

Streetwise Community Circus CIC

National Autistic Society Project Evaluation

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Streetwise Community Circus
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Summary:

From October 2011 to June 2012 Streetwise Community Circus CIC (hereafter SCC) ran a program of circus workshops with a group of young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) through partnership with the National Autistic Society (hereafter NAS). The sessions were part funded by the National Lottery, through the Arts Council for Northern Ireland, and part funded by our partners NAS. The project was one of several projects being delivered by SCC throughout Northern Ireland at the time, including Newtownabbey, Cookstown, Antrim, Magherafelt, Belfast, and Lisburn.

These projects were each a part of SCC's broader focus on providing circus workshops to individuals living with disabilities. The aims and objectives of these projects include:

- To introduce to new groups the benefits of circus skills
- To enhance circus skills levels
- To have a positive impact on health
- To promote inclusion
- To enhance self esteem
- To form new relationships between the arts, health, and community sectors
- To promote an increased acceptance of disabled people in our society

This evaluation explores how, and to what extent these aims and objectives were met on the NAS project. In addition, the evaluation includes discussions regarding other valuable information pertinent to the impact of this project that was not connected to the stated aims and objectives. The report is based on analysis of data collected via questionnaire and informal interviews with participants on the project (performers), parents/carers of the performers, SCC tutors involved on the project, and NAS support staff.

The collection of data on this project was largely ethnographic in nature, as the author was also the lead tutor on the project. As such I combine information collected from all parties with my own observations and analysis as an informed participant.

This evaluation also explains how SCC utilise the philosophy of social circus, and contains a section on the potential benefits of using this approach with individuals with ASDs more generally. This latter section is based on observations of this project alone, but will certainly provide a few pertinent questions for future, broader research into this area.

What is social circus?

Streetwise Community Circus works under a philosophy of **social circus**. But this philosophy can be difficult to define precisely, as there are so many practitioners within this sphere who define the boundaries of the term in different ways. For some, social circus is a form of therapy, for others it focusses solely on young people at risk; some may even say that circus projects that work with individuals with disabilities are not social circus programmes at all. Some social circus programmes focus on specific areas of training – e.g. aerial or acrobatics, whereas some, like SCC's projects, tend to focus more on the balance and equilibristic disciplines, such as juggling and stilt-walking. Some may suggest that the idea of a performance is detrimental to a social circus programme as it puts too much pressure on the participants. Whilst the diversity within the approach is often confusing, it is also one of the approaches strengths! Streetwise Community Circus generally accepts the following definition to be one of the clearer examples of defining this global movement:

Social circus is an innovative social intervention approach based on the circus arts. It targets various at-risk groups living in precarious personal and social situations, including street or detained youth and women survivors of violence.

*In this approach, the **primary** goal is not to learn the circus arts, but rather to assist with participants' personal and social development by nurturing their self-esteem and trust in others, as well as by helping them to acquire social skills, become active citizens, express their creativity and realize their potential.*

Social circus is a powerful catalyst for creating social change because it helps marginalized individuals assume their place as citizens within a community and enrich that community with their talents.¹

The way that SCC use the idea of social circus in relation to its work with individuals living with disabilities, is by designing programmes that use circus skills as a means through which a variety of social and developmental goals can be met. Thus, the tools may be the same as those seen in any circus school or circus performance around the world – juggling clubs and balls, diablos, unicycles etc., and many of the methods for teaching may indeed be the same (in principle – see section below on adaptive techniques), the goals for social circus programmes have a more applied social focus. We do not teach individuals circus skills just for the sake of learning circus skills (as would a recreational juggler), or in order for them to become professional performers (although that option is open to any of our participants), we use circus skills as a tool to meet the aims and objectives of our projects as stated above.

While SCC recognises that there are opportunities for circus arts to be used in a therapeutic context, this is not one of the current objectives of the group. As such, we do not claim to be therapists who can treat any specific individual, our aims lie more in the social realm of self-belief, confidence, learning how to learn, resilience, and to some extent physical fitness. SCC believes that this social

¹ La Fortune, M (2011), *Community Worker's Guide: When Circus Lessons Become Life Lessons*, Montreal: Cirque Du Soleil.

circus philosophy is a powerful tool for improving the lives of individuals living with disabilities in our communities.

Introduction

The National Autistic Society (NAS) is *“the leading UK charity for people with autism (including Asperger syndrome) and their families. [They] provide information, support and pioneering services, and campaign for a better world for people with autism”*². Streetwise Community Circus CIC (SCC) is a community arts company specialising in teaching circus skills. Since 2002 they have been developing social circus programmes designed specifically to teach circus and performance skills to people with intellectual and/or learning disabilities. SCC provided 18 workshops with NAS culminating in a showcase event at a public event in Newtownabbey in June 2012. Two of our participants also performed very successfully at an event in the Braid Centre in Ballymena as part of Autism Awareness Day, 4th April 2012.

The workshops included individuals with a range of behaviours and levels of communication. Skills that were taught included: juggling, unicycle, stilts, flower stick, poi, diabolo, spinning plates and hat manipulation. SCC provided 3 tutors for each session, which usually ran for 1 ½ hours, and this tutor team remained fairly constant throughout, with only occasional replacements made due to illness. We found that this continuity served to strengthen a good working relationship between the participants, their families and the tutor team.

Although at the early stage of the project NAS ensured a staff presence of one form or another – often 2 or 3 staff members would be present at some stage in the workshop, this was not maintained. And for the majority of the project, support was provided solely by families and carers. It is not certain whether this had any impact on the success of the project, as the support from families on the ground was extensive, but it may be beneficial to establish a clearly defined relationship with our client organisations in future, to enable clients to understand their role in this kind of project.

Following feedback from previous projects with other clients, the planning of this project with NAS was clarified amongst tutors and expressed to participants and their families. In addition, each workshop was planned according to the stage of the project. The project was broadly split into 3 stages:

- Stage 1: Introducing all the circus skills
- Stage 2: Developing a favourite circus skill
- Stage 3: Developing and rehearsing a routine

In Stage 1 all participants were encouraged to try any and all of the skills that we offered in the workshop. Tutors were on hand to show participants how things worked, what kind of results could be achieved with a little practice, and how to ensure the props were used effectively and safely. Often we would come together as a group and try the same skill, but more often individuals worked on a skill on a one-to-one basis with tutors and/or family member. Throughout this stage, tutors were looking for the prop/skill that each individual really connected with, and we sought feedback from the participants to see which skill they thought they would like to develop further and possibly choose as a showcase skill.

² <http://www.autism.org.uk/>

Stage 2 saw the development of that skill and a focus on learning new tricks and beginning to develop a series of tricks into a routine. As the group was quite small, we were fortunate enough to have the time to develop a second 'back up skill', that could be practised in case the primary skill became boring or frustrating. For many, this was perhaps the most frustrating stage, as it became increasingly apparent that more focussed individual practice was needed to develop their circus skills. However, Streetwise tutors worked well with family members and carers to encourage this practice and develop a range of fun and effective ways to maintain concentration levels (see discussion on 'adaptive techniques' below)

By stage 3 we had established a level of competence in at least one circus skill amongst every participant. As such, in the final few weeks tutors focussed on developing these acquired skills into a performance piece. This development involved communicating with each performer to inspire them to show an audience what they liked about their chosen skill, rather than impose a set routine upon each performer. We encouraged discussion about costume choices, musical accompaniment, and character development. Throughout this stage tutors were engaged in a continuous level of evaluation and appraisal that enabled us to produce a final showcase event on June 9th 2012 at Lillian Bland Park, Newtownabbey³.



³ An edited video of this performance can be seen online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7b5THiZfTQ&list=UUcCrSFVej1FuxuBLIdnVhEQ&index=29>

Feedback from Tutors

Feedback was sought from tutors throughout the life of this project, as informal evaluation sessions after each workshop. The tutor team was consistent throughout the project, and from my own observations I was impressed as to how much thought each tutor put into their work. One of the difficulties of this project was knowing when *not* to teach; tutors are often under pressure to be seen to be doing something all the time, but developing circus skills also takes a good deal of personal practice. I feel that the tutor team on this project found the balance between helping, teaching and allowing for personal practice time, without pushing too hard that the performers lost interest in their skills, or being too indifferent leaving performers with no assistance at all.

Planning:

Both tutors stated that they were aware of the aims and objective of the project and that the project was well planned most of the time.

As lead tutor this is encouraging, and I felt that my tutor team were working towards the aims and objectives throughout the life of the project.

Process:

Both tutors agreed that there was adequate support for their creative process, group dynamics were met to ensure fair participation for all participants, and that the participants engaged positively in the sessions. With regards to the key issues on practicalities of running a workshop the following comments were made:

For me it was finding new ways of explaining things and getting things to stick in the clients head

Finding the best way of communicating with the participants to help them open up and enjoy the project (an issue I believed we achieved and overcame)

Clearly developing communication skills was a benefit seen by tutors as well as participants. In my own experience, the training provided by NAS was crucial to this. Following our training session I found myself becoming much clearer in my instruction, and allowing more time between sentences, and this had a direct impact on my teaching. I also found that working with parents and carers in the room was beneficial, as we could often rely on them to reiterate what we were saying, or ask them for help when practicing.

Outputs:

- How would you describe the artistic quality of the project?

It was quite high giving the time we actually got to practice for. Two participants came up with [routines] pretty much entirely on their own.

Excellent, the input came from both the tutor and participants which helped in them getting into it more as they felt more like it as their project and they had some input and control

This is crucial to our role as social circus tutors, allowing our performers the time to create, rather than impose routines upon them. In this case we dealt with some highly creative individuals who now had a new form of expression and used it to great effect.

- How was this measured?

With the resulting show, from talking to parents and people who saw the show

The quality of the showcase itself is an important part of the process, but is often difficult to express. Our aim as social circus tutors is not to produce a high quality show at any cost, but we are also aware that we are not going to lower our expectations simply because we are dealing with individuals with ASDs. Our aim as an organisation is to produce a showcase that reflects the fun and enthusiasm displayed by our performers throughout the process, and to incorporate their own interpretation of skills and the creativity they have developed. By being aware of this ethos throughout the process our tutors are better enabled to assist our participants to create a performance that should be as entertaining as it is empowering.

- How would you describe the impact of this project to the participants?

The project helped the participants open up, let them be creative, social and improved self-esteem

In some cases massive. One of the participants was unable to eat breakfast before school due to nerves. Now he can. Others made new friends. Parents were very pleased with the outcome.

The results described here fit well within the wider context and ethos of social circus; using circus skills that can help transform the lives of the participants on a higher level than simply learning new skills. It also suggests that SCC's tutors are actually aware of the broader impacts of social circus and are able to identify where they occur – which is very important.

Both tutors stated that this was measured through talking to parents and participants, reflecting the high levels of communication and trust developed between tutors, performers and parents/carers.

- What did you learn from this project that you will use for future projects? E.g. teaching methods, adapting props, interpersonal skills etc.

I think I learnt some good basic interaction skills with people on the [autism] spectrum, as in how you give instructions and how they perceive them

Finding out as much as possible about the participants as it helps build trust and communications open easier – e.g. that they are colour blind or not

Once again, this reflects that tutors are aware of the values necessary to be a good social circus tutor – in addition to any technical circus skills and teaching skills. I believe that training delivered by NAS helped with the area of communication, and a commitment to the project helped to establish a good working relationship with both performers and parents. The issue of colour blindness relates to a

technique I had devised to assist with a juggling pattern with one individual. After noticing that the individual was having problems maintaining a particular passing pattern with juggling balls using left and right hands, I suggested using 3 distinctly coloured balls, and reiterating the rhythm of the pattern by calling out the colour of the balls as they were being thrown – red, yellow, blue, red, yellow, blue After a number of weeks of trial and error, we were informed by the parent that this performer had no understanding of the concept of colour, and any improvement was purely coincidental. Sometimes it is good to know that certain techniques do not work for every individual.

- Any other comments

Really enjoyed this project and hope to do another one like it soon

Workshops were well run and had a relaxed and open environment for learning which helped the project run smoothly and didn't make anyone feel pressured e.g. towards the show

My own reflections of this project mirror many of the comments made by my tutor team. I believe that the most helpful aspect of these sessions was the support of the families in attendance. As this was quite a small group it was often difficult to find a balance between working with an individual for a length of time, and allowing them time to practice on their own. Often, a tutor may find it frustrating that an individual stops working as soon as they are left on their own, but hesitant to stay with them for fear of not giving them time to develop their own skills, or neglecting other participants. What was excellent about the family support here was that tutors could leave individuals to practice with their family members. It was also very useful to have family support and expertise on hand to suggest how best to approach certain individuals, and to know what would and would not necessarily work with them. This was always done in an open and encouraging way – family members never suggested that any of the participants should not be encouraged to try anything, which is a problem we have faced in previous projects, where the limitations of an individual are foregrounded over the individuals potential abilities.



Feedback from families

The following information has been gathered from parents of the performers via questionnaire and interviews.

How did you get involved in the project, and why?

All of the families involved were contacted via NAS, none of the participants actively sought out a circus program. Several parents referred to a lack of real information about what the classes were going to involve, but were generally very pleased with the process.

Information about circus teaching came to us from NAS, it sounded exciting and different from the usual classes on offer. We didn't really know what to expect but were pleasantly surprised by the relaxed atmosphere and encouragement

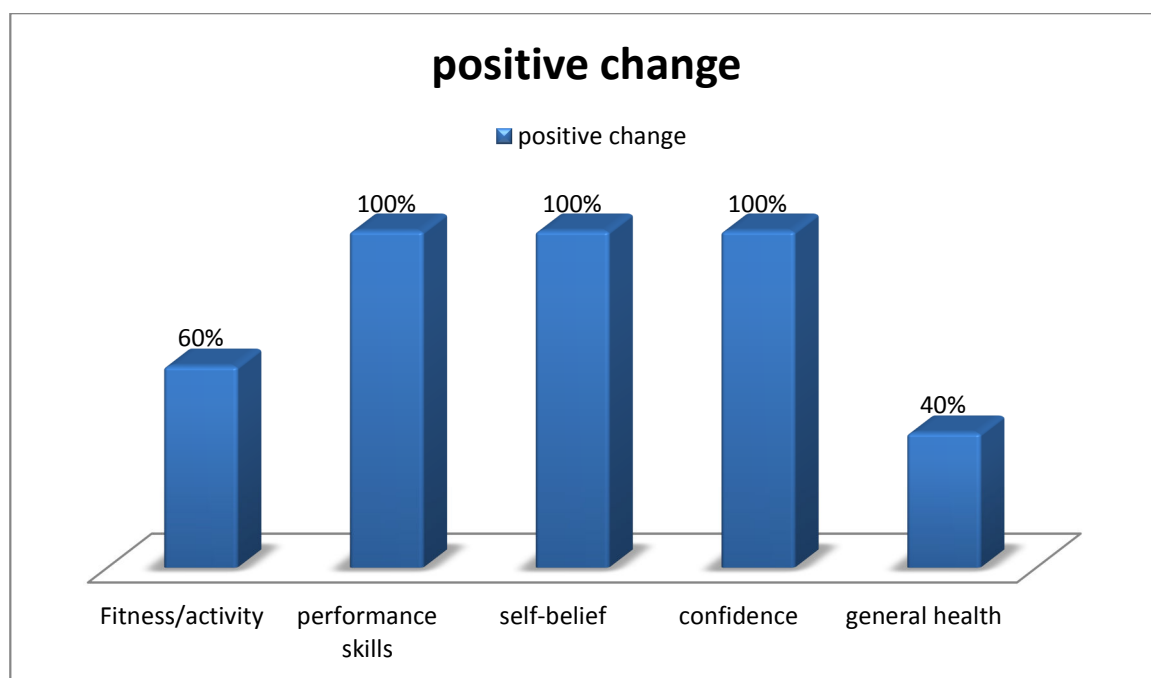
It sounded like a great way for my son to meet new people and learn new skills and have fun as he does not normally socialise with mainstream peers

One of the participants had taken part in a circus workshop hosted by NAS as part of a summer scheme, and one participant had a family member who had done some circus skills in the past, but none had taken part in a sustained project of any length, and most of the participants had no idea what to expect from a circus workshop.

We weren't sure what to expect, when we first arrived it seemed very sparse ... but X's level was catching a ball; that was his skill. Once I got my head around that, it was sufficient. You didn't need the 'ra ra', just the ball and the hoop to practice with.

Perhaps this is a point to consider in future workshops. To some extent the mystery of a circus workshop is part of its appeal – what is it? Will I like it? Etc. But does this mystery preclude some potential participants from coming? Do the negative stereotypes of circus – the freak show, the need for physical strength, the pre-requisite acrobatic or juggling skills needed – outweigh the positive reality of a social circus project? Without getting feedback from people who do not attend a circus project, it is difficult to say for sure, but the amount of pertinent information passed on to potential participants should certainly be a consideration for future projects.

Have you noticed any changes (positive or negative) in the following elements, as a direct result of participating in the project?



It seems clear from these results that the key area of impact upon the participants has been in the development of self-belief, confidence and self-esteem.

He has become more confident in himself and performing in front of others has been a major breakthrough as he would never stand up in front of others before as lacks confidence. He even went to his school formal and did a solo "Gangnam style" dance and before doing the circus project he would never had the self-belief or confidence to do it

This project has clearly been successful with regards to the aim of developing confidence.

However, measuring this with any certainty or quantitative proof is not without its difficulties – in particular in the context of ASDs. I spoke with the mother of one of the less verbal participants regarding her observations of the impact of this project, and in particular the impact that performing in public had on her son:

X showed emotion – embarrassment, pride, etc. especially in Ballymena. He was very proud of himself and showed self-esteem in his own way. He felt a part of something and he trusted us. He trusted us to take him backstage, he trusted what we would do with him, and he trusted Glenn enough to go with him. He wasn't totally ga – ga, he did have a sense he was on show

Again, with the caveat that our circus tutors do not hold a more intimate understanding of autism generally, it is fair to say that displaying emotion and trusting other people was another positive outcome of this project.

What other activities have the participants taken part in that compare to this circus project?

All the responses here inferred that the circus project was unique. Several participants attend other social groups, but none have the same elements that the circus had.

He doesn't really do anything else, he's just started this autism initiative thing, but it's more going out and socialising. He doesn't really do any sport

Nothing comparable. We go to various clubs and outings but nothing like the circus project

What do you think makes the circus project unique?

We wanted to know more about why circus seems to have had such an impact on this small population. There are a number of theories as to why and how social circus works in a variety of contexts, but I think that the responses here speak for themselves:

I think it's that everybody could go and join in, it's different from any other thing. He seemed to enjoy it, he fitted in.

It's a rare opportunity to learn unique skills.

Combination of skills and confidence building

The staff and their patience and understanding of the difficulties the children have and the ability to bring out the best in them. The fun aspect and learning new skills and not just the kids - the parents as well. The showcase was a great experience and enjoyed by everyone. The fact that the project ran long term and wasn't just a one-off workshop this gave the chance to improve skills confidence and opportunities to socialise

In short, a combination of the unique nature of circus – the fact that it appears unusual or outside of mainstream sports/activities, combined with a professional and empathetic attitude from staff seems to be the ideal combination of a successful circus project. This supports my own personal thesis that social circus projects always have the potential to have a powerful impact by their very nature, but need to be managed and delivered competently in order for that potential to be fulfilled.

Was the project managed successfully by Streetwise staff?

The response to this was a resounding yes. And I am very proud of my tutor team in this respect.

The sessions were fun, communication was good on the nights, the venue suitable and Nick's cake delicious⁴

As this project included a range of individuals with various behaviours it was often difficult to attain the right balance between accepting certain traits and focussing on developing circus skills and showcase routines. However, I think that with the help of the parents/carers this was largely successful.

⁴ Although not a traditional or integral part of any circus project, we did develop a penchant for baked goods throughout this project, and parents and tutors took it in turns to provide homemade cakes and buns each week.

The structure and timing of the workshops seemed to have been well managed. We developed a structure over the course of the project that suited all participants; allowing several opportunities for inclusion or private time/space. As participants arrived we greeted them and let them get settled, some chose to come in and get practicing straight away, others took the opportunity to have a chat. Once the majority were present, we had an opening meeting; sharing news and outlining a plan for the session, letting people know where we were in the life of the project etc. Following this we had a physical warm-up – which was often led by participants themselves.

The rest of the session was organised according to which stage of the project we were in, earlier sessions were much freer and more fluid, whilst those heading towards the showcase were more structured as rehearsals. Each session we assigned tutors to participants. This was largely due to the small numbers involved, and we didn't want to appear to 'over teach' – In early stages we found that if a tutor wanted to give a participant some space to practice they were keen to appear to be working and so would approach another participant with some advice on what they were practicing; advice which may have been in opposition to the advice they had only recently been given by another tutor! By having an informal 'learning plan' for each performer, which was explained at the opening meeting, all tutors were made aware of their own responsibilities, and the 'over teaching' issue was resolved.

At the end of each session participants were given the opportunity to show their work off to the group. This reinforced a sense of confidence in performing skills to others, and has been a largely successful teaching method carried over from other projects. In small groups like this, there is the time and opportunity to include a weekly showcase – however, in larger groups this is not always the case, and having a showcase each week can even be seen as a waste of rehearsal time.

Following this, the group met to discuss plans for next week, to ensure everyone was doing ok, and to establish who would be responsible for providing the essential baked goods for the next session.

The timing of the session seemed to be about right, although 2 of the participants often left a little early – usually when they became agitated, tired or bored. This was accepted unreservedly and never became a problem with the management of the project as a whole. At the same time, it was difficult to get one or two of our performers to leave the venue, as they were keen to continue rehearsing and/or socialising. As such I believe that a balance was met that accommodated both poles.

One parent referred to the high level of cooperation and tolerance that everyone showed – not just the tutors, but parents and participants. But with the caveat that we were perhaps fortunate that there were no instances of more challenging behaviour experienced throughout the life of the project. This is a serious concern. As stated above, support from NAS staff was initially very good, but waned quite quickly. Had there been any serious issues or challenging behaviour, our own circus tutors are not necessarily equipped to deal with it. SCC has provided training in dealing with aggressive behaviour from participants, and we were provided with training in ASDs more generally from NAS, but the lines of responsibility were not clarified on this project.

It is my recommendation that these lines of responsibility between SCC, partner organisations, participants and support staff/families/carers should be made explicit from the outset of any future project.

Was this project beneficial to the participants? (in what way?)

I wanted to allow people the opportunity to think about any other impact that this project had on the performers that was not directly linked to our own aims and objectives – any unintended outcomes of the project as a whole.

On the whole responses here reinforced our own aims and objectives – the participants showed increased levels of confidence, learned circus skills, had fun, and socialised well.

The confidence it has given my son has been remarkable and actually heard him volunteering to be a compere at a showcase!

Got them out and away from the television

He liked going and he was able to do different things so he wouldn't have to just stick to the one thing. He can be very shy, though if he was concerned about performing he didn't say so. We missed the performance in Newtownabbey, but he did the one up at the Kennedy Centre, he wouldn't have missed that.

He wanted to go, he had a sense of being a part of something

Would you like to take part in other circus skills projects in the future?

Of the responses collected all but one stated explicitly that they would like to become involved in future projects. As a result of previous evaluations, SCC has now enabled this opportunity for participants in our projects through the Evergreen Project and our Summer School Project. Several individuals from this NAS project have continued to develop their circus skills by accessing these programmes.

However, the individual who responded that they would not necessarily like to get involved again expressed concerns that her son would not necessarily benefit from joining in either of these projects, where the groups are larger, and the expectations of developing circus skills are perhaps a little higher.

For me, it was the right thing, the opportunity was super. But I'm not sure if it would work again. It was good, it was just right for us – it just worked for me and X

This is a difficult situation. Those performers who have now gone on to further develop their skills in other projects have done so very well – indeed, one of the participants on this project is currently being employed with SCC as a circus tutor. But this is a pathway designed to develop circus skills and performance skills in quite a busy and focussed context; which is not necessarily the right context for all of our participants. It may be possible to develop further ideas in conjunction with NAS to provide circus workshops for those participants who can be allowed the opportunity to shine in smaller, less busy environments.

Any Other Comments:

It is Awesome!

He enjoyed it, it was good for his skills and his confidence.

Fantastic! Nick and the gang were great 11 out of 10! All children/adults with ASD should get the opportunity to take part as so beneficial

Summary:

In general terms, it is fair to state that those closest to our performers were impressed with the circus project delivered by SCC. There were several instances and examples of an increase in confidence and self-belief amongst the participants, and this has been observed in other aspects of the participants' lives, not just in the context of a circus workshop or showcase.

The project was well managed by SCC and the tutor team showed patience, commitment, and empathy.

Almost all of the families involved would wish to be involved in future projects; and indeed many already are.

In addition to the stated aims and objectives, one of the clearest 'unintended outcomes' was the development of social skills and camaraderie witnessed throughout the project. These social relationships connected the tutor team to families and participants, as well as participants and families to each other.

The project was seen as successful and reinforces the idea that social circus is a potentially powerful tool for social change; and that the ideals of this philosophy were applied by the tutor team in a specific manner.

Feedback from Participants:

Feedback from participants was not collected formally as a part of this evaluation. This was due largely to the incredible variety of levels of communication and ability, and so it was quite difficult to develop a method of data collection that could be utilised across the board. There were also certain time restraints which meant that my own focus was based more on the development of the project, and less on the collection of data for evaluation. These are elements that should be overcome for subsequent evaluations.

However, observation of the participants made throughout the project can help to shed some light on how participants engaged with the process of learning and performing circus skills.

Attendance at the workshops was high; despite the small numbers involved everyone attempted to maintain a presence throughout the life of the project. We did have one participant who did not return after the Christmas break, and one who only attended for 2 or 3 sessions. Only one of our regular attendees did not perform at the showcase event; but this was due to a family event, rather than an unwillingness to perform or get involved. Indeed, the enthusiasm for this project was so high that it caused some concern when a session had to be cancelled at late notice due to injury. Several participants had to be encouraged to leave at the end of each session.

Of the participants who saw this project through to the end, several have subsequently become involved in other projects run by Streetwise, and one has even developed the skills necessary to become a tutor and is now employed with the organisation. Clearly, Streetwise is now in a good position to enable participants from short term projects such as this to access circus skills workshops on a long term basis.

Informal feedback from participants throughout the project was measured and discussed by the tutor team on a weekly basis. It is my assertion that the tutor team worked very well with the participants and their families to create a space and a context which enabled these young people to express themselves creatively and imaginatively. The results of which were a joy to observe.

Individuals were able and willing to come together and, largely through the rituals of opening and closing activities, become a part of a team. I observed several occasions where people were encouraged to join in by their peers, as well as their families and tutors. This group identity ensured that the environment became a safe place for individuals to explore their circus skills, and subsequently a supportive space where these skills could be demonstrated, and performed to others. This was a vital step in developing our showcase event.

Circus and ASDs: Some Observations and Hypotheses.

Although SCC has experience of working with individuals with ASDs in a range of contexts, e.g. mainstream schools projects, other disability groups; this was the first time that this tutor team had developed a program specifically for individuals with ASD. Our medical understanding of the condition was limited, and my own expectations were unclear. As such, the project as a whole became an opportunity for us as a circus organisation to learn more about ASDs as much as it was about the participants learning about circus. And so, from this small glimpse into the world of autism and circus, it has been possible to suggest some reasons why social circus can be a useful 'social intervention approach':

Diversity of circus:

One of the key strengths of circus is that it is an incredibly diverse and incorporative discipline. Circus not only relates to juggling, balancing, aerial or acrobatics, but can include dance, drama, urban sports, traditional culture, and a host of other artistic endeavours. This diversity means that circus tutors are (or should be) open to suggestions about what each participant hopes to achieve throughout the project. It also means that circus tutors should be flexible and accommodating in their approach.

With regards to the participants on this project we found that some individuals gravitated towards certain objects/skills, and became focussed on learning these alone. This seems to be a common trait throughout circus – social or otherwise. However, one of our participants decided that they would learn almost everything that we could teach, and quite soon surpassed many of my own skills in several disciplines. Whether this was a reflection of the participants ASD or whether they were just born to be a circus performer is unclear! What is important is that this project succeeded in finding at least one discipline for every participant, and there were no examples of any individual failing to relate to the project as a direct result of their ASD.

The inclusive and diverse nature of circus seemed to connect with this group. And tutors soon found that the participants were keen to incorporate their own ideas regarding learning and performing skills. So, when one performer wanted to use the flowerstick in a way that reflected their interest in the slow motion special effects of the film 'The Matrix', it was up to us to accommodate that request as best as we could.

The Unique nature of circus.

Circus is a peripheral art form, with a history of exclusion from mainstream society. This is part of the appeal for many of those who choose to pursue a career in this field. Whilst never really made explicit, this peripheral nature is often represented by the physical appearance of our tutors (this tutor team in particular was fairly heavily tattooed, pierced and quite hairy), but it is also reflected in the attitudes of the tutors towards the performers. The tutor team on this project seemed to make a very genuine connection with all of our performers, and displayed a continuing sense of empathy with them. This was noted by almost all of the families involved:

I think it's that everybody could go and join in, it's different from any other thing. He seemed to enjoy it, he fitted in.

Participants got one-to-one teaching and help. They didn't feel pressured and given the chance to do things in their own time. All the staff were friendly and encouraging

Nick, Glenn and Logi displayed super patience

The staff and their patience and understanding of the difficulties the children have and the ability to bring out the best in them

In large part, this empathy and familiarity was due to the longevity of the project, the continuity of the tutor team (there were only one or two occasions where we had to replace one of the tutors due to illness or availability), and the relatively small number of performers. This connection was demonstrated when all three of the tutor team enthused as much about the fact that one of the participants had begun to verbalise in the sessions as they did when any particular individual achieved something with a circus prop.

It is, at this stage, only speculation that circus is appealing because of its association with non-mainstream cultural spheres, but the fact that this is not a skill that everyone in society believes that they are capable of, does have a certain attraction. By the end of the project we had a group of individuals with ASDs who performed skills to a public audience who did not possess those skills. As such, a situation occurred where there was a certain twisting of traditional power relationships between neurotypical populations and groups with ASDs. This may explain why so much of our feedback referred to an increase in self-confidence and self-belief.

Performing: inclusion, confidence, quality, and fun.

All of the projects that SCC run in this disability strand result in a performance of the skills learned. SCC refers to these events as showcases, rather than as shows, in order to diminish anxiety about performance, and to incorporate flexibility into the end product. Throughout different projects we have developed theatre productions, in-house demonstrations, street performances, and impromptu gatherings! Whatever form this final showcase takes, our tutor team are encouraged to ensure that a balance is sought that encourages inclusion and quality using fun, and promoting confidence. This philosophy reflects SCC's commitment to disabled people not merely *experiencing* or *accessing* the arts, but *participating* in the arts more centrally.

The simplest way to explain this is by referring to the following principles:

1. Every participant should be encouraged to perform, but never forced onto the stage, or put on the wrong stage.
2. Every act is presented in terms of ability rather than disability.
3. If someone is having fun on stage, then more people are likely to enjoy watching them.

1. *Every participant should be encouraged to perform, but never forced onto the stage, or put on the wrong stage.*

SCC recognises that the final product (the showcase) is an important opportunity for performers to communicate what they have achieved to an audience. But we also recognise that the process is as important as the product. We have found that having a definite event to work towards gives the

tutor team and the performers a goal to work towards, and encourages a lot more focus from all sides. However, if an individual is simply not ready to perform, or if the context for the performance is not suitable for any individual or group, we are usually able to find other means of achieving these goals. In this case only one of our performers could not make the showcase event, but this was only due to availability, as such we arranged a dress rehearsal where they were able to perform to an audience, and they were also subsequently involved in a public showcase event as part of another project.

2. *Every act is presented in terms of ability rather than disability.*

SCC recognises that living with a disability may make public performance more complex. However, we intentionally refuse to present our performers as disabled. There is no mention made of individuals' conditions or disabilities in showcase events. All of our showcases focus on the skills and abilities on display, not on stoic accounts of triumphant adversity. Showcases should always be fun and entertaining, never opportunities for patronising people.

This was reiterated in an interview with the mother of one of the participants:

X's performance was to throw and catch balls and it was obvious he couldn't cope with more. If we had made it stricter [i.e. pushed the skills learning a little more] could he have learned more or would he not have coped? He needed to have expectations, there needs to be a focus [as part of the circus project] not just going on stage and saying 'here's a wee boy with autism'

I think that finding this balance is a very personal endeavour. As circus performers, all of our tutors are expected to attain a certain level of quality in their showcases, and in the training leading up to the showcases; but to balance this with the participant's individual needs. It was very fortunate that on this project we could consult with parents/carers to identify the limits of each individual's patience, and to know when to push further and when to pull back.

The training provided by NAS also helped here. I recall working with one performer who was having trouble with a particular trick. He looked worried, his face was taught, and there was a slight sweat appearing on his brow. I asked "are you ok?" and he replied "yes". But I was unconvinced, so I tried rephrasing my question – "how are you feeling?", and the response "anxious"; it was time to take a break and work on something else for a while!

3. *If someone is having fun on stage, then more people are likely to enjoy watching them.*

Fun is an essential element of social circus. We are asking for participants to become performers, and as such we need to enable them to have as much fun on stage as possible. Whilst fun is an essential element, it is not the *only* reason for doing circus – a circus project where we all just got together each week and had fun, would rarely achieve the overall aims and objectives of the project. Fun is a way of getting to an objective effectively, not an overall objective in its own right. Tutors on this project strove to achieve this throughout the project, and I believe that we were largely successful.

The fun aspect and learning new skills and not just the kids – the parents as well

The sessions were fun

In some cases, ensuring that a performer was comfortable on stage meant that we needed to include a tutor into the act. In other cases, this was not necessary. From my own personal experience as a performer I am aware that a solo performance is a much more pressured experience than being on stage with a partner. If a solo act starts going wrong a stage can be a very lonely and uncomfortable place, and this can have detrimental effects on any individual's confidence. With a tutor embedded into an act each performer can rely on that extra level of security and enable them to focus on their performance. Although this has to be presented in a way that ensures that the participants are the focus of each act, rather than the tutor.

And so, the use of fun and laughter as an interpersonal event between our performers, our tutors and our audience was a key element in producing a showcase event that in turn had a positive impact on our participants' levels of confidence and self-belief:

My son's self-confidence and self-esteem improved so much, he found something, with the encouragement of the teachers, that he could actually do. It didn't matter if he messed up he was still cheered on anyway

Adaptive teaching techniques and teaching philosophies:

Throughout this project the tutor team were met with a few instances wherein teaching methods had to be adapted or re-imagined in order for them to be more easily understood by the participants. As an organisation, we have often stated that teaching circus skills is about practice – regardless of ability, which is why it is such a powerful medium for individuals living with a disability. Through working with an entire group of individuals with ASDs, we often began to question the clarity of this assertion.

There were times, when we had to focus more on the methods we used to communicate with our performers. And, once again, the training provided by NAS was an excellent start. In particular, we were introduced to the adage that 'once you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism'.

Throughout my own experiences of teaching circus skills to people with ASDs I have found the following to be true. One of the ways that this disorder manifests itself in our workshops is as an apparent lack of communication between tutor and student. Tutors are often looking for clues from students that a piece of information has been understood, and some of our performers with ASDs do not always provide these clues. Our circus tutors have to trust that at least some of this information has got through, and we need to develop much more creative and interesting ways of communicating that sparks some interest in our students. These methods are as individual as the students we work with; for some it may be increasing eye-contact for others it is decreasing it, or referring to the student in the third person, or providing a commentary of every movement made, or increasing or decreasing touch, or providing rewards, or using specific coloured props – or excluding certain colours, or ensuring certain noises are minimised or maximised. In short, every tutor has to get to know every student that they are working with.

As stated above, I believe that the tutor team on this project developed a solid sense of empathy and understanding with all of our performers, and this was reflected in the levels of trust that we were met with from them.

This interpersonal connection is a valuable part of social circus and seems to have had even more salience in the context of autism. The levels of communication varied, and we were often guided by the presence of parents and carers. For example, we were informed whether a colour coded juggling pattern would work or not (it didn't). We were also told that if we were pushing too hard with one of our performers we would soon know about it (we never found out in any detail what that meant, fortunately). One or two of our performers were not very verbal at all, but we identified ways to connect with them as individuals throughout the project. For example, one parent informed us that her son would almost certainly be listening to everything that we said, even if he was not looking at us, or even in our direction. Slowly we began to realise what worked and what did not, and each of our performers on this project developed circus skills to such a level that they were able to perform those skills to a public audience.

Tutors who developed a better rapport with one or other of the performers at the early stages of the project built on that rapport and we assigned tutors to performers on a social and personal level rather than in terms of any particular circus skill. This practice reinforces the policy of SCC to hire tutors who are competent in all of the skills that we teach, rather than employing tutors who specialise in one or two circus skills.

This project also reinforces the recent direction by SCC to identify the professional aspects and core competencies of social circus tutors. SCC currently considers a certain level of competence in circus skills to be a basic requirement to be a tutor. However, we are beginning to recognise a range of other social and personal skills that are equally important in the context of social circus; empathy, patience, tolerance, resilience, flexibility, creativity, enthusiasm, etc. etc. Feedback from participants and their families on this project suggests that these skills are increasingly evident amongst our tutor team.

In summary, analysis of the feedback gathered from this project suggests that social circus has the potential to be used very successfully in the context of ASDs, and that SCC tutors are developing a range of teaching methods and approaches that enable the philosophy of social circus to be applied effectively. By working closely with relevant parties involved in the lives of the participants we were able to develop a successful project. However, there is always the potential to improve upon this, and SCC should continue to seek strong partnerships with other stakeholders in this field – therapists, academics, artists, medical and social professionals, and of course, families.

Results and Recommendations

Taking all of the above data into consideration I suggest that SCC has met its own aims and objectives on this project. There are also a number of unintended outcomes and practical considerations that should be recognised and addressed.

Aims and objectives:

- To introduce to new groups the benefits of circus skills

As only one of the participants had experienced a circus skills project prior to this one, we can safely assert that SCC lived up to this aim successfully.

We also showcased the benefits of circus skills at 2 public events – one to the local community and one to an audience with a specific interest in autism. Both events showed our performers in a very positive light, and illustrated the potential impact of social circus programs with individuals with ASDs.

- To enhance circus skills levels

All of the participants on this project learned some new circus skills. Many of those who took part in the end-of-project showcase performed 2 or 3 different skills. Several of our participants have now enrolled and performed on SCC's other projects such as the Evergreen Programme, and our annual Summer School.

- To have a positive impact on health

Feedback from families suggests some positive impact on physical health. However, the impact on social and mental health is perhaps more observable; particularly within the sphere of confidence, socialisation, and enjoyment.

- To promote inclusion

Within the project SCC operated an open door policy that enabled anyone with an ASD to attend – regardless of the severity of the ASD. We also encouraged family members to attend to take the opportunity to learn new skills and to observe the skills learned by the participants themselves.

The decision to perform the showcase at a public fun day in the Lillian Bland Park, and the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the show from members of the public, placed our performers at the centre of their community in a very high profile.

As such, this project promoted inclusion in terms of accessing participation in the arts for individuals with ASD and their families, and also promoted inclusion of individuals with ASD in society by showcasing their skills in a high profile public event.

- To enhance self esteem

The increase in self-esteem amongst participants on this project was foregrounded by several stakeholders and in various ways. This aim has been met overwhelmingly.

- To form new relationships between the arts, health, and community sectors

This project further developed a good working relationship between SCC – a community arts organisation and NAS – the leading UK charity for people with autism and their families. The entire process resulted in a context of reciprocity in that we learned as much about autism from this project as our participants learned about circus.

We also succeeded in showcasing the potential of social circus projects to a range of interested parties through the performance at the Braid Centre in Ballymena, as part of World Autism Awareness Day 2012.

- To promote an increased acceptance of disabled people in our society

This is always a difficult aim to measure, and gathering data that reflects it is nigh on impossible. However, by continuing to make it easier for people with a disability to fully participate in the arts, to have a say in how they present their skills, and to be a central part of the creative process Streetwise Community Circus is striving to enable individuals to perform abilities regardless of disability. We believe that providing a context for our performers to do this in public in a well-managed and enjoyable manner does promote an increased acceptance of disabled people in our society, and we wish to continue doing this.

The NAS/SCC project 2011/12 successfully met all of the aims and objectives of the Streetwise Community Circus disability project.

Unintended outcomes and observations

This project raised some issues that, though unexpected, it would be prudent for SCC to consider:

Communication with our partner organisation support staff could have been a lot better. I believe that project leaders need to have more confidence in contacting partner staff, and not assume that it is the role of the Streetwise office to manage projects on the ground.

The potential benefits of learning circus amongst ASD populations are at this stage relatively unexplored, and further research into the precise nature of these potential benefits would be very welcome.

Some parents and participants stated that they were uncertain as to what to expect in a circus workshop. Having a clearer picture prior to arrival may have helped here. Again, this may be a consideration for lead tutors to ensure communication between relevant parties.

Streetwise tutors became more aware of some of the factors involved when working with individuals with ASDs, particularly in terms of utilising creativity, structuring a workshop, environmental factors, and communication. We learned a good deal from our participants and their families, and this information needs to be shared throughout the organisation.

Tutor's personalities became more important than specialisms in skill levels on this project; certain tutors worked better with certain participants. This reiterates SCC's policy that all tutors need to be competent in all of the skills that we teach, rather than having specialised juggling tutors, diabolo tutors etc.

Family support and involvement in this project was without doubt the key to success, however, we should be aware that this support is not always available; and indeed, some projects may insist on developing independence amongst participants and so we must be flexible enough as an organisation to develop a range of projects that can cater to the variety of needs and wishes of individuals with ASDs.

Recommendations

As a result of the evaluation into this project, I have identified the following recommendations to be considered by SCC for future social circus projects.

- Lead tutors need to be more forthcoming and confident when dealing with partner staff and partner organisations.
- Streetwise Community Circus should explore the potential for identifying and disseminating the benefits of learning and performing circus skills in the context of ASDs.
- Streetwise needs to ensure that tutors, partner organisations and participants are aware of the global context of the social circus movement, and all parties need to be able to articulate the benefits of the ideals of social circus projects. This is not 'just another job' it is a powerful medium for social change – as has been exhibited with great effect in this project.
- Streetwise should continue to provide opportunities for participants to continue to learn circus after the life of any project – which, again, we have managed to do successfully in this case.