	12
Researcher	12
Setting.....	14
Study Design.....	14
Participant Observation	15
Interview Recruitment	15
Participants	15
Interviews	16
Participant Observation Using an Occupational Therapy Lens.....	17
Results	18
Trying, Learning, and Fun	18
Culture and Competition	22
Releasing Expectations.....	24
Meeting People Where They Are	26
Feeling Better	30
Making Friends, Making Community	32
Discussion.....	35
Just-Right-Challenge	36
Circus as Health Promotion.....	40
Circus as Therapy	41
Circus and Occupational Therapy	43
Conclusion	45
References	47
Appendices	52
Appendix A – Domain of Occupational Therapy.....	52
Appendix B – Semi-Structured Interview Guide	53
Appendix C – Research Consent Form	56
Appendix D – Participant Demographics.....	58

At the very thought of “circus”
A swarm of long-imprisoned desires breaks jail.
Armed with beauty and demanding justice
And everywhere threatening us with curiosity
And spring and childhood,
This mob of forgotten wishes
Begins to storm the supposedly impregnable fortifications
Of our present.”

-E. E. Cummings *Damn Everything but Circus!* (Kent, 1970)

Circus has a diverse lineage from all over the world that has evolved, and continues to do so. Culture, society, contextual factors, individual performers, and more recently a broad population of non-performance-based participants influence what circus is and how it is represented and understood. Circus attracts and represents a diverse population, and is a place where anyone and everyone can participate in playful, creative, social, and physical skill-building.

The purpose of this study is to explore why adults choose to participate in community circus and what they glean from the experience. Very little research exists on the therapeutic potential of adult circus participation. As a result, there is a need to explore why adults participate in community circus, and how this participation has affected them across physical, cognitive, social and emotional domains.

Literature Review

In this brief review of the literature, I introduce the reader to contemporary community and therapeutic circus practice, which throughout the paper I refer to simply as “circus.” I

introduce occupational therapy and its role in promoting adult wellbeing. I draw linkages between circus and the philosophy and practice of occupational therapy.

Circus, Past and Present

Circus exists in a myriad of forms in modern day society. We have circus as entertainment, circus as an art form, circus as a therapeutic tool, circus as an educational tool, and circus as tool for social change - not to mention all of the crosses between the above (A. Cohen, personal communication, January 19, 2017).

Circus is a word that evokes a series of responses and reactions, images, aromas, sounds and emotions. For many, circus conjures visions of traditional circuses such as the Big Apple Circus and the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Others may reflect on imagery of theatrical circus artists in fantastical costumes, such as Cirque du Soleil. Some may think of their community circus school, with students of all ages, sizes, ethnic backgrounds, and abilities, learning and practicing new skills together. Each person may have their own unique description, opinion and relationship to circus, not all positive but often crossing cultures, ages, genders, economic brackets and abilities. Circus is a unifier and it draws people together. Just as circus draws various populations to become spectators, more recently it has also drawn these diverse populations to become participants.

Arrighi (2013, p.11) writes:

By its very nature, circus training and performance is hybrid. Both sporty and creative, it produces imaginative outcomes as much as it develops highly skilled physical proficiencies. With music and dance it shares the development of rhythm and precise physical skills; with sport it shares the development of strength, speed, physical development and team building whilst avoiding the competitive spirit so essential to

sporting endeavour; with drama it shares the development of self-confidence, performance skills, and lateral thinking [...] but is without the spoken word and character demands intrinsic to a written text.

Over the years of observing, participating in, and researching I have developed a flexible understanding of circus. It is physically creative interplay between people, apparatus and props that bridge a variety of skill sets, personality types and abilities. New (contemporary) circus is difficult to define and categorize. Unlike ballet, circus cannot be labeled as dance. Nor can it be labeled a sport. It is a shifting blend of athleticism and art. It can be a modest or grand social endeavor or a solo occupation. Its shape at a given moment is a product of the individuals who are participating and what they create together.

As a 3000 year-old entity, circus has many branches. The five branches that predominate today include Traditional Circus, New (Contemporary) Circus, Recreational/Fitness based Circus, Social, and Community Circus (Bolton, 2004). There are many differences between Traditional and New Circus. The most relevant difference for this study is that circus has shifted from something people watch to something people participate in. Although Social Circus is a form of recreational New Circus, its mission is based not simply in skill building but more so using circus skills to create social change (Arrighi, 2013). The contrast between Social Circus and Community Circus is subtle. Social Circus uses circus skills as interventions for at risk populations. Although Community Circus may share this agenda, they are ultimately driven to be an expression of the community they are a part of (Bolton, 2004 p. 168). The current study is based in a Community Circus that has prioritized accessibility and inclusion, and aims to work with at risk populations.

Recently, circus schools and programs have been increasing in both numbers and popularity within the USA and people of all ages have been exposed to a different form of circus than what the media has typically and historically represented (Traditional Circus). This is in part due to Dr. Reginald Bolton (November 13, 1945-July 14, 2006) who continues to be an important figure in the promotion of circus scholarship. As a practitioner, academic and educator Bolton disseminated the concept of New Circus all over the world. Kiez (2015, p.26) notes he was a prolific writer and his work, and limitations within, sparked the pursuit of academic research related to circus (a.k.a. circademics).

In 2011 the American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO) conducted a member organization survey, which found that there were 250 circus organizations within the USA, and ten new organizations established each year. Of the 250 organizations who participated in the survey, 92% were founded between 1981 and 2011, and of the 25% in the past between 2001 and 2011 (Cohen, 2012). This information is important to note because although there is an increasing demand, there is little understanding as to why people of all ages are interested in joining the circus, what their experiences are and why they continue to participate.

Why Circus?

Motivators and Barriers for Adult Participation in Circus

Circus participation is spurred by multiple motivators that may change depending on the context. According to Daniels (2007) people's competence and degree to which they are comfortable expressing confidence is influenced by their motivation. Motivation can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation relies upon outside approval and results in ranking social status, whereas intrinsic motivation promotes satisfaction and camaraderie. Hagger, and Chatzisarantis (2008, p. 81) note that "[i]ntrinsic motivation [...] reflects engaging in behaviour

for the [...] satisfaction of the behaviour itself, and for no external contingency.” Because circus is a noncompetitive activity, and tends not to hold specific social prestige, there are few external pressures. Because of this, circus participation more often stems from intrinsic motivation.

Although engaging almost any new social activity may stir up fears, to participate in circus is to confront fear and failure, both great and small, across many domains. These fears include: exposure, humiliation, success and failure, heights, physical and emotional modesty, injury, social gaff or isolation from others, lack of comprehension and, trust of self and others. These fears may be intentionally and unintentionally faced, and are often resolved through participation (Bolton, 2004, p.175). According to McCutcheon (2003, p. 112), circus helps to overcome a fear of failure, the need to provide a right answer, and to please authority.

Circus as a whole is fun and this context allows participants to approach learning and fears in a positive mood. According to Kakko, Karkkola, Kekalainen, and Honkanen (2013) “Being in a good mood and being successful in the circus practice lessen the anxiety [...], which makes it easier to manage the daily routines.” Not only does circus participation help mood while in the context of the school, but it also may positively and indirectly impact other areas of life. Leaving one’s comfort zone may be a risk that is facilitated by having fun and being in a positive emotional state. Bolton (2004) states “Circus is a risk at every level.” Risk-taking is an inherent and necessary part of circus and it is a step in the journey to gaining confidence and building trust. Risks are not held within the confines of the physicality but emerge in thinking patterns, social interactions and psychological experiences, as is evident from the examples above.

Emerging Evidence on Youth and Adult Wellbeing through Circus

“[...] to take risks, to trust, to dream and aspire, to work hard and to laugh” (Arrighi, 2013, p. 11)

Research published in English that explores the benefit of circus for health and wellbeing is sparse. What does exist is often investigating youth and specifically at risk youth populations. Future research is necessary in order to assess if these benefits are also found within the adult population. The following section explores this limited literature and its implications for community and therapeutic circus practice.

The research discussed here suggests that participation in activities that include a combination of sport and creative expression, such as circus have been shown to support self-worth, self-concept, social integration, self-esteem and confidence. It has lead to constructive risk-taking, fun, hard work, individualization, constructive risk-taking, which has lead to overcoming fear and other mental barriers as well as increase mindfulness and camaraderie. All of these together suggest circus participation supports overall self perception, social interaction, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing as well as the ability to transfer these as life skills. The variety of disciplines, athletic and creative components, and noncompetitive, inclusive nature of the form makes circus a unique and beneficial outlet for all ages.

Adult participation is voluntary and is similar to engaging in an extracurricular activity as it is outside of typical responsibilities of work and home. The skills in a circus setting are not necessary to typical daily function and therefore are new to most people. The motivation to join a circus class may be rooted in any combination of playful, creative, athletic, social aspects or in supporting one's mental and physical health and wellbeing. Whatever the reason, circus participation is a voluntary learning process outside of the work and domestic responsibilities of the typical adult life.

For all [circus] learners there is opportunity to further develop their motor skills, enhance their concentration and self-esteem, and revitalize their involvement in learning in and through the physical dimension; to engage learners, each of whom may bring different activity interests to the physical education program and each of whom may display different but equally valued abilities (Price, 2012, p. 8).

In a study conducted by Blomfield and Barber (2009), a total of 1489 adolescents completed a survey regarding participation in extracurricular activities and the relationship to general self-worth, social self-concept and academic self-concept. The researchers drew a distinction between *no participation*, *sports-only*, *activities-only*, which was defined as non-sport activities that include music and drama or *mixed participation*, a combination of sport and non-sport activities. Through statistical analysis, they found that levels of *social self-concept* and *general self-worth* were significantly higher within the mixed participation group than *sports-only*, *activities-only* or *no participation* groups, and both the individual activity groups rated higher scores than the *no participation* groups. Although this study focused on an adolescent population, the concept of a diverse and balanced occupational engagement may hold true to adult wellbeing as well. There are two important extrapolations from this study. The first is that people who participate in extracurricular activities demonstrate higher rates of social self-concept, academic self-concept and general self-worth. The second is the highest ratings were within the *mixed-participation* group, which is particularly noteworthy as this group is most similar to circus activities in the blend of athleticism and creative expression.

It is possible for people to experience an increase in levels of self-worth and self-concept without their internal cognizance. Fournier et al. (2014) describe through participation in circus arts, youth gain an awareness of their abilities and are able to move between social participation

and belonging to a feeling of secure autonomy and independence. This supports their understanding of who they are and how they fit into the circus community but is also transferable to the broader context. This is an important area to consider for several reasons such as the psychosocial health benefit of inclusion and being a part of a larger community. But also, that the time spent honing skills and participating in this unique setting can be translated into general life skills. This impacts the more intimate experience of self-perception and how one independently functions in the world. It applies to personal relationships and, or broad social contexts such as education and employment.

Self-esteem and ability to confront fear are impacted by changes in confidence. In a mixed methods study, Rixom (2012) explored the effects of embedding static trapeze activities within a mental health and employment program. Participants' self-esteem, motivation and ability to overcome fear all improved. These measurable improvements were seen not just within the context of the class but transferred to practical areas such as seeking and finding employment. The identified benefits of the study included: improved physical and mental wellbeing, increased ability to overcome mental barriers, improved confidence and self-esteem and increased mindfulness. Additional benefits included increased opportunity for social interaction, improved discipline, increase in focus and motivation, as well as provision of a reliable structure and routine (Rixom, 2012). Because the nature of trapeze work was inherently unique and difficult, it required dedication to the practice. Through this, progression of skills and competency varied between participants but overall bred a sense of camaraderie. Increased ability and camaraderie increased participants' satisfaction with overcoming obstacles such as physical and social aspects of fear.

Obstacles can stem from a single source or a combination of social, cognitive,

psychological and physical roots. A study conducted by Kiez (2015) found more detailed information about gains in physical literacy, but also participants' psychological experiences. Physically, Kiez found significant improvement in motor competence, movement comprehension, and confidence. Psychological benefits included increased motivation to participate and associated happiness with circus engagement. This points out an obvious, but easily overlooked aspect of circus participation: it is fun.

These studies demonstrate that the combined experience of circus result or have the potential to result in positive gains across multiple domains. Circus is not segmented into unrelated experiences; but rather is experienced as a package. Students are exposed to new skills, cooperation, play, safe risk taking, philosophy, body awareness, touch, history, social interaction and creative expressions. When practicing circus arts, trust, coordination and communication skills are experientially developed and risk taking curiosities are played out in a safe, enjoyable and controlled environment (Bolton, 2004).

Occupational Therapy and Adult Wellbeing

One of the many important ways that occupational therapy is a unique and valuable form of therapeutic work is through this holistic approach. In doing so occupational therapists address and incorporate motivation, relevance, routine, social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs (Kielhofner, 2009 p. 303). Occupational therapists and clients create goals together that incorporate the clients' strengths and interests to support their areas of weakness or challenge. According to the AOTA (2012, p. 2), "Where access is restricted, practitioners can design meaningful tasks using their strengths that require use of restricted areas." In doing so, the client and therapist are able to prioritize what is addressed in sessions to increase the relevance, motivation and active engagement, which not only improves the therapeutic outcome, but also

results in a meaningful and enjoyable experience. This unique and multifaceted approach to therapy is influenced by the individual needs of the client in combination with the therapeutic expertise of the occupational therapy practitioner and results in a therapeutic program that is tailored to the client based on their physical, cognitive, social and emotional needs and interests.

Occupational therapy, partially due to its close ties with the medical model, is bound to problem remediation with quantifiable outcomes. Rather than a sole focus on problem reduction, however, occupational therapists promote their clients' quality of life and wellbeing. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (AOTA, 2014, p. S35) defines wellbeing as "contentment with one's health, self-esteem, sense of belonging, security, and opportunities for self-determination, meaning, roles, and helping others." Wellbeing is a subjective experience that is influenced by social, cultural, temporal, physical, spiritual, personal domains (Fazio, 2008, p. 363). Health and wellbeing are improved through meaningful and productive occupations (Knight, Ball, Corr, Turner, Lowis, & Ekberg, 2007).

Occupational therapy differs from medicine in its approach to disability and human difference as well. The medical model defines disability as "deviations from body norms" and as problems to be fixed (Kielhofner, 2009, p. 236). Alternately, occupational therapists ask, "What matters to you?" not, "What's the matter with you?" (AOTA, n.d.). As Hanson and Hinojosa (2014) assert, "We are committed to nondiscrimination and inclusion as an affirmation of our belief that the interest of all members of the profession are best served when the inherent worth of every individual is recognized and valued" (p. S23). Occupational therapy's client-centered approach requires patience and clear communication with clients, families and other healthcare providers.

How Circus Relates to Occupational Therapy Philosophy and Practice

Circus and occupational therapy share many similarities beginning with the challenge of definition. Each is striving to express a unified and compelling identity. Both are evolving fields, shaped by people, society, and culture (Clark & Marc-Aurele, 2014). They have a shared philosophy and set of values such as, inclusivity, being people-centered, participation-based and holistic.

Much like circus, occupational therapy supports people across all ages and through a wide spectrum of occupational domains (see Appendix A). Circus teachers and occupational therapists aim to empower their students and clients to actively engage in meaningful activities. Occupational therapists and circus teachers are collaborators and facilitators; rather than strictly stating what should be done, they both encourage students and clients to incorporate what they value and are interested in doing. This deepens the meaning of the intervention to the student or client and promotes generalization of learning into everyday lives and routines.

Whether occupational therapists are seeking to support the health and wellbeing of typical adult populations or interventions that will support at-risk populations, circus has great potential to teach skills that are transferable to other aspects of life. The inclusive and holistic nature of circus may encourage healthy habits and general wellbeing.

There have been a few studies that have explored specific benefits of using aspects of circus as a therapeutic tool within occupational therapy. For example Maglio and McKinstry (2008, p.290) suggest that occupational therapists may be able to address coordination, sensory processing, and tone as well as overall physical, emotional, and mental health through circus activities. Rappaport's 2014 study investigating the therapeutic benefit of circus intervention, demonstrated that circus participation increased occupational roles, self-determination,

participation in exercise as well as increased positive affect and entry into a flow-state. These studies have provided rationale for future research regarding the therapeutic potential of circus participation across all populations.

Resilience and adaptability have allowed circus to exist in various forms for several thousands of years. This longevity is a testament to the global demand and dialog between society and circus. Historically circus performers and spectators have shaped circus, however New Circus has opened the possibility for anyone to influence and define circus in their community and beyond. This receptivity is what makes circus pervasive, inclusive and also positions circus as an effective therapeutic context and intervention. The lack of research investigating the benefit of circus participation is surprising given its history. This combined with the potential to support and promote the physical, social, psychological and cognitive health, well-being and overall quality of life necessitate further investigation.

Method

The present study utilized an inductive, qualitative approach to investigate the experience of adults in a community circus.

Researcher

It is important to be transparent with the subjective nature of a qualitative method (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). In this section I describe my background in circus and my relationship to the circus community, which is the setting for the study. These layers of experience and connection serve to enhance the depth of my understanding as a researcher, and thus may lend credibility. I also took measures to state the established relationships between the researcher, teacher and participants in the study, as well as several years of personal experience and both informal and formal observation.

My participation and interest in circus predates my studies in occupational therapy. I have practiced partner acrobatics for nine years and have observed and participated in circus classes periodically throughout this time span. The majority of my circus interactions have been within the Upstate New York circus community this study is a part of.

I have been a regular member of the school in various ways, although not as a regular student. Prior to its opening, I participated in an adapted juggling workshop for people with developmental disabilities, and after it opened I co-taught an intermediate partner acrobatic class. My partner is a teacher at the Circus School and I am a good friend of the director of the school.

The pre-existing relationship between me, the school, teacher and participants could be seen as a limitation because of the challenge to separate the participants' point of view. However there was strength in the deeper understanding of the participant's experience, understanding community circus and having been a part of this particular community. It may have allowed participants to feel more comfortable sharing their personal experiences and allow for more specific line of questioning.

Since entering an occupational therapy program I have begun to perceive the world through the lens of occupational therapy. As my professional and experiential knowledge grew in both fields, I have contemplated the profound and largely undocumented potential relationship between occupational therapy and circus. I have been aware of the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship, for both the individual students and clients, but also the professions. There was a likelihood that research exists in countries that have more established circus programming, funding and education such as in France, Spain, Germany, and Portugal, but was not as prevalent in the English language. Because of the scarcity of research on circus participation, I wished to investigate this specifically within the adult population. I chose to study

circus because it is something value personally, and because I immediately experienced the therapeutic benefit of participating.

Setting

The study setting was an Upstate New York community circus school that opened in 2015. The Circus School offers 35 classes per week, and approximately 25 percent of the student population receives scholarship in one form or another. There are ten teachers, about 150 students, ranging from under one to 55 years old. Another 200 people have been a part of the school through outreach or other activities such as parties and workshops.

The director of the Circus School, was also the teacher of the circus class, had a sizable impact on how the class and school were run. The teacher has researched, studied and practiced circus, and specifically circus education around the world and has an intentional rationale how to teach circus, and how to run a community circus school. The director's intentional effort to draw from circus philosophy and methodology from all over the world has greatly influenced the culture of this school ("Circus School"), and therefore exhibits and promotes the shared circus philosophy that draws heavily from Social Circus. This can be viewed as a limitation in that they helped to create a specific program that may not be generalized to other settings and populations, however because they have been gathering historical and contemporary information from all over the world, it could be stated that this was a shared perspective and could be viewed as a strength as well.

Study Design

This was a qualitative study using participant observation followed by four audio recorded, one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Appendix B), which were then transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. One limitation of this method was within the

inherent property of a qualitative design resulting in potential for transferability but not generalizability.

Participant Observation

Informal, exploratory participant observation began in January, 2016, while I was completing a 12-week, 40-hour, occupational therapy program requirement for community fieldwork at the circus school. During my weekly visits, I observed several youth classes and participated in and observed an adult circus class. I took notes to document my observations. My learning objectives during this time were to begin to identify the Circus School's strengths and areas of challenge. I sought to learn ways occupational therapy might fit in, whether for the students, teachers or the organization. I also wished to explore the feasibility of further research into student experiences of circus.

Interview Recruitment

The potential participant pool consisted of all students at the Circus School who were older than 21 years and who had participated in ten or more classes of the introductory circus course. I hoped to recruit circus school students who were new to circus and who had committed to the practice, as evidenced by attendance.

I sent an email to contact potential participants (see Appendix C) from this population. Students who responded to this email and expressed interest in participating in the study (n=4) were emailed a consent form (Appendix D). We communicated via email to set a location and date of the interview convenient to the participant.

Participants

There were four participants in the present study (see Appendix E for demographics). One participant wished to have a pseudonym that was gender neutral and therefore all

pseudonyms (“Chris,” “Jordan,” “Sam,” and “Taylor”), and associated pronouns are gender neutral. All were students in the circus school described above. Each had attended at least 10 class meetings of an introductory course. This class introduced students to many circus apparatus and disciplines including: Icebreakers and games, Juggling, Aerials (static trapeze, fabric, lyra, corde lisse), Balancing skills (rolling globe, unicycling, tightwire) and Acrobatics (tumbling, partner acrobatics, group balance, handstands and handbalancing).

Interviews

Each interview took place at a quiet location determined by the participant. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could request the recording to be stopped at any point, and could choose not to respond to questions they preferred not to answer. After completing informed consent, I introduced the interview by suggesting the participant reflect on relevant areas such as physical, social, mental and emotional aspects of participation in circus classes. The interview guide provided a general template for the interview, which took 45-90 minutes and consisted of open-ended questions about participants’ experiences and perceptions of circus participation. With participant consent, I digitally recorded each interview. One of the audio recordings was faulty and could not be used. –The interview was recorded from memory by the researcher directly after in order to preserve the specific phrasing of the participant. Following each interview I encouraged participants to ask me any additional questions they may have had regarding this study.

Recordings were kept on a password-protected laptop personal computer. The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed using a computer program (*transcribe*), and foot pedal, which allowed me to control the speed of the interview playback and provided ease of rewinding and fast forwarding.

After all interviews were transcribed, I printed all transcripts and began to analyze them, using open coding. Importance was determined based on the emphasis placed by the participant (in frequency, ardor and, or declaration). I was looking for personal reflections of their experience and occasionally had to redirect participants to speak from their experience rather than hypothesizing about circus participation. Important phrases were underlined and a tentative theme handwritten on the opposite margin. Once this was completed, the many themes were collected and re-organized to combine and dismiss less frequently addressed ideas. The interviews were then cut into paper strips based on what theme was being addressed and the collection filed into envelopes with the participant's name and the corresponding page number. The accumulation of data in each theme was then sorted and the most impactful pieces were then transcribed into a document. The final themes were selected based on richness of information gathered across all four interviews. They addressed the structural supports of the class (*Meeting People Where They Are*, and *Culture and Competition*) as well as student experiences and perceived outcomes (*Releasing Expectations*, *Trying, and Learning*, and *Fun, Making Friends, Making Community*, and *Feeling Better*).

Participant Observation Using an Occupational Therapy Lens

As noted above, I observed children's and adults' circus classes for 12 weeks in spring, 2016. I kept notes on my observations and reflections during this time. Incorporated with interview results, below, are also a few reflections from during this placement.

The Person, Environment and Occupation model (PEO) was a helpful frame of reference to organize and interpret observations into an occupational therapy perspective. This enabled me to recognize the teacher's strengths in modifying the environment and occupations to support the occupational performance of each student and the group. Through changing the occupation and

environment, the student was given the agency to change their mental, emotional or physical selves in a way that best suited *their* desired outcome. This resulted in a client-centered, holistic practice that prioritized self-assessment, inclusivity, non-judgmental acceptance and flexible participation. This harnessed the student's intrinsic motivation to participate in these fun but often challenging new skills. I observed that, with the teacher setting the tone, all of the students together then co-created a culture that perpetuated these values.

Results

The most prevalent and commonly held themes across the four interviews included:

- Trying, Learning, and Fun
- Culture and Competition
- Releasing Expectations
- Meeting People Where They Are
- Feeling Better
- Making Friends, Making Community

Trying, Learning, and Fun

In order to better understand the potential therapeutic benefit of circus, it is helpful to understand the motivation to join, the thoughts, reflections and responses to circus participation over time. Learning new skills was a major emphasis in interviews with circus students.

Participants frequently emphasized the value and process of “trying new things” or “learning skills” in their introductory circus class.

In my observations, I noticed that students in the class I observed initially showed great hesitation about trying out a new apparatus or skill:

2/11/16 (Adults)

This group has a tendency to not want to be the first person to try something or volunteer. If no one gets the ball rolling, there is a “waste of time” in each activity. This has a direct consequence that means not everyone will have very much time to try the new thing. They are choosing to have less time on each discipline over being “the first.” Once people go, they fall in line but still are hesitant to “step on each other’s toes” so they are shy in their approach. Once they are on the trapeze they seem nervous and excited and really happy to be there.

But whatever their hesitation, circus students were indeed trying new things. Some saw “trying new things” as a unique opportunity within circus, and one that perhaps differentiated people who attempted circus from others. This was in part due to the variety of circus disciplines (e.g., aerials, object manipulation, tumbling, juggling, balancing) within the class.

“I started developing favorites for sure but I also still enjoyed variety.” (Taylor p. 4)

“Some [adults] don’t try new things because it’s hard or because it feels easy and nice to just do the things that you’ve always been good at, and I don’t fault them for that [...] But I do find it impressive when there are people that are like ‘ I don’t know how to do this, and I’m just going to try and I might not be able to.’” (Sam p. 15)

For some participants, circus was an experiment in capability or an opportunity to try something they always wanted to learn. Taylor (p. 14) emphasized that one of their motivations was to “try different things and experience different things and seeing what I can do. I guess seeing what my body is capable of doing.” Sam (p. 6) observed, “I am learning skills that I’ve always been wanting to learn. It’s mostly things I can almost do, but that feels close enough sometimes.”

Participants experienced learning and skill-building in a variety of ways. This varied from a strong desire for improvement to valuing the process over the outcome. For example, Chris and Taylor both emphasized learning goals. Chris observed, “If I’m not getting better, I don’t see the point.” (Chris p. 5) Taylor reflected, “Yeah I guess I’m proud of myself for some of the things I did, some of the things I was able to learn how to do.” (Taylor p. 10) Sam, on the other hand, were more tempered in their learning goals. Sam reflected, “... there’s some people that, like, work really hard to get better at a lot of things and I don’t really care about that, I just do it for fun.” (Sam p. 8) Sam observed, “I enjoy feeling myself getting more flexible or learning how to do something new. But I don’t need to feel like super good at something, I just want to be able to like, do it.” (Sam p. 9)

Participants also found themselves observing how they experienced learning itself and how emotions came into play. Whether the skill they were learning was a long-held aspiration or a completely new experience, learning inevitably involved experiencing both success and failure. This entailed confronting habits of thought or self-talk that could hinder the learning process. Jordan (p. 10) acknowledged a “sort of perfectionist tendency” when learning something new. Sam described how frustration and anger entered their learning process:

“[...] I’m frustrated with myself for not being able to get something. But also I’m surprised that I couldn’t get something [...] when I can’t see how I can improve. So when I keep doing something wrong the same way over and over again [...] I guess angry at myself.” (Sam p. 11)

Recognizing the stress of attempting new skills, Sam noticed that teachers balanced old and new learning within a class in order to maintain comfort. Sam commented,

“I appreciate [that] the things that are hard for me, we don’t do it the whole time. We like, do it for a little bit, and then we switch to something that’s easier and vice versa [...] it still feels like I’m building on things a little bit, just slower.” (Sam p. 7)

In time, a growing sense of familiarity could help support students to face new experiences more confidently. Jordan observed, “Now I think there’s just a greater comfort level. I’ve used a lot of the apparatus.” (Jordan p. 3) Similarly, Sam commented, “I have an idea of how to do the thing instead of being brand new. It feels like I can do it and I don’t have to be anxious about figuring that out.” (Sam p. 3) Comfort was also influenced by the amount of time spent on the activity, and the degree of challenge experienced, as Sam commented “I think that within the class there’s a range of how much *new* people feel comfortable with.” (Sam p. 16) As much as circus was about learning and skill development, it was also fun. Taylor and Jordan commented on this frequently throughout the interview, often while laughing and poking fun at being adults who crave silly interactions. “Somebody *play* with me!” (Taylor p. 13) Jordan went on to reflect on the adult experience of physicality, saying, “I think the emphasis is on fun and enjoyment with the skills secondary” (Jordan p. 15). Chris (p. 2) concluded, “Really I chose it because it’s fun.” (Chris p. 2)

Whether fun was something that was specifically sought out, or was a welcomed aspect of participation, adults were grateful to have the opportunity to engage in play. Both Taylor and Jordan discussed the limited opportunities that adults have to participate in something that is fun and addresses multiple domains. Circus was not only fun but it met their need for social interaction, exercise, psychological support and desire to learn new things.

“Get a bunch of adults together and play something silly instead of something serious like softball or something.” (Taylor p. 13)

“I think that it’s [circus] a really cool experience, because adults especially don’t learn new physical skills. Their physical experiences tend to be much more strictly physical. Like going for a jog with a friend, can be a social experience, but it’s not really learning something new.” (Jordan p. 11)

In circus class, most everything encountered was new, and learning was an inevitable part of circus participation. Some prioritized the process while others were more goal oriented. The pace and priority may differ between individuals, however each person was faced with their relationship to skill building, goals and responses. Consciously or not, individuals navigated the relationship between their internal response to learning new skills and external culture of a noncompetitive setting.

Culture and Competition

Participants were aware that circus was non-competitive. Sam remarked, “there’s no formalized competition.” (Sam p. 8)

“I like the idea that [...] everyone working together and it’s not a competition. Like gymnastics is ultimately a competition. There is a winner and a loser.” (Jordan p. 1)

For some, such as Jordan (above) expressed, this was an enjoyable aspect. However, it was unusual, and participants needed to acclimate to the culture of a non-competitive, but physical endeavor.

“I would look at them and think I was stronger or should be better than them, but I wasn’t and this would be frustrating. But then I would tell myself to stop it. That wasn’t the ‘circus’ way to be.” (Chris p. 5)

Without competition, participants were unsure how to deal with comparisons and had to redefine competition as something that occurred between people and not an internal experience.

“So it was motivational and not, not like competitive against other people, but more so with myself and just wanting to do things. I don’t like limitations.” (Taylor p. 9)

Chris, Taylor and Sam were aware of the role of competition in a noncompetitive environment and had to determine how they responded to this inwardly and outwardly.

“But I do feel like there’s always a slight amount of competition between people learning new things, even if it’s like in a fun way.” (Sam p. 8)

“I have always done competitive things and am a pretty competitive person so there were definitely times where I was comparing myself to other people or pushing myself to do better.” (Chris p. 5)

“I definitely have interior competitions all the time. Like, I always want to be able to do everything.” (Taylor p. 8)

Sam commented, “I don’t like being the worst or best person in the class” (Sam p. 3) demonstrating that even in a noncompetitive setting there was an awareness of where participants ranked. It was how people responded to this that defined the concept and ability to respect the noncompetitive culture. “It’s not void of competition, because of people. But it is mostly.” (Sam p. 8)

As several participants acknowledged, labeling something as noncompetitive does not mean it is void of competition, as competition may be a component of motivation, risk-taking, skill building, and ultimately participation. Participants expressed that they used competition as a motivating force to build skill or work with their self-identity but they explicitly shared that although they compared themselves to other students, they did not compete with them.

Participants respected and appreciated the ‘circus way to be,’ but had to adjust participating in a noncompetitive endeavor.

The noncompetitive culture of circus combined with an internal relationship with progression toward goals, introduced the role of expectations. Individuals were given both the freedom, and responsibility to be accountable for their relationships with concepts such as competition and expectation.

Releasing Expectations

The comparisons that participants were aware of while determining how to behave and respond in a noncompetitive environment also played a part in their expectations of their own abilities as well as their observations of others.

“I find it reassuring [...and] interesting because sometimes it surprises me, and it helps me when I’m having trouble with something. I can remind myself that, the thing we just did that I was really good at, someone else couldn’t do that. [...] Sometimes it’s you, sometimes it’s not. It’s reassuring in that way.” (Sam p. 10)

Expectations were mostly set and felt from within, although Sam also reflected upon teacher’s unintentional expectations as well as the difference between self and societal expectations on adults versus children.

“[...]the other teacher] does a really hard thing and is like, ‘Now you do it’ and we’re like, ‘I have no idea how to do that’ and you make it look really easy and don’t sometimes acknowledge that difference.” (Sam p. 16)

“I think that adults feel like they’re expected to know what they’re doing and to be good at things. So when they’re put in a situation that that is not guaranteed to be the case, it makes them uncomfortable. [...] opposed to children [...] who] are more comfortable

figuring out something as they go [...] and most people don't expect them to know what they're doing when they've never done it before." (Sam p. 14)

Sam and Taylor were both aware that they placed high standards on themselves, and that sometimes this realization could be experienced in a lighthearted way, while other times it was a source for frustration and disappointment.

"I always have really unrealistic expectations, but I know that I have those." (Taylor p. 6)

"I think I have particularly high standards for myself that are not entirely based on society or reality." (Sam p. 14)

Jordan and Chris both expressed their surprise and, or frustration when they were unable to complete something they thought they would be able to do.

"I've always been so athletic that most everything comes pretty easy to me so I thought this would as well. It did not." (Chris p. 3)

"[...] when I feel like I should be able to do something and I can't." (Jordan p. 5)

There were times participants expected to be able to complete something and discovered it was more challenging than they anticipated. Chris thought that based on past experiences, their strength would be in tumbling and unicycling and not in aerials. On the contrary, Chris wound up excelling in aerials and struggling with both unicycling and tumbling. This surprise moved in both directions as Jordan shared that on occasion they were surprised that something that looked difficult was easy when broken down.

"[...] figuring out some things in circus look hard and are kind of easy. That was surprising to me 'cause just hadn't thought about it or expected it." (Jordan p. 7)

Participants disclosed that a sense of comfort grew from observing this inability to anticipate success or failure when watching their classmates.

“I just find it kind of fascinating to see like, what people are good at and what they aren’t and that it’s not always expected or like you’re not always baseline at everything. Some things it’s like this [hand movement up and down].” (Sam p. 9)

Because the *All Things Circus* class included a wide variety of apparatus and disciplines it was common to excel in some, but not all of the activities in every class. As mentioned in *Trying, Learning, and Fun* this also meant that if frustration grew from experiencing mini failures while engaging in an activity, it was only for a limited period, because the class would rotate through several apparatus each week. This diversity meant encountering a variety of successes and failures, which in turn meant an ever-changing relationship to one’s expectations. A key support structure provided was the teacher’s ability to meet the diverse needs of each person in this ever-changing environment. Additionally, the teacher provided various entry points, and encouraged students to self-assess and act on their own behalf within each class session, discipline and apparatus.

Meeting People Where They Are

“I like learning new skills that I feel like I can do.” (Jordan p. 4)

Teachers, of course, played a key role in helping students learn new things and manage expectations about themselves and the learning process. When I observed an adult class, I noted the following:

2/4/16 (Adults)

[the teacher] has an incredible way of explaining things to make them approachable and accessible to many levels. She encourages everyone in a way that is straightforward,

genuine but not doting. I say this because I find people often make somewhat of a deal when someone does something “right” and either points out or ignores when they do something “wrong.” This accentuates the judgment aspect of the process and may discourage people from challenging themselves. I’m not entirely sure how she does it, but she creates this judgment free environment that still encourages people to feel good about themselves and their connection to a something or someone and is both challenging and supportive. It is an incredible skill that I hope to learn.

As mentioned above, an important phrase most participants used was, “meet people where they are.” The teacher continuously modeled the ability to attend to minute changes and to adjust and celebrate each person’s dynamic relationship to the activity. Rather than celebrating the mastering of a skill, the teacher modeled an acknowledgement of mini successes and failures as a part of the circus experience and process of learning.

“I think for the most part we just meet people where they are. Like we get excited for the person that is not so great at it and made a little bit of progress but it’s also really cool to see someone really good at something do something really beautifully.” (Sam p. 10)

Part of “meeting people where they are” was based in the teacher’s observational skill and supportive acknowledgement of the changes.

“[the teacher] noticed everyone’s growth and attempts and was so encouraging and positive.” (Chris p. 4)

“I feel like, one of [the teacher’s] strengths is being able to really meet people. *Wherever they are*, and really celebrate them [... the teacher] celebrates every little tiny thing, but she *sees* it. (Jordon p. 10)

From my observations of a children's circus class at the circus school, here were a few examples of comments the teacher made to encourage her students:

Some great remarks from teachers to kids:

- Kid on silks- "I loved how you paused and thought about what to do."
- Very enthusiastic kid- "xxx is ready, so he'll go 1st."
- Difficulty with an activity- "Maybe it won't be today!"
- Kid who's challenged on silks- "I love your determination, great work"
- Kid not trying- "Keep your body up there, you got this!"
- Kid having a hard time doing an activity- "You're doing the hard part really well."
- Kid who is not always taking turn, but no one is annoyed- "I love how often you're practicing, it's so great!"

Chris and Taylor also pointed out that the teacher's ability to provide appropriate cues to support them as they practice new skills was also an important aspect of their experience.

"[the teacher] is so good about noticing the little things that change [...and] was really good about giving cues and direction so that these skills could be successful." (Chris p. 3)

"I feel like [the teacher] was really supportive, encouraging and really good at both giving directions [...] and gauging where people are. Giving help when needed or asking for help when needed or encouraging that in others." (Taylor p. 5)

Acknowledgement of all change was also important as it resulted in an ability to modify or offer other suggestions. This gave students permission to advocate and express their limits, interests and abilities. Participation was not limited to carry out a skill the one way it was demonstrated. Participation included having a modified version or even opting out of an activity.

“Recognition of not just the top skills and achievements but the recognition of really everything!” (Jordan p. 10)

“Giving people options of where in the scale they want to attempt something... Yeah, and not modifying things just when they’re asked for, but assuming that that will be the case and providing it regardless of people needing to ask for help.” (Sam p. 15)

“[the teacher] was really good about modifying things, or finding something else [...] I think that was a great part about circus, that it was ok if you *didn’t* want to do something [...] you can modify it to your own likes and wants.” (Taylor p. 16)

This seemed to both be a way to support the students in their changing relationships to the various activities but also in their relationships to themselves. This phrase seemed to both encourage, and give students permission to self-reflect and interact with the material, apparatus and each other based on their desire, ability to self-assess and perception of safety.

“I also like challenges. It started off as a lot of challenges, and it offers them in a safe place [...] with a spotter there and someone who knows what they’re doing. I felt safe in trying these things.” (Taylor p. 3)

For instances where students’ boundary of newness, support, ability and exertion have been met, Sam summarizes simply, “It’s hard when it’s too hard.” (Sam p. 16)

The teacher was able to meet the individual needs of the students by providing several modifications for each activity as it was being explained (i.e. practice juggling with two balls, three balls, or juggling in pairs). This simple strategy meant that students had built-in support, and a sense of control. I observed that students were given the opportunity and permission to determine what best suited how they wished to participate in any given moment. In doing so they could push themselves one moment and ease off another. The choice was theirs. This meant that

each person had a different experience with this specific activity but also with every rotation in a week and series. This resulted in a wide variety of approaches to each apparatus, in which students were subtly supported in attending to their own needs and desires.

The teacher was supportive and aware of student's struggles and strengths across the domains. They intentionally modeled and encouraged students to self-assess and respond to their present needs without judgment. The combination of the teacher's awareness, care and consideration combined with their own physical, mental, social and emotional practice, impacted students' overall psychological state.

Feeling Better

“Well it definitely helps my mood.” (Chris p. 5)

Chris clearly stated that the reason for joining the class was to use exercise and circus as a way to combat depression. Chris used circus as a preventative measure and a way to take an active role in supporting mental health. Because it was a 12-week session this initial commitment was a strategy to be accountable. It created enough external pressure to encourage Chris to come each week. It was often the only thing that they found excitement in, or looked forward to. Even if it was a struggle to get to class each week, Chris states, “Circus always made me feel better.” (Chris p. 5) Like Chris, Taylor routinely used exercise and circus as a way to improve mood.

“I definitely used exercise as I would say, as a mood enhancer [...] just so that I feel better physically and mentally both. [...] And circus is definitely, fits in as exercise.”

(Taylor p. 9)

Participants shared that having an outlet where they could be silly, have fun and be social reduced their stress.

“Having a place to be silly and hang upside down has really helped my depression. I mean life is so serious and this was a place I could not have to be so serious.” (Chris p. 6)

“[I] juggle to relieve stress [...] it’s just that you can’t pay attention to whatever thoughts are going through your head when you’re juggling.” (Taylor p. 11)

“After a stressful day at work, going to circus class and having fun is definitely an upper in many healthy ways.” (Taylor p. 10)

All four spoke of the camaraderie aspect of circus and how being in it together allowed them to take risks, whether they were physical, emotional or social.

“I think that made me understand we are all bringing our ‘stuff’ to class with us. So when everyone is so positive with each other it makes a difference.” (Chris p. 4)

Through a supportive environment, they did not feel alone in their struggles. “Some people would really have a hard time with things and people were so encouraging that it made it feel safe.” (Chris p. 4) Whereas Sam shared their thoughts on the historical aspects of circus impacting how “outsiders” (Sam p. 19) were not only accepted but also valued. “Not just inclusion, in like a “everybody’s welcome’ but like, ‘No *because* you are different, you are important”” (Sam p. 19) Sam continues, “it might have an effect on who finds circus today.”

Although they all shared feeling supported by the group, teacher and the circus community, social anxiety was common experience that Jordan, Taylor and Sam all spoke of. “People make me nervous” (Jordan p. 3) Taylor used self-talk to work through shyness “Why would I feel funny performing? These other people are just as silly as I am.” (Taylor p. 10)

“I’m really shy, and that has been really limiting for me. Circus class has definitely been one of the factors that has been helping me get out of that.” (Taylor p. 10)

Jordan and Taylor both shared how being busy, "...I need like something to do." (Jordan p. 14) and having something to do helped them feel happy. They shared their dissatisfaction with typical adult activities "I don't want to go to a bar or something like. I want something interesting to do." (Jordan p. 14) or as shared in the *Trying, Learning, and Fun* section above, "Get a bunch of adults together and play something silly instead of something serious like softball or something." (Taylor p. 13) Jordan happily states, "there is always something to do at circus." (Jordan p. 14)

For some, supporting mental health was a primary reason to join and for others, a beneficial side effect. Chris shared that participating in active things was something he has always enjoyed, but now "doing them supports my mental health." (Chris p. 2) Whether it was the exercise aspect of circus, a method to keep busy, an opportunity to be silly, or a way to connect with others the common denominator was that circus made participants feel better.

Making Friends, Making Community

The social aspect of joining the circus class played a central part of the all four participants' decision to take the class. It also became an important reason to continue. Jordan (p. 14) commented, "It's fun interacting with people in a way that's not typical kind of boring adult ways that you interact, like going out to a bar."

Sam, Chris, Jordan and Taylor all described circus as a fun, interesting and unusual place to meet people, and most assumed they would have something in common with their fellow students based on the fact they had all joined the circus.

"I was hoping to make friends, I was hoping, looking forward to that [...] I had plans like, I wanted to be friendly, and learn everyone's names and not shy like I often am in other situations." (Sam p. 3)

Although they wished to form friendships with their classmates, as was mentioned above, there was a level of social anxiety they had to overcome. Early in the introduction to circus class that I observed, adult students interacted hesitantly with both apparatus and one another. One way this manifested was through deflecting peers' praise for accomplishments in class. But trust seemed to grow over passing weeks. Concerning weeks 4 to 7 of class, I observed in my notes:

I think the group is finally loosening up, not entirely but enough to notice! It seems people are still conscientious about how well they perform in comparison to others but they smile while they try AND they enthusiastically praise a fellow student if they do something well AND that student only somewhat uncomfortably accepts the praise! [...]
Our masks are coming down, our weaknesses exposed, our strengths seen and felt, and we are all still ok. We are safe, and can laugh a little more, and grunt as we struggle through the next new activities together.

The supportive community helped them to build enough trust to help each other learn new skills.

“The class was always so supportive and willing to share their ideas or observations [...] there were a lot of times where we all help each other out. It’s really supportive.” (Chris p. 4)

Participants were aware that a goal of the teacher was to reflect the community and to support students' relationship to circus. In my observations, I noticed small ways in which the teacher helped build a shared identity and inclusive community culture. In a children's class, for instance, she would call out things like “OK circus kids, come on over.”

One participant exclaimed their appreciation of the friendliness and community aspect, and how the variety of disciplines attracted a variety of students.

“[the teacher] wasn’t looking to produce top circus performers [but] wanted it to be about the community [...] ‘This is about being here with the people who live here.’”

(Jordan p. 9)

“I think the community aspect is different and it’s one of the things I like a lot [...] everyone seems to really like each other. And because of the different disciplines, there’s different types of people. It’s not just like one body type or like, one like interest that draws people, it’s all different things.” (Sam p. 6)

Working in pairs was a common occurrence and the act of pairing off can often create tension or anxiety for many people. One of the examples that kept coming up during the interviews was how the class was divided. The teacher chose to use silly concepts that gave students an opportunity to interpret the guidelines in a way that best suited their needs. This lighthearted strategy alleviated some of the stressors that may have arisen when dividing a group. Students could reach out to someone they were more comfortable being paired with or reach out to a new person if they were seeking to meet someone they didn’t already know. These subtle supports were intentional methods to naturally support community and class cohesion while respecting each person’s autonomy.

“[The teacher] partners people up based on something you can interpret, so you have some choice in the matter but you also have a guiding thing. So it’s not just ‘Find a partner’ social anxiety time.” (Sam p. 13)

Friendships were made within the class, and a sense of community was created not only within the class but grew to include and be included within the Circus School.

“The community was great too. These classes were a great way to meet new and interesting people.” (Chris p. 1)

“I like [...] seeing the same people every week and kind of becoming a little group.”

(Jordan p. 4)

“I have made friends and that’s been really nice. [...] I can stop by and say ‘hi’ even if I don’t have a class [...] and I love helping out with the shows and stuff too. So I feel like I’m a part of the school just beyond the classes I’m taking.” (Sam p. 6)

Discussion

The disease of professionalism [...] begins when goals become more important than process, when practice becomes means rather than a source of enjoyment. Focusing on a distant goal, we never cherish the moment. We mortgage the present to make a downpayment on a future that keeps receding. The great trick is to make the pleasure of living each day our most important ‘goal.’

-Keen (1999, p. 237)

In this research project, I used participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis to learn what draws new students to join a circus class, what they experience and, what is compelling for them about the experience. To summarize: The fun aspect of circus drew participants to join a class, and helped them overcome the challenging aspects such as social anxiety, exposure and skill building. The noncompetitive culture of the school provided a welcoming environment for students who were focused more on skill building and performance as well as for those whose priority was more about a process, and overall experience. The teacher played a pivotal role in providing various entry points to skills, astute observation, and encouragement. This fostered a non-judgmental environment that encouraged self-assessment for students to establish an individualized approach to circus participation. The commitment to a 12-

week class provided a structure to establish a consistent practice, and routine social interactions that helped cultivate trust, and contributed to the culture of the school.

While students attempted to learn new skills, they were continuously faced with mini successes and failures. They also experienced success and failure as they compared their progress to the goals they created for themselves. Personality such as being a competitive person or having perfectionist tendencies influenced the goals they made as well as how they internalized the learning process. As one student stated, adults are often expected to understand and perform new skills proficiently having never tried before. This external pressure can be detrimental to participation as it sets adults up for failure, embarrassment and lack of motivation to attempt something new.

Along with the frustration of unmet expectations, participants were also regularly surprised when skills were significantly less challenging than anticipated. As was mentioned, this was partially because the teacher broke each skill down, and occasionally because some skills were easier than they appeared to be.

Just-Right-Challenge

Adults wanted to engage in fun activities, and circus was just that. Joining was voluntary and because there was little external pressure, participation stemmed from intrinsic motivation. Because of this, the foundation of circus involvement was an internal experience. The inevitable fears, risks and challenging aspects were not faced to please someone, or to provide a correct or socially acceptable response. Each individual chose to confront these challenges and chose the pace of which to do so. Through self-determination fear and other obstacles were often resolved through circus participation.

Providing a just-right-challenge, or “meeting people where they are” was an important support for participants. According to Ziviani (2015) the just-right-challenge contributes to motivation, perseverance when faced with challenge, and the perception of success. Leufstadius, Eklund and Erlandsson (2009) continue by connecting the just-right-challenge with the degree of meaning the activity holds for the individual. Evidence suggests that providing a just-right-challenge is beneficial to the relationship between the facilitator, activity and participant however achieving this is a perpetual pursuit.

Nilsson and Durkin (2014) discuss the dynamic role of the facilitator and participant to provide the just-right-challenge, and the need for vigilance, encouragement and flexible modification. They point out that a just-right-challenge is not stable and unchanging but rather a dynamic progression to finding a balance of challenge and support. Providing a just-right-challenge was a joint effort between the teacher and student. The teacher set up a supportive scenario with various entry points, and the students asserted themselves to support or challenge themselves as best fit their present needs. There were so many disciplines, apparatus, skills, and occasions to interact with them over a 12-week period that participants were not bound to create one trajectory and stick to it. Their energy level, emotional state, physical body and variable need for challenge or support determined how they interacted moment to moment. In doing so, there was a sense of impermanence.

The noncompetitive structure resulted in little to no external pressure to learn certain skills at a certain rate. Instead this was determined by the individual resulting in a variation of approaches that were all equally represented and valued. Participants experienced less stress because they were empowered to reflect, self-assess and determine their approach. This also meant that external pressures due to comparisons between classmates, or anyone else was their

own making. Students had to untangle the relationship they had with competition, perfection, and speed at which they learned and how this compared to the short-term and long-term goals *they* established.

As one student noted, circus was not void of competition because of the human element, but they internalized the noncompetitive culture, and interpreted it to avoid interpersonal competition and to make conscious decisions on how it was integrated into their personal practice. Students primarily shared they used internal competition as a motivational tool to get them past a hurdle or bring them closer to their goals. In a phenomenological study of noncompetitive physical activity within the youth population, Christiana (2014) states, “Noncompetitive activities may naturally possess greater intrinsic qualities than competitive sports such as freedom, choice, and personal enjoyment that may develop during childhood and carry into adulthood.”

During noncompetitive activities, the individuals determine the degree and type of participation. Participation is malleable and set by the individual rather than adhering to the predetermined physical, behavioral and social rules set by others in competitive activities. Similar to children, adults may also benefit from unstructured play physically, behaviorally, psychologically and emotionally. “[Unstructured play] can cultivate a range of social and emotional capabilities such as empathy, flexibility, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Such capabilities, sometimes referred to together as ‘emotional intelligence,’ are essential for successful social interactions in adult life” (Burdette & Whitaker, p. 48, 2005). Noncompetitive activities shift the power from the outside (teacher, coach, referee) to the inside (participant) and in doing so the participant constantly determines the level and type of engagement. Doing so may increase motivation, meaning and generalizability. In comparison with competitive

activities, circus participation may hold more intrinsic properties, more meaning and overall influence on all areas of life.

Because of the diversity in people and in disciplines, there was always someone struggling and someone excelling. In time, the ranking, judgment and relationship to success and failure became less important, less defining. Students are desensitized to the external pressure, and were able to attend to the process and relationship they have to the apparatus, prop or themselves. The anticipated trajectory of ease of performing a new skill was inconsistent both for the self and for others. This visual feedback was comforting and curious to the students, and helped build camaraderie and develop a lighthearted response to achievement and expectation.

The teacher provided a range of entry points into each activity, and shared keen observations of students' physical, social, mental, and emotional responses and interactions. In doing so, the definition of participation expanded to include more than the physicality. This acknowledgment encouraged students' to adopt a more holistic view of participation and performance, and increased students' internal validation and awareness of being multidimensional. This contributed to creating a culture of trust and sense of belonging within the class, school and circus community.

The context of a fun and supportive context allowed people to confront challenge in a positive mood. As Kakko, Karkkola, Kekalainen, and Honkanen (2013) mention, this contributes to success and transfers to other aspects of life. Through challenge and taking safe and measured risks, people were better able to trust and build confidence in themselves and others. Through games, icebreakers and humor, the teacher fostered opportunities for students to comfortably interact with each other. In time, the highs, lows and continual exposure within a supportive environment created a trust within oneself and each other. As trust grew, so did students

willingness to try new things socially, physically and emotionally. Guards were relinquished and trust developed into confidence. Confidence in each other, and in oneself gave rise to camaraderie, friendship and community.

Circus as Health Promotion

Based on research, improved self-awareness, confidence, and self-esteem have been outcomes from circus participation. Increased opportunity for social interaction also played a role in developing a sense of security, and how one fits into a broader community. The reliable and supportive structure has enabled students to confidently work through challenges. To summarize, the positive benefits of circus participation on motivation, personal growth, social interaction, participation, and physical and mental wellbeing impact all areas of life.

Blomfield and Barber (2009) found higher rates of self-worth and social self-concepts for those who participated in a combination of sport and non-sport activities. Although this introspection and positive psychological impact are important to note, the study by Fournier et al. (2014) suggests how this information is relevant to life outside of circus. Fournier et al. found that circus supported people's ability to determine what was an internal or external pressure, and gave them the authority to make choices rather than unconsciously follow the path of least resistance, or to relinquish their choice to others. In an adult population, it is most advantageous when people are invested in whatever they are participating in. Knowledge, self-awareness, assessment and potential for change are supports that increase intrinsic motivation and therefore the potential for growth, therapeutic benefit, within the circus environment as well as life outside of circus. The benefits from circus participation may be specifically pertinent to adults because it provided a fun, accessible, individualized way to dissect, understand and be accountable for one's internal and external choices. By doing this in a safe and supportive setting, adults were

able to practice leaving their comfort zone, self-assess and more accurately respond to and represent their multifaceted and ever-changing existence and overall increase their quality of life.

The findings in the present study were similar to many of the benefits in Rixom's (2012) research on mental health and trapeze. Although briefly mentioned in the present study's results section, the reliable structure and commitment to a 12-week session provided a framework that students valued as a motivation to come to class and overcome the internal and external obstacles that emerged weekly. In both studies, participants' self-esteem, motivation and ability to overcome fear all improved within the reliable structure that circus provided. The challenges of confronting the spectrum of success and failure constantly shifted within the physical, social, cognitive and emotional domains. This minimized judgment, increased camaraderie and satisfaction with their relationship with themselves, to each other and with the various circus disciplines.

It was surprising that the physicality of circus did not play a larger part in participants' reflections of their experience as they did in the 2015 study by Kiez. There was some dialog about enjoying getting stronger, more flexible, and physically capable. One participant mentioned their excitement in learning to do a cartwheel, as it was something they had never mastered before. Physical literacy was a backdrop to the experiences rather than the forefront.

Circus as Therapy

Drawing from the present study, personal experience, formal observation, and conversation, adult participation in circus tapped into the therapeutic realm whether or not the school, teacher or students intended it to do so. Circus participation addressed multiple domains and welcomed the possibility for students to shift their approach to best meet their needs. The teacher intentionally created a safe environment to self-assess, take risks, explore and for

students to feel supported in their acquisition of new skills. These strategies were then modeled by the class to create a culture of support.

Although circus directly supported some participants' mental health through exercise and social interaction, it also supported it indirectly as well. For some circus was an intentional tool to address depression, and social anxiety. For others, it was a less intentional aspect of circus participation. Having a physical and social outlet to be less serious, and engage in more interesting activities than typically available to adults relieved stress and elevated participants' moods.

The teacher drew from circus philosophy and methodology to establish a culture that inspired people to playfully engage in skill building and creative, inclusive expressions. "Meeting people where they are," was an important phrase to exemplify acceptance of each person's relationship to circus, learning and all associated interactions. This related to the comprehensive intentional support circus provided, socially, physically, emotionally and cognitively.

The participants in the present study shared how circus improved their physical and mental health through exercise, fun and social interaction. They faced fears, failure, unexpected outcomes along with success, confidence and surprising growth. The teacher provided supports such as a variety of ways to participate and interact with an activity and encouraged them to self-assess and provided opportunities to make decisions that best suited their individual needs. From the first class, students were given enough structure to have direction but the agency to explore, create and engage in circus that was a portrayal of who they were, what their interests were, and their desire to participate.

Circus and Occupational Therapy

Cole (2012) defines community health as “the physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing of a group of people who are linked together in some way, possibly through geographical proximity or shared interest.” According to Cole (2012), when in a community-based setting, occupational therapists must shift from following the medical model and taking a more directive stance to assuming the role of facilitator and educator. In community settings, occupational therapists focus interventions on social and environmental factors. Further still are organizations, programs and schools that are open and accessible to the public. “Clubs are examples of community within community. They offer the child, the adolescent and the adult structures that support and encourage their cognitive and social development. In this way, they provide the potential for powerful interventions” (Fazio, 2008, p. 342). To truly be a community-based organization all people must have access, and again this points to yet another strength of Circus. Woodhead and Duffy (1998) reported the school-based circus program Circus West, benefited the students, the school and the community at large. Historically, circus has been a refuge for people who may not have been welcomed in society, and because of this there was an innate sensitivity and awareness of accessibility. Whether it was through adapting activities or providing safe entry, circus was a community within a community that had an intrinsic motivation to welcome all people.

Circus already has programs around the world targeting at risk populations including women who have survived abuse, people who have been incarcerated, refugees, people living in poverty, rural and inner city populations, and those who are cancer survivors (e.g., Suzanne Rappaport’s Circus for Survivors program, Cirque du Monde’s social circus program for at-risk youth, and Women’s Circus, a social circus program for survivors of sexual violence).

Occupational therapy and Circus can collaborate, use each others strengths and expertise so they do not have to reinvent the wheel. Maglio and McKinstry (2008, p. 290) states, “A collaborative intervention focused on a community provides a more effective and sustainable way of building healthier communities.” Circus and occupational therapy can collectively work for occupational justice, for inclusivity, empowerment, connection, play and increase quality of life.

People’s predisposition based on their individual definitions of circus can easily result in dismissing it as a viable arena for therapeutics. Because there are no structures or certifications legitimizing it as such, and minimal research supporting its efficacy, circus would greatly benefit from being affiliated with a respected and professionally recognized therapeutic profession such as occupational therapy. Occupational therapy can not only add credibility through affiliation but also through scholarship. This relationship would also have potential to directly impact how circus organizations structure and teach. Through activity analysis, environmental assessments teachers and administrators can rely on the knowledge occupational therapists have of applicable legislation, ergonomics, and insurance. This also creates a potential to adopt a shared language and structure to facilitate process of grading skills, providing a just-right-challenge and maximizing inclusivity.

Through activity analyses, occupational therapists already have a well developed, detailed method of analyzing the physical aspects that make up any given activity. However, the remaining domains are not as represented in terms of concrete analyses. From work and education, to sleep and play, nearly every occupation people routinely engage in has a social element. As was demonstrated in research as well as the present study, social interactions are a key element in circus participation. As such, it would be beneficial for occupational therapists to use their expertise to develop and use a social activity analysis. In doing so, occupational

therapists would better understand and translate what is essential to the task and what areas could be better supported.

Occupational therapy can benefit from the preexisting community base, and safe space that naturally challenges and supports physical, social and psychological aspects of the human experience. Circus already has set up an intrinsically motivating environment and occupational therapists can conduct activity analyses and, or use professional expertise to provide therapeutic intervention in a safe, playful, and supportive setting. This addresses the unnatural environments occupational therapists typically use when working with the adult population. Occupational therapy values finding ways to support wellbeing in several areas using one activity. Circus may offer an effective time management strategy, but also a holistic approach to therapeutic intervention. Other strengths circus has to offer to the field of occupational therapy are regarding accessibility, inclusivity and a broad definition of participation. In a community context, occupational therapy can learn a lot about how circus relates to, and models success, failure and judgment.

Circus and occupational therapy have potential to benefit from a shared partnership. However, because occupational therapy is driven by evidence-based interventions, the lack of research in the circus setting is currently a hindrance in the further development of this relationship. This potential for therapeutic benefit and lack of research supports the need to explore why adults participate in circus classes and how this participation affects them across various domains.

Conclusion

Observations and interviews with adult students in an Upstate New York community circus enabled me to explore a number of aspects of the circus experience. Through this

experience, I realized how exceptional the Circus School was in fostering a deep sense of trust and belonging. The teacher's attention and acknowledgement of details in, and outside of the physicality of circus helped students feel valued. Success and failure were met with an awareness, not judgment. There was a sense of impermanence that sanctioned the potential for change, growth, or creative expression. Because the class incorporated so many disciplines and apparatus, there was always something that people excelled in, and other things they struggled with. This reinforced a non-judgmental culture both externally and internally. It created a safe environment for students to grow accustomed to feeling vulnerable in exposing their strengths and weaknesses. Prolonged exposure liberated participants to immerse themselves within the activity. In doing so, participants went from restrained self-conscious participation to an assured self-aware participation.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Domain of Occupational Therapy

<i>OCCUPATIONS</i>	<i>CLIENT FACTORS</i>	<i>PERFORMANCE SKILLS</i>	<i>PERFORMANCE PATTERNS</i>	<i>CONTEXTS AND ENVIRONMENTS</i>
Activities of daily living (ADLs)* Instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs) Rest and sleep Education Work Play Leisure Social participation	Values, beliefs, and spirituality Body functions Body structures	Motor skills Process skills Social interaction skills	Motor skills Process skills Social interaction skills	Cultural Personal Physical Social Temporal Virtual
*Also referred to as basic activities of daily living (BADLs) or personal activities of daily living (PADLs).				

Exhibit 1. Aspects of the domain of occupational therapy. All aspects of the domain transact to support engagement, participation, and health. This exhibit does not imply a hierarchy Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (2014, p. S4)

Interview Guide

Intro/Basics

- What brought you to “Circus School”?
- How long have you been participating in circus? How many classes?
- **Were there any barriers to cross in order to take a class? How did you overcome them?**

Expectations and Commonalities

- What were your expectations? Were they met?
- What was surprising?
- Is circus similar to anything you have participated in? How so? How is it different?
- Does circus “fill a gap” in your life? What and how?

Changes and Preference

- **Tell me about your experience on your first class. What about now? What has changed or stayed the same?**
- What are your favorite parts? Explain
- What are your least favorite? Explain

Is there anything else you want to say about changes you've experienced, before we go on to talk about intentions and meaning you have found by participating in class?

+/- Meaning & Intention

- What are some meaningful moments and why?
- What has been challenging?
- What has been supportive?

Is there anything else you want to say about intentions and meaning, before we go on to talk about how circus has impacted you?

Change

- **Has Circus produced some kind of change in your life? Can you tell me about that?**
- **Have other people noticed anything different?**
- **Circus Class asks people to try a lot of new things, how was this for you? Did it impact your life in other ways?**
- **How did you feel in a non-competitive class?**

There are so many ways that participating in circus could change how a person thinks or feels. They might be physical, mental, emotional and or spiritual...
What ways has circus changed or drawn attention to these parts of your life and how?
Here's a list of areas that might get you thinking... they may or may not be relevant to your experience and please share others that pertain to your experience!

- Trust (self and others)/ Social interaction
- Self-concept/ Self-worth
- **Willingness to leave comfort zone/ Take risks (physical, social, emotional, mental)**
- **Criticism (of self and others) and Self-assessment**
- Initiation/ voice needs and desires/ Communication (verbal, physical)
- Emotions and Mood (anxiety, pride, liberation, frustration, joy, depression, vulnerability)
- Comfort with touch
- **Acceptance (of self and others)**
- Problem solving...
- Prioritizing "me time"/ relationship with and importance of Play

What haven't we touched on, are there other areas that circus has made an impression?

Transference

- **Are the affects of circus something that impacts your life only while in class? If they transfer to other areas of life, in what ways?**

Accessibility

- Who do you think could benefit from circus participation? In what ways?
- Who do you think would be harmed? How and why?

Suggestion

- **In what ways could circus be (more) supportive?**

Future

- **Do you expect to continue participating in circus classes? Why?**

Highlights/ Additions

- **This has been an informative session and I have a couple of more questions still, but before we wind it up, can you tell me what you would most like me to remember?**
- During this interview, what are the most important areas you have identified and shared? (biggest take-aways)

Meaning

Some people have joined “circus school” for exploratory reasons and some for specific reasons... did you have any particular reason?

Identity

- **How far away do you live from Downtown?**
- **How many years has it been since you were last attending High School or University?**
- **How old are you?**
- **What is your socioeconomic bracket?**
- **How do you racially identify?**

Confidentiality

Make up your own codename or nickname!

What have we missed... are there other thoughts you would like to share?

*Thank you so much!

Appendix C – Research Consent Form



Department of Occupational Therapy **Research Consent Form**

Research Title:

Exploring the Experiences of Adults Participating in Community Circus Classes: The Synergistic Relationship Between Circus and Occupational Therapy

Overview of the Research:

This study is about what motivates adults to participate in a circus class and how participating affects their lives.

Who are the participants?

Adults who are at least 21 years of age and who have participated in at least 10 circus classes at XXXXXXXX.

Voluntary Participation

Participating in our research study is voluntary. It is not required by XXXXXXXX. You may leave the research study at any time. Nothing will happen to you if you decide not to participate in the research study.

Risks and Benefits

I do not believe there are significant risks involved in participating in this study. You may feel uncomfortable sharing some of your ideas or experiences. You may always “pass” on a topic you do not wish to discuss.

There are no direct benefits to taking part in this study. You may enjoy discussing your experiences with others. I hope to learn more about adults’ experiences of participating in group physical activity, and I hope to share what we learn with others.

What You Will Be Asked to Do

If you volunteer for this research, you will be asked to take part in a 30-90 minute one-on-one interview as well as a 15-30 minute follow up ensuring I was able to understand and summarize what you shared. In this discussion, you will share about your experiences of circus class, for example about what got you interested in taking part, what classes are like, and how taking part

affects your goals and other parts of your life. The interview will take place at a place of your choosing and at a convenient time.

Privacy

Your privacy will be maintained throughout the study and in all published and written data resulting from this study. We will not use your name or other details that would identify you.

Audiotape Permission

Individual interviews will be audio recorded. Recordings will be used only for research purposes. They will not be shared publicly. Only members of the research team will have access to the recordings. During the interview, you may ask for the recording to be stopped at any point.

Questions

If I have any additional questions, I may call or email Jessica Shurberg, Occupational Therapy Student at Utica College, at xxxxxxxx or Professor Denise Nepveux, Faculty Advisor to this research, at xxxxxxxxxx.

Consent

I have been given an opportunity to ask any questions regarding this study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

By signing this document, the subject waives no legal rights. If you agree to participate in this research please sign this form.

SIGNATURE

DATE

Appendix D – Participant Demographics

Pseudo-nym	Years post formal education	Number of <i>ATC</i> classes attended	Number of other circus classes attended	Proximity to Circus School	Age	Racial Identification	Number of children	Socio-economic Status
Chris	2 years	12	18	10 minute walk	31	white	None	Middle class
Jordan	13 years	30	0	10 minute walk	36	Asian-American	None	Middle class
Sam	3 years	30	~6	5 minute bike	25	white	None	Upper lower class to lower middle class
Taylor	19 years	22	12	4 miles	36	white	Two	Upper lower class to lower middle class