

How circus training can enhance the well-being of autistic children and their families

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Abstract

This project is concerned with how circus training can benefit children diagnosed on the autistic spectrum and, in turn, their families. Many “special needs” children spend a great deal of time in physiotherapy, speech therapy, osteopathic therapy, occupational therapy and behavioural therapy. The thesis explores how circus can open up a new world to such children, enabling them to take risks, physically and emotionally; to stretch the capacities of their bodies in an environment that enriches their social development. Not only do they gain in strength, coordination and physical awareness, they can also gain confidence, opportunities for creative expression and a sense of “fitting in”.

For the parents and siblings of children with autism, circus training sessions provide respite and a chance to enjoy seeing their family member becoming involved with other children and achieving things that might not have seemed within their capabilities. There are frequently flow-on effects through improvements in autistic children’s skills and behaviours in daily life. Families can also become part of the “circus family” – sharing a sense of community with other families who understand the challenges that accompany life with an autistic child: a sense of isolation in the wider community, the frustrations, embarrassments and feelings of being judged. In the circus community, parents never need to apologise for their child in the same breath as introducing themselves.

The project draws on observations from my work as a circus performer and trainer; focused interviews with several physiotherapists, occupational therapists and circus trainers; literature relating to youth and social circus, and autism; and theoretical work on creativity, embodiment, difference, identity, belonging and changing notions of community, particularly from Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben and Probyn.

I set out to demonstrate the practical value of circus to children with special needs and their families; that the environment of creative chaos developed in circus is particularly beneficial for children with autism; that the practice philosophy of circus values both difference and inclusivity, helping to build community; that philosophy and cultural theory can provide insights into how circus “works” for autistic children and their families; and that participation in circus can change how people understand the world and each other. My aim as a circus professional is to encourage us all to re-think how we approach physical therapy for children with special needs and to provide some theoretical frameworks that support the exceptional work of youth circus schools around Australia.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signature

Date

Kristy Danialle Seymour

This research was conducted according to the provisions of clearance granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee: Approval No. Hum/08/12/HREC

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Introduction

Circus values and value of circus for children with autism

This project is concerned with how circus training can be used as a form of occupational therapy for children diagnosed on the “autistic spectrum”¹. Using the tools of circus training to “unlock the body” can open up a new world to children with “special needs”. Not only do they gain strength, coordination and physical awareness, they also gain confidence, opportunities for creative expression and a sense of “fitting in” somewhere. Many “special needs” children have spent a great deal of time in their young lives involved in physiotherapy, speech therapy, osteopathic therapy and behavioural therapy – some of them since birth. The mental and physical strain that this puts on both child and family can be huge. Further, children can reach plateaus in their development, which might be seen as an indication of them having come to the limits of their capacity to benefit from the therapy, but can, in fact, simply be due to boredom or frustration. By recreating a *culture of circus* for children on the autistic spectrum, we provide them with an environment that is stimulating while being safe, challenging and inclusive. It is possible to use circus training to develop the same motor skills and muscle memory outcomes that are most often targeted in occupational therapy and physiotherapy, with the difference that there is another especially creative and playful layer that is more likely to enable children to enjoy the therapeutic process. Hanging upside down on a trapeze not only creates a physical experience that helps to strengthen children’s bodies, it offers them imaginary engagements and actual challenges that help them to develop confidence in many different respects – physical, emotional, creative, expressive.

The circus is a culture where difference is not only embraced, it is celebrated; a place where freaks, social misfits and oddities in general have found a way to belong, especially since the 1800s. Circus has a history steeped in the idea of being different and unorthodox. It encourages “rules” and expectations about physical abilities to be bent and broken in order to create a dynamic space that changes the way we see and experience the human form, and reorganises our ideas of what bodies are capable of doing. The lights shining upon an aerialist as she flies through the air defying gravity; the sound of

¹ I use the term “autistic spectrum” as this is the most commonly used medical term, however this, and the term “special needs” are both labels that are capable of locking children into categories and “boxes”, which we try to avoid when working with children and circus.

the drum roll as acrobats balance delicately upon each other's shoulders, keeping the audience in suspense as to what might happen if they slip or fall – these are aspects of circus that amaze onlookers, but equally they can amaze performers. Social circus allows children to amaze themselves. This project explores how amazing yourself can be especially important for children too often seen as problems, who can come to see themselves that way too. Further, the spectacle of the circus also exemplifies a kind of community of differences, and a sense of acceptance of people simply on the basis of what they bring to the production of creativity in motion. In these ways, the attraction of circus for performers can partly consist in providing a place in which those who may have been told “you can't do that” or “that's not possible” can undertake the “impossible” *and* in providing a place where those who may feel like “square pegs in round holes” can find that they “fit in” alongside each other.

Children with special needs are more often than not, however kindly, represented as “square pegs in round holes” in our society, and they can therefore frequently experience their lives as such – as not quite fitting in, or even not fitting in at all, to the parameters that seem to be “normal”. These children can benefit greatly from creative and innovative forms of therapy. My work aims to show how circus can play a significant part in providing ways of meeting their actual (rather than assumed) needs. In my work as a Youth Circus practitioner I have witnessed how circus can positively impact on the lives of young people in general, and how it can benefit those whose experience of life has been traumatic – such as youth at risk and refugee children. Over time, and as a result of undertaking therapeutic programs, my work has become increasingly focused on how circus training can enhance the emotional, physical and creative wellbeing of autistic children and their families.

The spectacle and frenetic physicality of the circus may appear to be an assault on the senses – festoon lights, ring masters with megaphones, acrobats flying past, noise and rapid movements all amounting to a state of chaotic energy that would seem to be the exact opposite of what a child with autism “needs”. However, my experience suggests that when autistic children are immersed *as participants* in this state of creative chaos, in fact they begin to draw upon the senses that they usually repress in order to shield themselves from the world. That is, it seems that the apparent chaos of circus gives them an opportunity to express themselves and their feelings more freely than they “normally” do. Physically they are challenging themselves, developing body awareness and fitness. Mentally they are achieving feats they at first regard as impossible, gaining confidence in themselves and learning to trust their bodies to hold them up and balance themselves

safely. And beyond these obvious benefits experienced by each child to various extents, lie the emotional and creative rewards that arise from being *part of the group* that is participating in the circus.

Children with autism, almost by definition, are unaccustomed to *feeling* part of a group; to experiencing a sense of connection and interaction with others as enjoyable, stimulating and exciting. Circus, also by definition, is a group activity – whether it is a group of professional acrobats learning to trust each other with their creative ideas and bodily safety, or a bunch of amateurs learning tricks for fitness and fun, circus sets up a creative space that is beautifully chaotic *and* inclusive, relying at once on individual brilliance and group cohesion.

My thesis argues that for children with autism circus provides an opportunity to explore the play between allowing themselves to be exposed to a sense of chaos in which they draw on their senses, and making a creative virtue of the kind of order that they are used to imposing, or trying to impose, on their day-to-day world. Further, the practice of circus values their eccentricities, individual preferences, talents and modes of expression, while at the same time encouraging them to rely on and interact with other children and trainers in order to execute a trick or acrobatic sequence, or make an audience laugh. My thesis also argues that when circus is used as an alternative therapy, there are flow-on effects for siblings and parents. Further, participation in circus training can improve how children respond to other therapeutic strategies.

Aims of the project

In order to build on my professional observations through focused research, I have explored the following areas:

- how autism affects the entire family unit;
- the outcomes for children with special needs of becoming participants in what I am calling “creative chaos”;
- the implications for children who feel “different” of a circus philosophy and culture that are inclusive, value difference and help to build community; and
- how circus can change how people experience and understand the world and each other.

Methodology, Literature and Organisation

This project is based on my professional experience as a circus performer and trainer, and particularly, as a Youth Circus practitioner, and draws on that experience for observational evidence and examples. Further, I undertook several focused interviews with physiotherapists, occupational therapists and circus trainers with whom I have worked in connection with Flipside Circus and other projects. I have drawn on literature specifically relating to youth, community and social circus. In particular, I am indebted to the late Reg Bolton's doctoral thesis, *Why Circus Works: how circus can be a significant development experience for children and young people* (2004) and his book, *Circus in a Suitcase* (1988). Given the extent to which ideas about order and disorder, chaos and creativity, individuals and groups, belonging and community have emerged as central to my discussion, my conceptual frameworks have come to include theoretical work on embodiment, difference, identity, belonging, creativity and changing notions of community. In particular, I have been influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Giorgio Agamben and Elspeth Probyn. While I did not consider it appropriate to attempt to provide a discussion of autism in medical and therapeutic terms, I found the overview of current understandings provided by Utah Frith (2003) particularly helpful. On the experiences of parents of autistic children, I have been greatly assisted by the dissertation of Kirsten Fritz (1999).

The chapters of the thesis are arranged thematically, with the focus for each based in the mix of research methods, professional experience and literature that I have outlined: "Autism affects the entire family unit"; "Creative chaos"; "Philosophy and social circus"; "A community of outsiders"; "Therapeutic benefits"; and "Changing the way we see ourselves and each other". I hope to convey the value of circus beyond stereotypes of spectacle, sequins and eccentricities; to pose important questions about identity and belonging; to demonstrate how circus can enrich experience and life skills for children with autism; and to suggest how the ability to look "outside the box" of what is "normal" can help us understand difference as a positive characteristic of self and community.

Identity, difference and belonging

Identity, difference and what it means to "belong" are questions that arise often in contemporary cultural analysis, and we will also find them at the heart of what makes circus an important tool for understanding ourselves and each other, and how we can learn to "belong" together with our many differences. Although identity is something that we all struggle to come to terms with, there is a growing discomfort with "identity politics"

as a means of positioning oneself, and at the same time an unwillingness to discuss identity freely or frankly:

Increasingly, it seems that even in progressive circles the heart has fallen out of conversations about identity. Identity has become a set of implacable statements that suppress, at times, questions about what identity really is for. (Probyn, 1996: 9)

Aiming to develop a “sociology of the skin”, Probyn argues that we can come to terms more productively with questions of identity, and desire, if we understand belonging not in terms of being inside of a category of sameness, but by sharing the condition of complete difference in a position “outside belonging”; by giving ourselves scope to “approximate” belonging; and by recognising that being “proximate”, being close to other, is not contingent upon recognising similarities to ourselves. Identity and belonging, in this analysis, are fluid states, becomings that take place in shared difference (Probyn, 1996). It is my aim in this thesis that by uncovering the inner workings and under-utilised potential of circus as a tool for social and personal change, particularly for those whose identities are located outside what is considered “normal”, I can demonstrate how conventional ideas about identity and belonging can be challenged and undone, along with labels we place upon each other in order to create categories, and boundaries we draw concerning what is possible or acceptable for bodies.

For children with autism, participation in circus enables their “outside belonging” to become a shared feeling based in a personal sense of identity that does not require them to suppress their difference. They can experience affinity with others in a context that endorses difference and celebrates idiosyncrasy. At the same time, their personal sense of identity is enriched through achievement. The benefits of this can be shared in each child’s family, and families can come together through their children’s experiences in the circus. Through this work in relation to children with autism and their families, I hope in turn to inspire parents and children more generally to pick up a juggling ball, stand on a tight-wire, swing on a trapeze, or simply think beyond what they have been conditioned to believe is possible.

One: Autism Affects the Entire Family Unit

Sharing stories

Although it is an individual who is diagnosed with autism, the impact that both autism and its diagnosis have on the entire family can be enormous. Autistic children suffer great difficulty in building relationships in social settings, whether that is at home, in the classroom or in the playground. During research informing *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (1997) Utah Frith observed that, “[a]bove all the children seemed unable to establish normal relationships with their peers” (5). However, due to their close and continuing relationship, parents and siblings are affected first and most seriously, sharing the medical and cultural labels as well as the everyday challenges that come with living with a son or daughter, brother or sister with “special needs”.

The Australian film *The Black Balloon* develops a powerful representation of what it can be like to live with a child with autism. It focuses on the experience of having an autistic sibling, and on how the condition affects not only the autistic child but his entire family. *The Black Balloon* is centred on the relationship between two brothers, Charlie and his older brother, Thomas. Charlie has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Thomas loves his brother but struggles to deal with his condition because of the extent to which it affects his own day-to-day life. Thomas desperately wants to have the experience of being a “normal” teenager, but Charlie represents all the reasons why Thomas cannot have that. Thomas is often placed in the role of care giver for his autistic brother, a role for which 16 year-old boys do not necessarily see themselves as “cut out”. This is a situation with which many families with an autistic child are familiar. It is common for siblings to find that they have to sacrifice what is considered a “normal” way of life for their age due to the special needs of their brothers/sisters. At the very least, siblings need to accept that they must relinquish more of their parents’ attention to their brother or sister than would usually be the case. However, outside the family, they frequently feel a need to “defend” their autistic siblings’ behaviours and condition among peers – even among friends – at school and in other social settings.

In a heart-wrenching way, *The Black Balloon* depicts the shared struggle that autism can become. The film enriched my understanding about how much autism affects the entire family, and especially how stressful it can be for the siblings. Some of the most powerful

scenes are concerned with events that take place in particularly ordinary settings. Charlie and Thomas attend different schools: Charlie goes to the special school and Thomas attends the regular high school down the road, but they catch the bus from the same stop. One morning, Charlie is bullied by a group of kids from Thomas's school. The bullying is entirely based on how Charlie's autism makes him different. The boys mimic his repetitive gestures and strange noises, mocking him openly and taunting him physically by pushing him around. They are unaware that this is Thomas's brother but quickly find out when Thomas and his girlfriend, Jackie, step in to defend Charlie. This moment permanently changes school life for Thomas. He becomes the focus of incessant bullying himself. Categorised as "weird" for having an autistic brother, he is shunned for something that he cannot change. He is bullied and made to feel like an outsider simply for being a brother². In the cruel environment of adolescent peer pressure, Thomas lives the cliché: we do not choose our family.

Parents of children with autism not only face the challenges of their children's behaviours in the home, but frequently feel the need to apologise for their children's behaviours in public; to be constantly vigilant "in case" their children create a problem for others; to over-police their children in order to avoid such difficulties. As a consequence, most parents of children with autism experience anxious, stressful and highly-strung lives. As with the ordinary circumstance of the school bus stop in *The Black Balloon*, everyday chores like a trip the supermarket can end in disaster for parents with autistic children.

Kirsten Fritz, a behavioural therapist, undertook an Honours thesis centred on the experiences and challenges facing mothers with children diagnosed on the autistic spectrum (1999). Having worked closely alongside families as carer and therapist, her insights into these mothers' experiences, in conjunction with the interviews she conducted with them, help us to understand how complicated family life can be.

Your social life is very limited because people say, 'Yeah come around for a BBQ' or 'come around for a meal'. First of all you've got to think that Toby isn't going to eat anything – well that's okay, and then one of you has got to decide for the evening that you're going to be the one that watches Toby. Usually it is me because I watch him anyway. Because Toby will wreck things, as you know. Our house is Toby proof, but you can't let him go into the bathroom or he'll eat their soap. He can just do an untold amount of small misdemeanours in a very short amount of time. They don't really matter but when there are a lot of them – he can pull things out of the cupboard, pinch the lollies, eat toys.

² Most bullying focuses on a characteristic that the bullied person cannot change – being short, wearing glasses, being clever, being from another country, wearing different clothes due to cultural necessity and so on. All bullying seeks to make the bullied person feel powerless in his/her difference. What makes Thomas's situation particularly frustrating is that he is unlikely to have been bullied if he did not have the brother he has.

He can get into somebody's bed and mess it up. You try going to a Christmas party or anything when you've got Toby. I think people can be better than what they are. I expect somebody at the whole Christmas table to get up and take him for a walk so I can eat my lunch. (Michelle, Mother to Toby, 26 February, 1999 in Fritz 1999: 53)

In different but equally important ways, *The Black Balloon* and Fritz's work supplemented my own experience with autistic children and their families with more intimate understandings. The film invited me to engage imaginatively as well as emotionally. The professional and personal relationships Fritz clearly built with autistic children and their mothers enabled extraordinarily close access in terms of observation and interviews. Her thesis combines her personal narratives, the reported narratives of the parents and scholarly work to take a reader "into" the lived experience of families and therapist while at the same time providing a professional perspective. In highlighting the degree of tension and anxiety characteristic of daily life with an autistic child, both of these resources became particularly significant in stimulating my thinking about how social circus can provide a context in which members of a family can collaborate in a creative and positive way, sharing an experience that has the potential to bring them closer – even though it takes place largely in a "public" setting. That is, for parents and siblings, as well as for autistic children themselves, becoming involved in circus can provide something of a counterbalance to the tensions and difficulties that tend to characterise many aspects of family life. Later, I will discuss in more detail how the benefits of circus training can affect not only the child who participates in it, but also his/her immediate family as a "roll on" effect, and also the possibilities that circus can offer in terms of social change.

Diagnosis: the labels we place upon bodies

Foucault (1991) describes the emergence and establishment of power-knowledge relations in post-Enlightenment Europe in terms of various regimes through which bodies were "disciplined" (i.e. rendered "docile", brought under the control of the state). Among these are the kinds of written discourse undertaken in particular contexts such as the military, education and medicine, understood as "disciplines" (i.e. epistemological fields). "The power of the Norm," Foucault observes, "appears through the disciplines" (1991: 184). Once it has appeared, the "norm" is continually reinforced, developed and perpetuated through various kinds of "examination", each accompanied by particular forms of "disciplinary writing" (184-194). "The other innovations of disciplinary writing" he explains, "concerned the correlation of these elements, the accumulation of documents, their seriation, the organization of comparative fields making possible to classify, to form categories, to determine averages, to fix norms" (190). In hospitals these techniques

became, by the end of the eighteenth century, the basis of “what might generally be termed the ‘clinical sciences’” (191). For Foucault, this development was part of addressing “a great problem”, a question that had existed since Aristotle: “Is a science of the individual possible and legitimate?” (191). The development of clinical sciences – “the problem of the entry of the individual (and no longer the species) into the field of knowledge” – is accompanied by “the problem of the entry of the individual description...of the ‘file’ into the general functioning of scientific discourse” (191). This becomes “a new form of power over bodies”. In the vast archives of late eighteenth-century medical files we see “where the modern play of coercion over bodies, gestures and behaviour has its beginnings” (191). So, individual files become archives, which in turn enable the establishment of “norms”, against which individual “cases” are measured in order to establish a diagnosis, which in turn becomes the basis of a file... and so on. The examination and diagnosis are thus central to how individuals are positioned and understood in a clinical setting, or as Foucault puts it in his own systematic examination of these processes:

3. The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case’: a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power. The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded etc. (Foucault, 1991:191)

Medical diagnosis after examination by a “specialist” has thus come to carry great significance in Western culture. There is no question that it has the weight of authority, but as Foucault’s analysis demonstrates, it also involves the recognition that with diagnosis the “individual” becomes a “case”, and somehow passes into the realm of medicine, into the “hands of the experts”.

Being provided with a diagnosis that their child has Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a very challenging moment for parents. It marks a transformation, and while that might be experienced as relief after a long period of worry and uncertainty, it is also a time when parents can quickly feel that their autonomy, their sense of agency in relation to the life of their child, is somehow taken from their hands.

Diagnosis can provide parents with guidance, help them to understand the sources of the behavioural and physical differences that their child is displaying: “Having a diagnosis, searching for an answer, a meaning for their child’s behaviour, is of primary importance

for parents” (Fritz, 1999: 41). Equally, though, diagnosis can apparently lock parents into a “label”, a category, for their child and so produce sudden shifts in their own sense of identity as the parents of that child. Further, they may not feel comfortable with aspects of the advice they receive concerning various means of “controlling” or “normalising” the behaviours of their child. However, they may not feel able to challenge or question the expert who has provided them with an explanation, understanding, a sense of clarity about their child’s behaviours. Fritz (1999) argues that there is often insufficient recognition among those providing diagnosis of the mixed impact that it can have on parents, and the tension between the knowledge-value of the diagnosis and the implications of it.

It is obviously necessary to identify the “symptoms” of autism in order to develop therapeutic approaches to it, however categorising bodies can also produce negative outcomes. There is a “problem”, as Foucault puts it, in understanding the experiences of individual bodies in terms of how they match sets of “empirical data” and hence fitting them into categories, so that we know what to call them, how to judge and position them in relation to a “norm”.

The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of normalising judgement. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. (Foucault, 1991:184)

The normalising effects of labels on bodies – fat, thin, special needs, autistic – transforms individuals into “cases” which in turn reinforces a binary opposition between what is considered “normal” and what sits “outside”. And even when the reason for the examination and judgement is therapeutic (and not to punish), there is too readily a slide between such a binary and questions of identity, relationship, belonging and so on. This is partly because of the cultural status of the examination itself:

...the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth. ...it manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected. The superimposition of the power relations and knowledge relations assumes in the examination all its visible brilliance. (184)

How this takes place in the experience of ordinary families in the contemporary setting of medical diagnosis, is in fact not as different from the effects Foucault describes as we might want to assume. Due to their need to access a range of educational and therapeutic

services, there is a sense in which parents are *forced*, eventually, to seek a specialist diagnosis of their child. That diagnosis *is* taken to provide “truth”. And in order to be given access to that “truth”, parents must be willing to have their child become the object of the expert gaze. In that moment, even before diagnosis, parents hand over something of their autonomy, and their sense of the power relations involved in their situation *is* changed by the knowledge relations. This helps us to understand how the privileged position attributed to medical specialists in knowledge relations can produce a sense of powerlessness for parents, even when that is not at all the effect/affect intended in the diagnostic or therapeutic setting. In any case, the changes in the usual array of relations within families consequent upon a diagnosis of autism are likely to produce uncertainties and anxieties, which can also impact on how the family interacts with the helping professions that inevitably become involved in their lives.

Discourses, relationships and feelings

The stress of diagnosis and therapeutic decisions mean that it is not uncommon for particularly strained relations to develop between parents and professionals. Parents often struggle against the labels – and thus perceived constraints – that seem to be placed upon the child *and* upon the parents in relation to how they “manage” their own child (Fritz, 1999; Billington, McNally and McNally 2000). It is clear that professionals often play a very supportive role, but equally, professionals can have serious negative impacts on how parents experience the context of diagnosis and subsequent discussions about “therapies” and “case management”; that is, about their child’s future. Medical jargon and the sense that professionals are placing children into “boxes” or “pigeon-holing them” in order to fit them into a special needs “system” can be confronting and frustrating for parents.

Tom Billington worked with Bridget and Cary McNally in writing, “Autism: Working with parents, and discourses in experience, expertise and learning” (2000). The McNallys, the parents of “Tom” who was diagnosed with Autism at the age of three, share their experiences with professionals and experts:

From the very beginning, we became disaffected with professionals and ‘experts’. Most failed to address our conflicting feelings. On one hand we felt a deep love for Tom but, on the other, we were daunted by the prospect of raising this very difficult child. This conflict was exacerbated by the attitude of professionals. They, and others, left us no doubt that this event was something bad; in short, a tragedy. (Billington, McNally and McNally, 2000: 62)

One can only try to imagine the enormity of grasping the diagnosis of your child with any illness or “disability”, however, to be confronted with deeply negative attitudes from experts doesn’t do much to offer hope to families at a time when they need it most:

Various negative comments also contributed to our feeling of anger and disempowerment. One such comment was, ‘well, let’s look at it this way: he won’t be going to Oxford.’ What we needed was to discover how we could make a positive difference in our lives. (Billington, McNally & McNally 2000: 62)

The stigma – or simply pity – surrounding children with autism and their families can be understood more clearly when considered in terms of Foucault’s analysis of the importance of norms in post-Enlightenment Western culture. His work explains the power of the labels we apply to bodies when we position them outside of the norm; the exclusionary discourses that accompany those labels, including the discourses of experts; and the consequent coding of autistic children in the social, in popular discourse. That coding is deeply familiar to parents prior to the diagnosis of their child. That is, at diagnosis, the word “autistic” comes already carrying the discursive weight of negative cultural assumptions and an accompanying sense of isolation. The power relations that result from discursive practices positioning autistic children “outside the norm” mean that the children and their families are designated in terms of negative assumptions – “terribly sad for the family”, “...and s/he seemed such a normal little baby”, “a tragedy”, “you have a hard road ahead” – and allocated to one kind of minority group or another. No matter how well meaning experts, teachers, relatives, friends and neighbours may be, their attitudes and discourses frequently result in the family feeling alienated and angry. This affects how parents regard themselves and their child, and can produce an impression that socially they are somehow being “punished”.

A sense of being “made” to feel different is doubly reinforced by the extent to which each person has been acculturated to understand their place in the social in terms of sameness and difference. The linguistic function that enables us to make meaning has, in Western culture, been intensified into regimes of power that rely on degrees of sameness, or degrees of likeness to a particular measure of what is “normal” among people. Thus we each learn to see ourselves in terms of the extent to which we “fit” or do not. In this hegemonic, on which Western culture has come to rely to perpetuate certain dominant groups and structures, difference is a mark of “failure to measure up”, and if we recognise this about ourselves, it becomes a question of affect: it is a strongly felt, embodied, “failure”. The linguistic operations of difference and sameness are relatively straightforward, but when they are arranged into all sorts of codes and made a part of the

symbolic order, part of the ways in which power is expressed in social and cultural settings, they also become implicated in complex networks of power relations that disperse across those settings and affect the people in them. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, “semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status” (1987: 7). This is why, when people recognise that they are being allocated “a differing status” by those around them on the basis of the presence of a child with special needs in their family, they can have feelings such as alienation, loneliness, anger, shame, guilt and so on. It may be that those around them are also constantly reassuring them that they “shouldn’t feel that way at all”, that they “know that’s not real/how it is” – but such reassurances are just as likely to reinforce as diminish feelings of difference.

Fritz provides a great deal of evidence about how discursive coding and social perceptions of autistic children affect mothers in their day-to-day existence. In particular, she observes the operations and impacts of judgement, of the normative gaze and of expectations of “what a child should be”. How a child “should” behave in public is a tacitly agreed social and cultural standard, an unwritten law that often sees not only the behaviour of autistic children on trial, but also the role of their parents, and in particular their mothers. People don’t pay special attention to the child and parent who “fit” the standard but they turn their gaze markedly towards the child and parent who don’t “fit”. Fritz summarises the self-regulating that mothers undertake in response to this sense of being measured and gives an insight into the constant battle they face between what is best for their children and what they feel is “expected” by others:

[The mothers] also encounter the more generalised social stigma involved with an ‘abnormal’ child and must cope with the fact that although the children look ‘normal’, their behaviours in public, and in extended family gatherings, are far from ‘normal’. People’s responses to those behaviours, whether verbal or non-verbal, can be read by the mother as much as judgements upon her as upon her child. She may become apprehensive about taking her child into public places; wonder whether her necessary ways of interacting with him will be ‘judged’ negatively by others; or feel a need to respond to his behaviours in ways which are counter-productive in relation to the techniques used for the treatment of his condition in the family home. (Fritz, 1999: 52)

It is my aim that through this project and through the use of circus as a tool for social change, we can begin to adopt a positive way of interacting with those who are different from a perceived “norm”; that we can recognise how our own use of a normative gaze and silent judgement affect others; that we can begin to look at things from a different perspective to create more positive outcomes for children with special needs and their

families. I am not alone in this aim. Obviously, not all experts and professionals inadvertently adopt negative discourses when dealing with families and autism. Change can be encouraged by the work of particular medical practitioners or therapists. Kaye Dixson, physiotherapist and creator of “The Juggling Brain” program, saw a need for a more open and creative way of working with children with learning difficulties – an approach that would not only improve their physical development, but also boost their self-confidence and creativity. Dixson starting to add juggling exercises into her programs and was impressed by how effectively it worked and how positively parents were responding to it as well.

By working on the vestibular system with juggling exercises, improvements occur in reading ability and writing ability as the pathways are connected and stimulated in the same way. Reading and writing requires a lot of input from the brain. How do you get that input? You can do it with a juggling ball: Can you grip the ball between your index finger and your thumb? These are the same muscles you use to write, then bringing in the eye following the ball as you grip the ball and catch the ball, transfers the specifics of the therapy into learning how to juggle – which is what the juggling brain does.

Kaye Dixson, Physiotherapist, Interview: April, 2012

Dixson’s work is one example of how thinking “outside the box” can help to bridge the gap between expert and patient. I will now explore how the use of circus training can change lives and build brighter futures for children with special needs.

Two: Creative Chaos

Controlled chaos in the circus arts

Circus is an ongoing state of controlled chaos in which several acts – each also utilising controlled chaos – usually take place simultaneously, in training and performance: bodies teeter along tight-wires; knives are juggled with gusto; balancing people and objects in precarious arrangements is a regular pastime; and swinging and flying through the air is the defining activity of the genre. Throw children – literally and figuratively – into the mix and the chaos is sure to escalate, while the control must continue to operate.

Circus schools all over the world encourage children to take risks with their bodies and minds³. It takes a great deal of courage and focus to get up onto a trapeze and thrust yourself into the air, trusting to the fact that your body and mind will remember what your trainer has taught you to do. When flying trapeze is broken down into its constituent parts, the performance is not simply a matter of swing, let go, catch, land in the safety net. Momentum, timing, trust, athleticism and a consciously embodied awareness of distance and gravity all work together in a complicated equation to make a somersault to the catcher look apparently effortless. Momentum, body and thought work together for an aerialist as she flies, in what needs to be recognised as embodied cognition – understanding-action that refuses to acknowledge any mind/body split. Juggling, while less dangerous, holds even more imminent chaos than flying trapeze: patterns and numbers and momentum and timing and once again gravity, all connect the body to the art, making jugglers look as though they could do it in their sleep. However in their many juggling training sessions, balls will have been dropped, fumbled and thrown in wrong directions hundreds of times before the controlled chaos of a seven ball juggling act comes together fluidly.

Without chaos, circus would not hold the magic and mystery that is the very quality that draws children (and adults) to it. Reg Bolton observes that “much of the value and appeal of circus is that it is relatively unexplored and unexplained” (2004: 1). Circus sets up a space that not only allows apparently chaotic actions to take place, but also enables all kinds of misfits, odd-bodies and kooky types to “fit in” together, and to be at the heart of

³ While circus training, like current theory, avoids dualistic separation between the body and the mind, it is nevertheless necessary to use both terms in order to discuss the kind of synchrony to which the training aspires.

the show. For children this makes circus a very appealing setting. And this is particularly the case for children with autism whose behaviour is often monitored closely in the classroom, the playground and in most aspects of their lives. As participants in a circus workshop they are encouraged to let quirky behaviours and excesses of energy “out” while learning how to control and harness them in positive ways towards creative ends.

Within the chaos of circus, the self-control, focus and determination to execute a trick perfectly is what makes a performer achieve mind-body synthesis and draw on deep levels of concentration. An acrobat can be training in a space with 20 other circus performers, all swinging, flying, dangling, flipping and juggling energetically around her, however her mind-body will be connected only to the new trick she is working to perfect. The ability to focus amid the busy disorder that surrounds them intimately connects acrobats to the creative chaos of the circus space as a whole. Once you reach a professional level, the same trick needs to be performed to music, under lights – perhaps strobe – on a stage that might be slightly tilted, with the surrounding activity of other acrobatic performances, the deliberate distractions of clowns who make audience members laugh as they also notice the potential for the acrobats to be dangerously distracted, and then there is that audience, itself consisting of hundreds of potential distractions... but somehow, it all clicks together and works .

Circus *needs* both to utilise and suggest a chaotic process in order to deliver the expected experience, or, professionally conceived, the required product. Underneath the creative chaos is a structure. It is a matter of looking more acutely in order to see it. As an art form circus is not, of course, out of control, despite the old adage, “This place is a circus!” still favoured by media, politicians and people who work in organisations to suggest unproductive chaos overseen by unprofessional people. In an actual circus there is an astutely devised and carefully managed overall plan; a structure, a formula. It so happens that the plan – the order involved in any successful circus show – does not take the form that most people recognise as “orderly”.

In *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice* (2005) Rob Pope makes use of the idea of *chaosmos* – a running together of chaos and cosmos to suggest a composed chaos. He takes the term from Deleuze and Guattari who, in turn, take it from James Joyce, whose invention it is⁴. For Pope, “...it neatly captures the paradox of many visions of creation and versions of creativity, both ancient and modern: the ways of which kinds of order (cosmos) emerge from kinds of apparent disorder (chaos)” (2005: 5). If you were to walk

⁴ Pope notes that the term is used by Umberto Eco in, for example, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* (1989).

into a circus rehearsal or training session you might think, “this place is out of control: nothing will be ready in time, no-one is focusing and no-one is in charge”. However, the chaos of rehearsal *is* ordered in all sorts of ways. For example, you cannot throw your body into a back flip without understanding the technique and timing required to execute it, and considering who and what is around you. Much less would you throw a trick to the flying trapeze catcher randomly, expecting him or her to catch you safely. And each trick is being practised as a constituent of an act that is or will be a constituent of a show that is built out of the skills that each performer has and the components of the potential show that each person or group is rehearsing. There is a plan in advance for the show, but that plan has usually been devised out of the work done in training and rehearsal. When the order of the performance is decided, including the narrative arc that often emerges around the tricks, there may be further changes if new or more challenging tricks are perfected. But once the performance begins, every element is synchronised with every other, every performer is aware of every other, each trick complements each other trick as part of the show as a whole

The “magic of circus” is precisely how it encompasses an ordered chaos, to such an extent that the audience is held throughout in awe of how the performers “bring it off” without being gravely injured. To closely observe committed circus performers training together is to become aware of brains firing with creativity; bodies flaring with skill, strength and enthusiasm; and an extraordinary group energy, a buzz throughout the space that links the bodies together in what it is they are about to create or perform. This is chaosmos as it occurs in circus during the creative process that underpins the devising of the performance, and during the performance itself.

Autism and chaos/chaosmos

It could be said that children with autism live in an almost perpetual state of controlled chaos. They tend to be chaotic beings in the sense that they “bounce” through their days, often swinging from very active and highly strung to quiet and completely reclusive. So, working against these feelings of personal disorder, they will frequently find ways to order themselves, such as only eating green food today, only walking in straight lines this morning, “windmilling” in the backyard or playground for the next two hours, or refusing to walk on carpet this week.

Suppose we place these children in a circus class that is, in effect, a parallel controlled state of chaos? They find themselves in a situation in which, for example, in preparation for walking on the tight-wire they are encouraged only to walk on the one rope stretched

out on the floor, over and over. Training exercises like this obviously allow children with autism to utilise their techniques of control in ways that also help them to focus their bodies on balancing, on connecting left and right brain, and concentrating on a task devised by someone else. Training for a circus trick in such a way invites them to make positive uses of embodied needs, actions, habits and expressions that in other situations appear odd or compulsive. Thus, in a circus class they are encouraged to spend extensive periods *embracing* their desire for repetitive actions and movements, which in turn enhances a comfortable sense of embodiment. To a considerable extent they are able to experience how it feels to “be themselves” in a productive context, learning how to undertake a creative practice in which they are not constrained by their awareness – and/or their family’s awareness – of what is socially “outside” of normal behaviours. The creative energy that circus culture produces, along with the physical risk it promises, provide a unique environment for special needs children to grow and embrace their particular ways of being in the world: their singularity; their difference.

Drawing on his “five fingers” model for the developmental benefits of circus training, Bolton argues that by setting up a creative space that is inclusive, challenging and bubbling with aspiration, it enables children of all types to find an imaginative place in which they feel they “fit”, or “belong”:

The circus can provide an escape from the world, or a colourful universe of possibilities. Both are **imagination**, as well as clearly manifesting the middle finger of **risk and defiance**. (Bolton, 2004: 89; emphasis in original)

Autistic children participating in circus training have the opportunity to step into a world where risk and defiance of the “norm” are encouraged; where imagination and aspiration are expected to be operating at full force – almost “out of control”; and where idiosyncratic, repetitive bodily expressions may well be recognised as providing a basis for new skills and new ideas. To enter this world, even just for an hour a day, can bring a very beneficial change of pace, and experience of affective engagement, for autistic children and their families.

The circus is recognised by those who participate in it as a world of possibilities, where minds are open and bodies are pushed beyond their limits to achieve feats and goals that are deemed not only dangerous, but barely possible. Through circus arts, a person’s body is changed and so is his or her perception of what a body can do. In the mid 1800’s when aerial performance was becoming a widely known art form, ideals of bodies were turned on their heads, as it were, especially in relation to gender. Aerial performance requires female bodies to execute strength-based acrobatics that previously were not considered

appropriate or possible for the female body. Women aerialists, therefore, were often perceived as 'un-feminine'. Peta Tait explored the social perception of aerial performance in *Circus Bodies*:

The social perception of upper body muscularity is not straightforward, because it is conventionally associated with masculine identity. Yet muscular female performers are equally central to the development of aerial performance. (2005: 2)

Since Joseph Leotard, some 300 years ago, took a bar of wood, added some ropes to it and decided he would use it to catapult his body through the air, circus has broken the "rules" and pushed boundaries of what bodies can and cannot do physically, what they should or should not do culturally. This "risk and defiance" is at the heart of the creative chaos that permeates and defines circus. It is also central to how participation in circus can enhance the creative, emotional and physical well-being of children with autism by embracing their differences and encouraging them to break out of the labels, boxes and constraints that they are all too aware of in daily life.

Three: Philosophy and Social Circus

Inventing Social Circus

I will use the term “social circus” often when referring to the style of circus training I have used in working with autistic children and their families. The structure and style of a social circus workshop varies greatly in comparison to a recreational circus workshop. There are different focus points, different needs for the participants and different outcomes from the training. Cirque Du Soliel's community development department, Cirque Du Monde, coined the term “social circus” about 15 years ago. It refers to a style of circus that is used to promote social change and/or community development. Cirque Du Monde undertake many successful social circus programs around the world, including in Australia where they work in Brewarrina, NSW and at the National Institute of Circus in Melbourne. The predecessor form, community circus, began as a practice-based movement in the 1970s, developed by circus artists and social activists who saw the potential of circus as a tool for social change⁵. They began to use the basic principles of circus to work with disadvantaged people, to build confidence and self-esteem, resilience and creativity. In its current form, social circus consciously provides a space for difference, inviting people to bring their own diverse experiences to a space that offers further diverse experiences, rich creative expression, and a safe environment in which to take risks, social and bodily. These are all contributing factors to why social circus has proved to be especially successful for children and young people at risk, those with special needs or those who are simply losing their way.

Clearly, medical and therapeutic knowledge can be brought to bear on why participation in social circus training is particularly beneficial for certain groups of young people. Equally clearly that project needs to be undertaken by people with appropriate expertise. However, in this part of the thesis, as a circus performer and trainer with an interest in cultural theory, I discuss how the benefits that flow to autistic children from the implementation of the practice philosophy of social circus can be better understood through some perspectives offered by the work of the philosopher, Giorgio Agamben.

⁵ In practice terms, social circus remains closely connected to communities and continues to be associated with community development. The development of social circus obviously tracks with similar developments in theatre practice, from “community theatre” into alternative theatre, theatre for change, radical theatre and so on. (See also Foster, 2003)

Social circus sets out to re-create the sense of freedom and fun that is associated with healthy childhoods, making use of elements familiar from play and building playful attitudes among trainers and participants. For children with special needs, social circus can concentrate on providing an apparently non-therapeutic, easy-going creative environment in which they can come to feel safe, while involving them in activities that encourage them to develop a sense of connection – with themselves and with each other. In my experience the combination of a strong sense of safety and playfulness that social circus provides can build confidence and trust while encouraging creative expression and constructive risk taking. In this environment, autistic children often take the opportunity to explore and/or express their individuality, ironically because they are sharing themselves in an inclusive situation in which their concentration is on working/playing with others to make an activity succeed. A therapist described the effects of social circus participation on her autistic clients' confidence like this:

We often see children very nervous of different activities, and hesitant to participate. As it is such a supportive environment, the kids always give it a go, and are able to challenge themselves only as much as they feel comfortable. You can really see their confidence build over the weeks, and it is hoped that they can transfer the confidence into everyday activities, and increase their participation and interactions with their peers.

Danica Lindstrom, Occupational Therapist, Interview: May, 2012

A philosophy of play: autistic children and circus

In *Infancy and History* Agamben observes that play has the effect of suspending time and freeing people from responsibilities. He discusses the connections between some forms of play and rituals, which are features of the sacred that were tied to ceremonies marking out the calendar. These have often become separated from their sacred origins yet remained a part of our play worlds. Examples include gambling with dice, playing with cards, various acrobatic feats, and the “orgiastic disorder” of New Year celebrations, that once involved “the suspension or subversion of social hierarchies, and licence of every kind, whose object...is to ensure both the regeneration of time and the fixity of the calendar” (1993: 68). Indeed, “the origins of most of the games known to us lie in ancient sacred ceremonies, in dances, ritual combat and divinatory practices” (69). However, we have largely lost connection with the myths that were the sacred framework; the cultural narratives that explained that “topsy-turvy sacred” (69), in which the play between order and disorder held a central place in metaphysical understandings of time, matter and being. Yet we have retained the games, the fairs and the carnivals, and a cultural delight

in disorder that we still experience as a kind of timeless time, when, just for a while, the conventional rules of behaviour and the conventional expectations of eventness, are thrown into disarray.

How an audience experiences circus in performance captures many of these elements – familiar objects being used and familiar actions taking place in spectacular, unexpected and risky ways, in an atmosphere that gives an illusion of disorder, where outcomes seem unpredictable and what is at stake appear to be the bodies of the performers. These aspects of circus also echo much older sacred ceremonies in their affect; in how the onlookers are taken “out of time” and “out of themselves”, as audience members might put it. In circus performance, however, the purpose is entertainment – using elements of play to create a sense of playful engagement and out-of-timeness for adults and children alike.

Agamben explores the relationships between sacred play and play for its own sake, which we think of mainly in relation to the play of children. He draws on Collodi’s *Adventures of Pinocchio* in which Pinocchio visits “Playland”, a place where “the population was composed entirely of boys” (Collodi in Agamben, 1993: 67)⁶ and all they did was play. In Collodi’s description of the boys’ many types of play, the prose almost tumbles over itself, even in translation:

...Some were amusing themselves with walking on their hands with their feet in the air; others were trundling hoops or strutting about dressed as generals, wearing leaf helmets and commanding a squadron of cardboard soldiers. Some were laughing, some shouting, some were calling out; others clapped their hands, or whistled, or clucked like a hen who has just laid an egg. To sum it all up, it was such a pandemonium, such a bedlam, such an uproar, that not to be deafened it would have been necessary to stuff one’s ears with cotton wool. In every square canvas theatres had been erected... (Collodi in Agamben, 1993: 67)

The parallels here with the rehearsal space of circus that I referred to earlier, and with aspects of circus in performance, are obvious. Agamben continues:

The immediate result of this invasion of life by play is a change and acceleration of time: ‘in the midst of continual games and every variety of amusement, the hours, the days, and weeks passed like lightning’. As was to be expected, the acceleration of time does not leave the calendar unaltered. The calendar, whose essence is rhythm, alternation and repetition, is now stopped short in the measureless dilation of one long holiday. (1993: 67)

⁶ In Collodi’s nineteenth-century imaginary world, sadly, girls did not have the opportunity to enjoy complete freedom from responsibility in a timeless state of play.

This is the play effect, an effect that adult players, drawing on their childhood memories, go on seeking to recapture or recreate throughout their lives. It is what we refer to as that “moment when time stands still” in immersive experience of play as a part of life that seems to escape ordering. Doubtless this helps to explain why adults continue to “lose themselves” in circus performances.

Agamben suggests that “ritual fixes and *structures* the calendar; play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and *destroys* it” (1993: 69; emphasis in original). Inviting recognition of the extent to which, in the west, ritual has been displaced by a range of activities more akin to play, Agamben observes that:

Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten. And we should not be amazed if, through this oblivion...they free the sacred, too, from its link with the calendar and with the cyclical rhythm of time that it sanctions, thereby entering another dimension of time, where the hours go by in a flash and the days are changeless. In play man frees himself from sacred time and ‘forgets’ it in human time. (Agamben 1978: 70)

Having “forgotten” sacred time and the rituals that mark it – a cultural forgetting that has become almost universal in the west – people who are engaged in current leisure are seeking to “forget” their everyday worries, burdens, responsibilities. That is, they want to “escape the stress of modern life”, as the cliché goes. It is the cliché underpinning the widespread marketing for play-spaces, such as resorts, ocean liners and entire cities (like the Gold Coast and Las Vegas), or play-pastimes, from yoga and meditation to shoot-em-up computer games. Even aspects of the everyday that used to be chores, like cooking and gardening, have been remade in the media as play, relaxation and lifestyle choices. Through play, adults take “time out” from the order of their daily lives.

In an inverse understanding, most children see schoolrooms, homework and family chores as interruptions to an immersion in play that is otherwise generalised⁷. But for autistic children, “forgetting themselves” in play is a more complex notion and less familiar to them than might be assumed. This is especially the case once they realise that their feelings and imaginations can take place in ways that they can’t always manage, and that their forms of personal expression are often not regarded as “normal”. Thus they invent and adopt bodily, psychological and emotional techniques that become rituals. These rituals operate almost like a combination of both the types of ritual that Agamben

⁷ Something recognised by educators who make use of techniques, spaces or objects associated with play to “enrich learning environments” and “engage children more in their learning”.

describes: the sacred rituals, which are ways of making sense of the world, and the rituals performed in “Playland”, that are no longer connected to meaningful rites or narratives, but nevertheless continue to make sense to those performing them in the context of their own imaginaries. These techniques give the children a sense of ordering themselves when they are in shared spaces, but frequently also in private spaces such as alone in their bedrooms, and indeed, in the most private space of all: “in their minds”. Ironically, the various types and degrees of mistaken, ritual self-management that children with autism can undertake (from small mannerisms or habits of daily life to major behavioural challenges) come to be seen as signs that they are “not normal”. And paradoxically, children with this “dis-order” that is popularly characterised as “living in a world of their own”⁸ clearly come to feel much less able than other children to slip comfortably in and out of a play world defined by unfettered imagination and spontaneous self-expression. On the contrary, children with autism are usually preoccupied with ordering their own potentials for “disorderly” self-expression and imaginings, no matter how much they may *appear* to be absorbed in their own imaginative preoccupations. And if their sense of time seems to differ from that of others, doubtless this is usually not because they are happily playing in their own imaginations, but because they are *busy* managing a self that threatens to become disorderly: “busy celebrating rituals”. This is a particularly challenging aspect of the condition for parents, therapists and, if and when they understand their own circumstance, for the children themselves. As Danica Lindstrom observed, the children often feel “very nervous of different activities”. That is, they are reticent to engage in anything that might cause them to let their guard down in the constant busy-ness of ordering themselves. It seems almost as if they fear that they might lose themselves in themselves.

“Whatever being”: quirkiness, singularity and community

While by definition a group activity, circus is founded upon the individual skills and creativity of its participants. The practice philosophy of social circus centres on encouraging a space in which all kinds of people can forget the many things that may hold them back from being the best version of themselves that they can be, and to participate in a space that encourages them to believe that they *are* the best version of themselves that they can be.

In a social circus workshop for children with special needs, each child brings his or her own idiosyncratic personality to the workshop context, and trainers do not expect them to

⁸ An idea reinforced by the term “autism” regardless of its medical usage.

“fit in” with an assumed behavioural “norm”. This produces an eccentric mix of potential creativity, albeit an often chaotic mix. However, it is the freedom of being “allowed” to bring your quirks or differences forward without the fear of ridicule or segregation that helps to make social circus so effective for children with special needs, and, as discussed earlier, a sense of chaos in any case supports creativity. It is the embracing and celebration of difference in circus that allows individual creativity to flow together safely and productively. Circus *relies* on difference to bring the group together. Australian Side Show performer, Captain Frodo, explains the importance of “difference” in his blog, “The Illuminated Showman”:

Difference is the fuel of evolution. Tiny individual differences drive life onward. This is what we celebrate in the Side Show. The carnival is a place where being different makes you stronger.

www.illuminatedshowman.blogspot.com.au

Agamben’s work in philosophy can also help to shed light on how, as “individuals” – indeed, as eccentric and even disorderly subjects – we can “fit in” without “blending in”; how we can be part of a group effort of productive creativity without being compelled to “make ourselves over” into a version of what the group expects a person to be in order to participate in the group.

The opening sentence of Agamben’s book, *The Coming Community* (1993b) is: “the coming being is whatever being.” (1). In explaining his usage, drawing on the Latin “*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum* – whatever entity is one, true, good, or perfect” he continues:

The common translation of this term as ‘whatever’ in the sense of ‘it does not matter which, indifferently’ is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: *Quodlibet ens* is not ‘being, it does not matter which,’ but rather ‘being such that it always matters.’ The Latin always already contains, that is, a reference to will (*libet*). Whatever being has an original relation to desire. (1)

I understand this as referring to being that is not “whatever” in an apathetic way, like a shrug of the shoulders, but being that is whatever it chooses or needs to be in the most important way to itself. Further, it seems to me that Agamben invites us to understand that if being always matters, then all beings always matter, and they matter for the reasons that they matter to themselves, each, singularly. I see that in circus bodies: in their exuberant displays of individuality, using that term in the sense of enjoying their difference

from every other body⁹. It is not at all considered “normal” to juggle knives, swallow swords or flames, swing and fly high in the air or stand on one foot on top of ten other people and two chairs. But as Agamben stresses, “whatever being” is a question of will, of desire: it is a need to *do* what bodies are not supposed to be able to do, and a will to *express* that need, that each performing body seeks and finds in the circus. The practice philosophy of social circus builds on this aspect of all circus, actively encouraging each person to draw on his or her specific desires, will to expression and personal parameters as the things to begin from in finding his or her contribution to the social circus community. Ethics and safety aside, there are no specific rules or codes that people must tick themselves off against in order to “be” a part of the community other than being completely themselves and using their bodies to tell important stories. For me, acknowledgement of “being such that it always matters” is central to social circus. Indeed, all circus in one way or another embraces a notion of each performer as an individual with special skills, and it works for audiences partly because performers build on that in order to convey the embrace of difference to the “everyday Jo/e”: “this act is extraordinary, but if I can do extraordinary things, maybe you can too”. Clowns, of course, play on this by becoming representatives of “everyday Jo/es” in the ring with the acrobatic performers, and demonstrating exceptional skills in apparently ordinary ways. In this way circus signals its knowing engagement in celebrating both the amazing and the everyday, and the capacity that each of us has to engage with both, and *be* both.

Developing his ideas about “the coming being”, and the kinds of community such being can produce, Agamben explains that:

The Whatever in question relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its *being such as it is* ... In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, or this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for being-*such*, for belonging itself. ... The singularity exposed as such is whatever you want, that is, *lovable*. (1993b: 1-2)¹⁰

⁹ And not in its popular usage, tied to post-Enlightenment modernity’s reliance on an ideology of Individualism to guarantee conformity with the terms of the social contract, including the implied terms that bodies should only behave in the ways that it is *agreed* that bodies should behave, and will be ordered, disciplined in one way or another, by oneself as well as others, to do that. See Foucault’s detailed exploration of these issues in *Discipline and Punish* (1991).

¹⁰ To avoid over-simplifying Agamben’s argument to my argument, the first omission from this passage is: “Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides) is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather ‘singularity

For me, this passage describes a way of thinking about oneself and others that provides an alternative to the familiar processes. As discussed earlier in relation to language and power, we are conditioned to use stereotypes, categories and identity politics as means of positioning others *in order to make sense of them* by arranging them into the orders of sameness. Agamben argues that it is not for us to make sense of others by any means other than those that others bring to us – which is how I understand their “being-*such*”. By this means, all people are understood as fundamentally unique. If each of us recognises this, we might be able to let go of the personal struggle *make sense of ourselves* by making ourselves fit into categories that are culturally and socially provided for us. What if we can make sense *to ourselves* simply in terms of being whatever we are, “being-*such*” (even though that will be shaped by our social and cultural experience)? Could we then understand ourselves through what we “*want*”, as and for ourselves, and could we find ourselves “*lovable*”? If we can put an end to the personal struggle to define belonging in terms of categories, we can give others the right to determine their own belongings outside categories as well, and we can begin our relations with others from the understanding that all of them are potentially *lovable*.

I have found the notion of the singularity as used by Agamben especially helpful in thinking more specifically about how social circus workshops provide what seems, quite quickly, to feel like “safe space” for autistic children. It needs to be remembered that these children often feel unsafe, even in their own space. The practice in social circus of welcoming and celebrating difference, and the emphasis on the fact that difference fuels creativity and creativity fuels good circus, means that each child can gradually come to feel not only comfortable in their difference, but enjoy it, at least while in the workshops. More than this, though, each child can begin to allow him-/herself to be such as s/he is. Children might even start to feel that they are lovable to themselves. I am grateful to Agamben for this insight into *how* our practice might be achieving the benefits that we can see it is achieving for children with autism. If that new sense of confidence that Danica remarked on is underpinned by the children having felt a loving relationship with themselves, then there is more likelihood that they will, as Danica hoped, “transfer the confidence into everyday activities”

Agamben also helps me to understand that the celebration of idiosyncrasies and quirks, in recognition that everyone has them and they are all different, is actually crucial to the success of these workshops with autistic children. Desiring to be oneself, “being-*such*”, is

insofar as it is whatever singularity”. The second omission is: “Thus being-*such*, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging (‘there is an *x such that* it belongs to *y*’) and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself”.

reinforced by the relaxed and welcoming attitudes of trainers towards the children's techniques of self-management. Their quirks, in other words, can come with them as part of "belonging itself". There are no qualifications on belonging in the workshops either, meaning there is no rule saying that they should not express themselves as they usually do. Their quirks are, in effect, "normalised" in the context of the workshop. The children quickly realise that the circus workshop brings individuals together into a community of training performers precisely by asking them to bring their quirks with them – not leave them at the door/tent-flap.

Love, Agamben says,

...is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favour of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. (1993b: 2)

For children with autism, a social circus workshop can break through the layers of quirkiness that they place between themselves and others, themselves and themselves, precisely by embracing that quirkiness and incorporating it into the development of individual skills, the fashioning of a trick that requires collaboration with others and the creation of a group performance that will be unique. In achieving these things, the children experience community – not as a matter of hiding their differences but through enjoying them. Agamben has helped me to understand why this can happen.

Because I have seen autistic children, other children with special needs and youth at risk engage in these processes, I know that there is more at work than the implementation of a sense of equity and opportunity for every child, however important this is. Many contexts in which such children are asked to participate begin from that premise. Sometimes they benefit from therapeutic and educational activities and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they choose to participate and often they don't. When it comes to circus workshops, my questions have become, "What makes circus different? Why does it so often work?"

Social circus in practice

The work of the late Dr Reg Bolton, a highly respected Youth Circus practitioner, has provided a strong set of guiding principles in the development of my practice and this project. Bolton worked with children and young people all over the world, from all walks of life and brought the circus experience to them with his "circus in a suitcase" concept. The Circus in a Suitcase program began in the late 1970s and continues to run today. It allows

circus to become available to children of all walks of life in all places around the world. Circus in a Suitcase simplifies the spectacle of the big top into a portable kit that can be taken into any space to create a circus workshop.

I recently facilitated a similar style of workshop in which I worked for three weeks, two hours a week, with a group of young people “at risk”. I arrived at the workshop with only a bag that held a skipping rope and some juggling balls, and a pile of hula-hoops slung over my shoulder. What started as a group of strangers quickly became a group connected by the art of circus. I started by throwing a juggling ball around the room, asking each participant to say his or her name and throw it back to me: to break the ice; to learn each other’s names. This grew into a juggling game, which then saw me suggest: “who wants to try to juggle while skipping at the same time?” This is where the energy switched – where kids who were closed off to socialising or joining in, began to encourage each other to try different tricks in the skipping rope, and then gradually let their own guard down to try some tricks themselves. Slowly they began to trust each other enough to stand on each other in human pyramids. Those who weren’t open to that had the option of hula hooping or juggling on their own, so they were able to remain part of the group; to participate at a level that was comfortable for them. In the short time we spent together, the participants and I were able to use social circus to start to bridge the gaps between the young people and instill the beginnings of self-confidence, hope and creative expression.

In implementing the practice philosophy of social circus and the “circus in a suitcase” concept not only with children with special needs and youth at risk, but also with children who have learning difficulties and refugee children, I have become increasingly aware of how social circus training does suspend time and reality for the young people. This allows them to be “outside themselves” and their burdens – that is to temporarily “forget” their everyday selves. In turn, this enables them to connect to playful and imaginative aspects of what it can mean to be a child, which, of course, helps them to reconnect them with themselves as desiring bodies; as people who want to be what they feel they can be; as being-*such*, and mattering to themselves. That experience frees them to become willing to take emotional, physical and creative risks that reward them with new perceptions of what is possible for them and others.

Bolton develops his concepts further in his doctoral thesis, *Why Circus Works* (2004). He explains his understandings in terms of a ‘hand analogy’ in which the hand represents the six aspects of how circus can be used to provide a significant developmental experience for children and young people:

It consists of the five fingers of the hand, plus the palm. The index finger, the one that points, represents the self-design, individuation, showing off. The middle finger, the one that sticks out and gets hurt most often, represents risk. The ring finger, cosily enclosed by the others, suggests trust and comfort and also raises the important issue of touching. The smallest finger, alongside all the bigger ones, is about aspiration, as it dreams of being big one day. The thumb is utilitarian and functional, and evokes the idea of hard work and resilience. Finally, the ticklish, sensitive palm represents the element of fun, play, laughter and happiness. (Bolton, 2004: 20)

Anecdotal evidence from colleagues suggests that this simple explanation of the hand analogy has been widely adopted by circus practitioners around the globe, becoming a model that is drawn on in their training and teaching sessions with children, as well as in their planning and thinking about their own practice.

Social circus is taught particularly flexibly. Trainers will often meet before and after a class to debrief on the students' progress and to shape classes to suit the group dynamic. Within the structure of the circus class there is a diversity of teaching methods and styles dependent upon which trainers are taking the class and which circus skills are being taught.

Because of the style of learning environment that circus sets up – one that is personal to the trainer's style of teaching – it is diverse and every trainer has a slightly different way of approaching the training. Kids fit into the learning style comfortably, finding a trainer that suits their learning ability or style. They will gravitate towards their natural skill and find a trainer who suits them.

Davy Sampford, Flipside Circus trainer, Interview: April 2012

Davy Sampford is professional juggler and I am a professional aerialist. We have taught together for many years and yet we approach a class from vastly different angles. This may sound like a potential problem, trying to bridge our teaching styles, however due to the flexible nature of the circus class itself, Sampford and I can overlap our styles in a way that enables all kinds of children to feel catered for. For example a child who is not connecting with me and the trapeze skills, may find herself inspired and in awe of juggling and hence drawn to Davy as a mentor rather than me, and vice versa. The diversity in the personalities and skills of the trainers reinforces the emphasis on acceptance of "all types" in the circus class.

As trainers in a social circus class, we are often challenged to extend and develop our usual teaching methods. I always go into a circus class with a lesson plan of what I will teach skill-wise and an idea of how I will teach it. However, quite often that plan becomes redundant. Davy has had the same experience:

I've found that I have learned from the kids. It has helped me break down the way I teach things. It's different every time. Kids with different learning abilities: you have to modify it and have a whole different bunch of ways of teaching. That has been a bit hard for me, as I have a particular technical way of juggling. But you really have to throw that out the window and pick up a different perspective on how you teach the circus skills.

Davy Sampford, Flipside Circus trainer, Interview: April, 2012

Again, this may seem seriously challenging, to have to continuously “think on your feet” while teaching the kinds of high risk physical activities involved in circus to children who can be unpredictable and chaotic in their behaviour. However, as explored in the previous chapter, circus is a chaotic art form and its need for a flexible structure along with what may appear as a lack of order or control is what makes it an ideal creative learning environment for children. This is especially so when it is children with autism. That the teaching of the practice is able to be dynamic, flexible and adaptable to the children being taught is just as important as the characteristics of the training environment and the values that the children encounter.

As I have explained here, all of these elements come together to work for children with autism; to provide them with an experience that involves the circus and the trainers welcoming them to bring their ways of being into the circus, and the successful implementation of the training relies on us in entering into their ways of being in order to help them try new things out with us and with each other. When they become ready to do that, they have in fact stepped into themselves in ways that they usually avoid and with a confidence they are not used to feeling.

Four: A Community of Outsiders

Trust and community

In my time as a youth/social circus practitioner I have experienced first-hand how trust and group dynamics play vital roles in helping the circus community develop and grow. The core of the work in a youth circus is with children undertaking training on a regular basis in much the same way as other children undertake dance or music classes, or participate regularly in a sport. It is, of course, often the case that circus proves to be personally valuable to many of these children as much as it provides them with skills and performance experience. However, I have also witnessed how circus can have a remarkable impact on the wider community. Social circus undertakes a great deal of community outreach, taking the circus out for particular programs. The aim is to engage the participants more positively with themselves and other people, with their own lives, through engaging with circus training. This often has the added effect not only of extending the circus community but of building new communities. Examples of this can be seen in the work I have done over the years using social circus with refugee children.

Working with Flipside Circus and the Queensland Program for Survivors of Trauma and Torture I developed a series of workshops with the refugee community in Brisbane. During the twelve-month project, workshops were delivered to several primary schools with high percentages of refugee children. The workshops aimed to provide an active and creative environment for the children to develop their self-confidence and to build friendships and trust with their peers.

The children had all experienced extreme trauma and many had suffered and/or witnessed serious violence. Sudanese and Liberian children made up the majority of the workshop participants along with some from Burma and Afghanistan. Understandably, many of the parents of the children arrived in Australia with a lack of trust of anyone outside of their immediate family, even fellow refugees. Sudan and Liberia have a difficult relationship with each other and there was, consequently, a significant degree of tension between families. Some of the adults did not want their children working together and were passing this tension on to the children, who at one stage refused to play together in the workshops. However, we persevered, gently encouraging them to work together in a

way that enabled the children to form bonds as naturally as possible, to learn to trust each other physically and creatively.

A few months into the workshop program, QPASTT noticed that tension between Liberian and Sudanese adults was beginning to ease due to the trust and friendships that the children were building with each other in the circus workshops. At the end of the program, we held a performance for the children which all of the parents attended. They socialised with each other, shared food, and watched their children share in the experience of performing a circus show. It was the start of a new community.

Trust developed among the children as they became part of the circus community through their learning and sharing of skills. As another trainer described it:

Over time, an increase in trust and sharing of common goals was clearly evident among the children, as they learnt that if they acted responsibly themselves, their acrobatic partners would have more confidence in them, see that they were both focused on achieving the same things, and act responsibly in return. Physically, the children would become more daring with each session, as they learnt to trust not only the other children and their trainers, but also themselves and their own capabilities – it was always very moving when a student who initially trembled with fear and apprehension at being mere centimeters off the ground, gained enough confidence over time to scale the trapeze with ease and stand on top of a human pyramid with a wide grin of satisfaction on their faces.

Jessica Radvan, Circus Trainer, Interview: March, 2012

Bolton emphasises ‘the significant moment when an outsider becomes an insider’ in circus (2004: 4). The QPASTT circus project was a perfect example of this. The children reached a point where they were all working together, building trust in each other. In the challenge of creating a human pyramid or holding each other on a trapeze, a level of trust develops in the group that brings everyone together on an emotional and physical level. There is no room for anyone to be made to feel as though they are not part of the group or that they do not fit in. It is not only the trust required in these moments that creates a strong group dynamic. It is also the energy that is shared by the group afterwards, having achieved something together that may have seemed impossible at the start.

Last year I worked with a group of young autistic children and their mothers, running a circus workshop each week for the children to develop their motor skills, their focus and concentration. After a few weeks I started to notice that there were other levels to the workshops that were starting to form. The children were slowly becoming more and more bonded to each other, much like siblings. They began to cheer each other on in difficult tricks, to support each other emotionally in their training as well as physically. I also

noticed that the mothers who came with their children to the workshops each week were starting to form bonds with each other and also with the other children in the program. The workshops provided an opportunity to share their stories as mothers of autistic kids, to listen to each other; a chance to support each other when their children struggled with a task and to congratulate each other when their children had breakthrough moments. In their time at the circus they found a common ground, a way to belong without feeling a need to explain anything about their family. In fact the very things that can so readily isolate them from “normal” society – the idiosyncrasies and challenging behaviours of their children – were precisely what linked them together at the circus. In effect, the mothers became a new community: a community of “outsiders” who became “insiders” in an environment that allowed them to celebrate the difference of their children together.

Difference, creativity and community

Rob Pope (2005) explains Deleuze and Guattari's *heterogenesis* as “a multidirectional and multidimensional activity of creation” (5). This suggests an interesting parallel to the creative process of the circus and the diverse and inclusive community that develops as a result of the chaotic creativity of practice. For Deleuze and Guattari the idea of heterogenesis “involves kinds of intricately interdependent but strictly unpredictable ‘becoming’ (‘being still to come’)” (Pope, 2005: 5)¹¹. Pope explains how heterogenesis highlights the multiple “intersecting planes” in which creation may occur. He cites these from Deleuze and Guattari:

(i) *Philosophy*, in so far as it is primarily involved in the creation of *concepts* (abstract systems of virtual worlds); (ii) *art* (including literature), in so far as it is primarily involved in the creation of *affects* (sensory embodiments of possible worlds); and (iii) *science*, in so far as it is primarily involved in the creation of *percepts* (sensory embodiments of functional worlds). (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, in Pope, 2005: 4-5)

Pope observes, again citing Deleuze and Guattari, that “what we actually encounter is an overlapping of domains: ‘three modes of thought intersect and intertwine’ such that ‘a rich tissue of correspondences can be established between the planes’” (Pope, 2005: 5) I have experienced all three “domains” as a circus performer and as a circus trainer. And these domains also help in understanding why and how circus is particularly valuable with children with autism; how the children need concepts, affects and percepts to come

¹¹ This is another compound word (from the Greek for “varied” and “birth”), another way of describing and exploring what they also refer to as chaosmos.

together in ways that make sense to them in order for them to make sense of themselves in the world.

Although similar in movement and technique, the practice philosophy of circus, the concepts informing the practice, differ significantly from gymnastics, athletics and even ballet. These strive for perfection in individual performance, producing elite athletes or dancers, even when there is a troupe involved. Circus, as previously discussed, is an inclusive, non-competitive, pluralistic and quirky, multi-sided art form in which any individual can become part of the group, no matter their size, shape or age as long as they have or develop skills that contribute to the creative potentials of the whole. The mode of their participation simply depends on the skills they choose to develop. As Davy Sampford observes, children in circus training gradually

...become more expressive, and then slowly they start to gel with the group and the other kids training with them. There are not many kids who stay on the outside of the group for long. It becomes somewhere for them to fit in because circus is not just one discipline. For example, if you are not doing so well on trapeze, you can try juggling or unicycle.

Davy Sampford, Flipside Circus Trainer, Interview: April, 2012

Because of the practice philosophy, which contributes to the “energy” that circus generates, it attracts people who would sit on the outside of most other “creative worlds”, the “virtual” or “possible worlds” created in and by performance. Circus adopts a conceptual frame in which all kinds of people can sit comfortably, without compromising their identity. For children with autism this is rare, to be able simply to fit in, without having to alter their behaviour or physicality first. For their families this brings a sigh of relief. *They* can leave their apologies, explanations and defenses about their children’s difference at the door. They can rest in the knowledge that for the time that they are in the circus space, they belong, regardless.

The physicality of circus as an art captures the “sensory embodiment of possible worlds” of which Deleuze and Guattari write. Trust and sharing is crucial for circus tricks to take place: standing on someone’s shoulders and knowing that they will not drop you. As the skills become more involved and more advanced the level of trust and group dynamic also advances. Not only are circus students connected by their trust in each other, but also by their touch: catching each other midair; gripping one another’s hands and feet; balancing on more than one person at a time. For children with autism, this experience of sensory embodiment is often a crucial part of their physical therapy: to be able to “locate” their bodies in the space; to feel their hands grip the ropes on a trapeze; coordinating their left from right when they are upside down – all of these embodied practices can activate

the brain in specific ways that aid their development. The bonus is the confidence and joy that the children express, and the joy that their parents and siblings can experience from seeing them enjoying this sensory embodiment characteristic of the circus. It is clearly a very welcome change from their day to day existence which usually sees them “trapped” in their bodies to varying extents.

Kaye Dixson has seen the “embodiment of functional worlds” in the children she works with in The Juggling Brain program. Dixson began to notice that through the connection to a skill or art such as juggling, the child became an “expert” juggler. It was a way in which they could connect themselves to their physical development through learning a special skill that not every child excels in. In training their proprioception, vestibular systems and overall brain function through the act of learning how to juggle, not only do children improve in their sensory development, they also *become* “a juggler” – something that makes them stand out in a positive way, a skill that they are encouraged to become obsessive about.

I had a lot of 8, 9 and 10 year old boys, who would be doing poorly at school, bored at school, not reading and writing well: they were depressed about their own abilities. So I started saying to them, ‘you’re coming here, but what you’re coming here for...is to learn how to juggle! And very few people in your class are able to juggle. And you’re going to be one of the best at juggling’. Now, for a child who had not succeeded in anything, they usually were not good at sport, they were not academic...this was the first tempting thing for them.

Kaye Dixson, Physiotherapist, Interview: April, 2012

In using the circus skill of juggling, Dixson has provided a goal for the children to reach that helps them motivate themselves to continue improve. Once you have mastered one ball and then there are two and then three, then comes throwing it under your leg, spinning around and catching etc. There is no end to what can be achieved and within this – the constant improvement and connection to their sensory embodiment, to the world of juggling – the children grow in physical development, but more so in confidence and their connection to themselves. Becoming a juggler allows them to make sense of where they “fit in” *in their own terms*.

The belonging encouraged is built from a recognition of difference, on embracing a position that is, as Elspeth Probyn (1996) puts it, “outside belonging”. Because, remembering Agamben, belonging that is a question of categories, sets and classes is the kind of belonging that children with autism or children with learning difficulties are anyway put “outside” of by those who are “normal” and take themselves to be the “inside”. What we aspire for in our work in social circus is, in these terms, to bring everyone we work with

inside their own outside belonging; to come to terms with what is actually special about themselves, so that they can, in turn, join a circus community largely constituted of other people who have been or are, in one way or another, “outside belonging”. In becoming comfortable in the circus community, children with autism come to be inside a community of other outsiders, and to understand that they are in a space and a community where their belonging *such as it is*, can belong.

Five: Therapeutic Benefits

[Circus] gives them an opportunity to develop balance and coordination through the use of their bodies in a direct, physical way – it's their hands that hold onto the bar and keep them from falling, it's their feet that step onto the trampoline and first make contact with the mat once they've jumped.

Jessica Radvan, Circus Trainer, Interview: March, 2012

Therapeutically speaking...

Beyond the creative and emotional benefits that circus holds for children with special needs, there are direct connections to therapeutic benefits similar to physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Having come to specialise in children with learning and other disabilities, focusing on brain development, Kaye Dixson has worked with many different children over the last twenty-five years in her practice as a physiotherapist. As mentioned earlier, Dixson developed The Juggling Brain program in order to help children connect to their bodies in a way that was motivating and inspiring to them. Rather than the standard way of approaching therapy, she looked to juggling:

I start with the sensory systems and then the coordination systems: tactile, vestibular-balance, proprioception – knowing where your body is in the space – kinaesthetic patterns, and audio and visual. And by assessing these areas I could find out which area was failing for them and then target that area with specific exercises but always with this goal in mind...which is juggling.

Kaye Dixson, Physiotherapist, Interview: April 2012

Juggling became the focus of her therapy sessions with children struggling to learn how to read and write, children with low muscle tone and children with special needs. By breaking down the art of juggling into exercises that targeted the key areas that the children needed to work on, the children stayed focused and developed in areas in which they had previously "failed":

I would then break it down for them and say: 'okay so the first thing we need to have for you to juggle is that we need to have your eyes working fantastically'. And so we would do some eye exercises where you have to catch the ball, then we would work on crossing the ball over the body, crossing over the 'midline' of the brain etc. And it was always aimed towards 'being a great juggler'. So I would be working on their brains and bodies but for them, it was the juggling that was the great motivator to improve.

Circus trainer Davy Sampford has also worked with all types of children for many years in his role as juggling trainer at Flipside Circus. Sampford has noticed that for some children, the circus class is their first experience of using their bodies actively and creatively:

For some kids it is the first time they have had to put brain and body together. Some kids get sent to circus training by their parents because they are not good at sport, or they haven't done anything really physical before. And so it is the first sort of port of call of connecting themselves to their bodies.

Davy Sampford, Flipside Circus Trainer, Interview: April, 2012

Sampford and I worked together on a series of workshops in 2008 with the Cerebral Palsy League, initiated by Associate Professor Roslyn Boyd of the University of Queensland. Associate Professor Boyd came up with the idea of a "circus clinic" for which children with cerebral palsy. Given that the children tended to favour a "good" side and let the "bad" side become even less able through lack of use, they would come to Flipside Circus for two weeks of workshops focused around developing both sides of their bodies. In the workshops the children would be encouraged, for example, to use their hemiplegic hand to grip the trapeze bar or juggle. This was done by placing a glove over their "good" hand that prevented them from using it to grip effectively. During the workshop series parents began to notice improvements in their children's physical development and personal confidence as a result of the circus training: "I've never even see Mitchell on a monkey bar, so to see him up on a trapeze was something really special" (Parent 1, "Circus Therapy and Cerebral Palsy", *A.M. Program*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC], July 19 2008)

After a few sessions the parents were also beginning to see benefits from the circus training in day to day tasks: "Just the smaller things that we take for granted that he couldn't do that he's now doing, like doing up a zipper on his jacket or a button" (Parent 2, "Circus Therapy and Cerebral Palsy", *A.M.*, ABC, July 19 2008). The circus clinic was followed up with brain imaging tests to measure any physical improvement made and whether those improvements could result in long term gains. Flipside Circus is about to embark on the next series of workshops later this year with the original group of participants to document their progress since the last circus clinic.

The original project with Roslyn Boyd was the stepping-stone that led occupational therapist, Fiona Jones and I, in 2010, to begin running workshops for children with special needs at Flipside Circus. This program continues as a regular part of Flipside's youth circus training program and Jones, who continues to work alongside me in the program,

says that she has observed a range of positive benefits from the training among the children:

Therapeutically, I have seen benefits such as: improvement in muscle tone and motor coordination; improvement in posture; improved attention; improved ability to participate in a group and confidence in social interactions; improved self-perception and motivation; improved perception by siblings and parents. These are noted outside of the circus environment also.

Fiona Jones, Occupational Therapist, Interview: May, 2012

From the start, Jones and I would run the workshop on a weekly basis, with circus trainer Jessica Radvan joining me in leading the circus skills. We would often have the children work with us on some circus skills such as trapeze, then work with Jones on basic motor skills such as using scissors to cut paper, or handwriting exercises. The workshop was structured so that parents and siblings could stay and watch, and sometimes participate, making the experience less intimidating for the children and creating a family environment that was supportive and fun. Often there would be assistant/trainee occupational therapists who would join in on the workshop series to learn and gain some practical experience working with the children. One of those trainees was Danica Lindstrom, who not only noticed the similarities between circus training and traditional methods of occupational and physical therapy, but also how effective circus was in positively impacting on the children, which was in turn improving their other activities:

You can see the children becoming more coordinated, and having a better understanding of how different movements should feel while they are doing them. Different movements and sensations such as jumping, swinging, and spinning, often are seen to have a calming effect, or can make the child more focused in class. Circus training can help children identify what movements feel like, which translates across. This is particularly important for children with poor motor planning and body awareness.

Danica Lindstrom, Occupational Therapist, Interview: May, 2012

What can bodies do?

Spinoza famously observed that “we do not yet know what a body can do” (*Ethics*, 1677), which is a wonderfully open idea that parallels the approach to bodies involved in the practice philosophy of social circus. We begin with recognising that each person is a collection of potentials waiting to find out what s/he is capable of doing. The aim of the workshops and individual training sessions is to help people extend their bodies in ways that they may not have themselves thought possible, and through doing that, enable them to become more capable and confident in other aspects of their lives. In our work with children with cerebral palsy, whose bodies seem “limited” from the outset, it was still possible to help them experience newfound bodily capacities which led to newfound

personal capacities. For Kaye Dixon's young clients, taking on the challenge of using their bodies to develop the skills of juggling contributed to a significant improvement in their cognitive skills. For the refugee children with whom I worked, the impacts of trauma could be seen in every aspect of their lives, but in conquering fear, shyness and antipathies within the group, in order to become skilled circus participants using their bodies in performance, the children became an example of confidence and collaboration as members of a wider community experiencing healing. Jessica Radvan's comments suggest the usefulness of circus with children with "ADHD", for example, as well as those with autism, when she stresses the focus and attention required to absorb and process the directions and techniques of circus training:

Often the best way to learn a new circus skill is not by understanding an explanation, but by observing a demonstration – it was interesting to note the change in attention and concentration as the children quickly learnt that if they didn't watch, they just wouldn't know where to start, and hence, wouldn't get to try to master 'that cool trick'.

Jessica Radvan, circus trainer, Interview: March, 2012

Children with autism expend a great deal of personal energy on trying to "control" their own bodies and/or how their bodies engage with the world, in an effort to make the rest of their sense of themselves feel less confusing and more meaningful. That is, they make use a range of emotional, cognitive and bodily techniques of discipline, and, as already explained, in doing so they often produce more problems for themselves in relation to their families and the wider community. In turn, families frequently feel pressured to prevent their children from using their modes of expression in public, so becoming inadvertently complicit in the kind of disciplinary regimes that the culture, in any event, expects us all to exercise.

Foucault (1991) was deeply concerned with how bodies are disciplined and discipline themselves, by and on behalf of society, as part of the perpetuation of power-knowledge relations and the hegemonics they support. He gives us an insight into how bodies become "docile" in culture, having been disciplined through the imposition of timetables; through the imposition of temporal rhythms on bodily actions (his example is troops marching, but we might also think of twentieth-century factory assembly lines) and then through control of how the body can move to achieve a task (which he demonstrates through the teaching of handwriting to French children in the eighteenth century):

3. Hence *the correlation of the body and the gesture*. Disciplinary control does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between gesture and overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed. In the correct use of the body,

which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required. A well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture. Good-handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the point of the feet to the tip of the index finger. (Foucault, 1991:152)

In circus we are also concerned with bodily discipline, concentrating on every individual gesture in its relations with the whole body in training, and practising a skill so often that it no longer appears to require effort. However, in circus, the trainee or performer is disciplining her or his own body towards a creative end. Skills development through concentrated discipline in circus has the objective of producing not “docility”, in Foucault’s sense of compliance, but a highly independent, active, co-ordinated, self-motivated body.¹² Trainees quickly take responsibility for their own disciplined skills development because of their sense of achievement during stages of training and their enthusiasm for the end result.

For autistic children, their personal response to their difference has frequently included various degrees of self-imposed disciplinary attempts to achieve docility, a compliant self, through having a reclusive, quiet, non-engaged body and/or through various kinds of repetitive, excessive activity. For these children, the disciplinary regimes of circus training can provide respite from their self-disciplinary techniques, even when their own techniques are utilised to kick-start the training regime. So, Foucault’s work provides valuable insight into both the “problem” facing autistic children, their families and their therapists, and the solutions, or at least the assistance, that circus training offers.

Foucault’s fourth form of discipline involves “body-object articulation”, in which “discipline defines each of the relations that the body must have with the object that it manipulates...” (1991: 152-153) Foucault’s example is rifle training in the eighteenth-century French military through which soldiers become seamlessly compliant parts of the military machine. For circus, on the other hand, an experience (for the performer) and/or illusion (for the audience) of seamless articulation between the body in performance and the objects with which it interacts is achieved through disciplined training that is driven by the productive desire of the performer to bring off the trick. Of course, in the case of high risk acts, such as trapeze, sword swallowing, knife juggling, vaulting and so on, the

¹² Remembering that the kind of circus training I have been describing does not envisage a dualistic body, a body that is “under the control of the mind”, the person training is also not trying to make her body somehow compliant under her will, “subservient to her mind”, but is working with her body, in which consciousness is embodied and cognition is as much a physical as a mental capacity. Will, in my thinking here, is linked to desire, as in Agamben’s discussion cited earlier.

relationship between bodies and objects *must* be right, as matter of life and death. Indeed, far from having a relation of dominance over objects (“over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, fastening them one to the other” – Foucault, 1991: 153), circus performers have feelings of warmth, respect, even love for the objects with which they interact in highly disciplined ways.

For children with autism, objects often become appropriated into their self-management techniques. This may be part of their play habits, for example: only dinosaurs will be read about; only dinosaur games will be played; only dinosaur toys will be played with; one kind of dinosaur will be played with this week; only blue dinosaurs of that kind will be played with today in this game. It may be part of their ways of negotiating the world: I will only walk up steps on the left side and today I will always jump over every third step; I will not use the yellow plates for my food, I will only have the white ones. Or it may be that it will be essential to their private sense of safety: I will only go to sleep in my own bed, with my own particular green spotted cat, with the one pillow and one doona that I prefer. In social circus workshops, children can find the particular objects with which they feel they want to be associated and their skills development will be focused towards the tricks that use those objects. If they have preferred ways of engaging with the world, those can often be incorporated into training: “John always likes to be to the left of the blocks”. If their object-relations change, the teaching is sufficiently flexible to deal with that. If there are particular objects of their own that need to accompany them to the workshops, that can happen too. Once again, with objects as with other aspects of their ways of inhabiting space, the children’s quirks are welcomed and utilised, so that they often surprise parents and therapists in quite quickly demonstrating willingness to participate in training.

Deleuze and Guattari take up Spinoza in their exploration of the potentials of bodies in their relations with each other and with the world.¹³ For Deleuze and Guattari, like Agamben, it is important to avoid categories (like species or genus, or “like defining a body by its organs and functions”). In considering each body, they state, “we will seek to count its affects” (1987: 257). I understand this as setting out to understand bodies, our own and others, by how they impact on others – not by “what they do”, but how they make things happen, how that produces *affects* in the world and how they produce feelings in others:

¹³ The chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible”, has many insights to offer in any broader consideration of how bodies become-otherwise in situations such as circus training and performance.

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, the affects of another body...either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (1987: 257)

Social circus values individual bodies and their skills and works with them towards how they can work with other bodies. The idea of bringing a number of bodies together to compose another “body” sits easily with circus practice. Just as the point of individual training is to produce a body that works to the best it can, the point of performance is to bring groups together to work on an act “as if with one mind-body”, “working as one”.

This, of course, produces a particular challenge for children with special needs, and particularly for children with autism. That we have seen them become willing to participate suggests that the new relations they start to enter into with their own bodies make them more able to consider entering into relation with other bodies working to the same end. To a considerable extent, what changes, I suggest, is a matter of affect, of feelings. The children allow themselves to become involved in touching, feeling and sharing. Given that the inability or unwillingness to enter into those kinds of situations is a defining aspect of the condition of autism, it seems that circus offers an especially valuable therapeutic potential.

In my years as a youth circus practitioner I have often seen circus provide a supportive creative environment for children to achieve things they may never have dreamed of doing before. Kaye Dixson, in relation to *The Juggling Brain*, agrees:

It allows children, once you get their systems going, to tap into what their gifts and talents are. I see children who you would have thought were not going to do well at anything, end up winning writing competitions, end up playing the piano.

Kaye Dixson, Physiotherapist, Interview: April, 2012

For all who train for it, circus requires, focus, discipline and repetitive gestures, all aimed at shaping the body to be the strongest, most agile and functional body it can be. In the creative chaotic training space that circus provides, this is combined with a high level of discipline to enable each performer to tap into the possibilities of what the body can do in a way that challenges them emotionally and creatively. For children with autism, to undergo such training and to experience such feelings clearly constitutes a kind of “breakthrough” opportunity, but at the very least, it can give them and their families periods of respite that have the potential to be carried over into daily life.

Social Circus as physical therapy... at a glance

Here I will briefly outline how circus training can target specific muscle groups in a similar way to physiotherapy. I will also highlight the emotional and/or cognitive benefits that accrue from each activity. Although based on my own professional observations, there are also links to Bolton's "Hand Analogy" which I explored earlier. This summary of each basic aspect of social circus training is designed simply to indicate various ways in which circus workshops can provide a significant therapeutic experience for children with autism.

The Group Warm-up: *team work* – learning to work beyond the individual, waking up the body in a non-invasive way, verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction.

Tight-wire: *the self* – promotes balance and control, focus, left and right brain connecting, stimulating the vestibular system, proprioception (e.g. maintaining awareness of relations between the body, the wire and space).

Trapeze: *risk, hard work* – promotes aerial awareness, gripping the bar for tactile awareness, core strength, proprioception (e.g. locating the body in space when upside down), confidence.

Juggling: *aspiration* – promotes goal-setting (juggling 2 balls, then 3, then 5 etc.), gross and fine motor skills, crossing the 'midline' of the body, following instruction, focusing on a task as an individual within the group, touch-connection, balance, core strength, object-relations, proprioception.

Performance: *Showing off/fun* – promotes confidence, trust, showing a new side of the self as part of a group, and provides strong feelings through moments of individual and group success.

Six: Changing How We See Ourselves and Each Other

The antinomy of the individual and the universal has its origin in language. The word ‘tree’ designates all trees indifferently, insofar as it posits the proper universal significance in place of a singular ineffable tree (*terminus supponit significatum pro re*). In other words, it transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property (the condition of belonging ...). (Agamben, 1993: 9)

Being-within an outside

As a matter of therapeutic and educational practice, children with special needs get put into categories: Autistic Spectrum, Asperger’s, ADHD, Cerebral Palsy, Dyslexic, Downe’s Syndrome ... “special needs” is itself a label, a category. I have been unable to avoid these categories in writing this dissertation. These labels are something that they will most likely carry for the entirety of their lives, due to Western culture’s long-established need to “order” human beings into categories according to status, financial or social standing, health status and so on¹⁴. In the observation above, from *The Coming Community*, Agamben highlights the question of the individual and universal in language: how one word is often used to represent a group: ‘tree’ signifying all trees. Since each person in the language group is likely to think of a particular tree in relation to the word, that one tree clearly cannot represent all of the trees in nature when there are so many varieties and species; it is merely one instance of how a ‘tree’ may be, look, smell, feel etc, but there are enough shared qualities for tree-ness for a slide from the individual to the universal to take place. It is not the only version of a tree people know, nevertheless, the operation of the word in language is to *stand in for* all those other versions of trees. Similarly, grouping certain people, based on some shared qualities, under a label that “stands in for” all the other versions of people that they might be, helps society to understand where they may fit into “the grand scheme of things”; it creates a condition of belonging that is placed upon them by others. In the case of those such as children with autism, who do not fit the set of large categories that constitute the “norm”, it also helps to discriminate them as a “minority”, isolate them and lock them into a category that they may not feel fits them, but about which they do not have a choice. That is, they are

¹⁴ In common usage, other categories are used which tend even more to lump individuals together: “disabled”, “handicapped”, “spastic” and so on.

assigned a minority belonging that is outside the belongings used to categorise most other people, and from which most other people draw their notions of identity.

In the essay, “Outside”, Agamben helps us understand the question of belonging from a different perspective:

It is important here that the notion of the “outside” is expressed in many European languages by a word that means “at the door” (*fores* in Latin is the door of the house, *thyrathen* in Greek literally means “at the threshold”). The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access – in a word, its face, its *eidōs*.

The threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak the experience of being-*within* an *outside*. This *ek-stasis* is the gift that singularity gathers from the empty hands of humanity. (Agamben, 1993: 68)

For Agamben, given his notion of the singularity, to be outside categories of belonging brings a sense of exceptional freedom, ecstasy. “Being-*within* an outside” enables a person to operate at the limits of what it can mean to be human; to be on the threshold means that you can see in every direction, and therefore move between various conditions of “being such as it always matters”. This perspective gives us a way to imagine how we might locate each and every person in terms of their specific differences, and think about how we relate to each other from that position. It provides a means to abandon categorical thinking and develop a different epistemology that is based on an ontology of difference.

However, without the benefit of such insight, the condition of minority, of being assigned to a category on the edge of things, but knowing what the “inside” is like, and what benefits it bestows, can be quite the opposite of liberating. It is usually experienced as isolating, and often experienced as oppressive.

Autistic children and their families are in this position. Being perceived as “outside” the “normal”, they are grouped together in difference, but within that outside they are in turn ordered, according to the severity of each child’s diagnosis, into smaller groups of sameness. Families can feel reduced to a small circle that is largely defined by the behaviours, day-to-day needs and therapeutic requirements of the child with autism. In another irony in relation to the connotations of the word “autism”, autistic children are not alone with their way of being, it is extended to encompass their parents and their siblings; it intrudes on the capacity of other immediate family members to undertake their lives as they would like to do in other circumstances. As already noted, there is nothing as simple

as a “quick trip to the supermarket” for a parent with an autistic child accompanying him or her. Nor is there any such thing as a relaxed after school play with the other kids in the street for the sibling with an autistic brother or sister trailing after him or her. The family are unlikely to be able to chat about their day over dinner if an autistic child is refusing to have his peas on the side of the plate they are on, will not eat most foods, cannot sit still at the table, rocks constantly on his chair and wants to talk when others talk. Any family outing to a park, museum or sports oval, any use of public transport, any visit to the cinema – things that are seen to constitute shared leisure and relaxed family time for others – can become a drama or threaten to become one, which is just as un-relaxing. In the most lively and friendly of neighbourhoods, and in the most ordinary of public circumstances, families of autistic children can feel the kinds of alienation, embarrassment, awkwardness and so on described earlier.

Coming together in the circus family

Given opportunities, however, within apparent isolation a sense of belonging to each other as a community of families of autistic children can develop: the individuals in each family can express a sense of identity in relation to others, and the families can create a group of “outsiders” who feel as if they “fit” together. As Bolton observes, “circus itself cannot be confined to one style, one culture or one period” (2005: 15), and as a community, circus embraces all kinds of bodies and personalities. I have explored how this can encourage children with autism to allow themselves to benefit from involvement in circus, learning how to celebrate themselves and embrace their difference. I am convinced, from my own experience and the anecdotal experience of others, that circus can also help these children’s families, providing them with reasons to come together; opportunities to become involved with the circus and with each other; and more moments that give them cause to be hopeful about the capacities and future potentials of their children.

As I have stressed, what makes people feel “outside” is also what can help them gather together. I have seen how through social circus, the bonds that the “outsiders” develop help to create a stronger sense of identity within a community as circus parents, but more than this, I have seen how circus can also change the way autistic children and their parents are perceived by others. Circus gives its community permission to be different, in fact it almost insists upon it. This obviously gives “outsiders” an invitation to belong. At the same time, everyone else expects everything to do with the circus to be unusual. When people from the wider community attend a circus performance, they are temporarily “on the outside looking in” at the community of circus insiders. This means that families who

become involved with social circus through their autistic children can actually be perceived as *more* “normal” because they are seen as more interesting in their shared difference with all the members of an entertaining and fascinating circus community.

For all kinds of children, the freedom that circus provides to be as wacky as you wish to be, is possibly its most attractive drawcard. As Bolton points out:

It seems reasonable to suggest that the air of aberration associated with the circus may be attractive to children, with two effects. Firstly, as I have seen in many instances, the very short or very overweight child, or the child with a mental disability, sometimes embraces the youth circus as an opportunity to say, ‘This is me. Accept me. Enjoy me.’ Secondly, all children have the chance to present themselves as odd. What is a clown, if not a collection of handicaps and deficiencies; feet too big, pants too baggy, face too white, nose too red, no dress sense, no balance, no social graces, no grasp of reality? (Bolton, 2005: 74)

Before people can believe that others can accept them as they are, they need to try to see themselves in a more positive light. Bolton advises trainers to encourage this in the practice discourse they share with each other and with the children: “All the time you are planning, preparing and rehearsing, agree to ban the words ‘no’, ‘can’t’, ‘impossible’ ‘embarrassing’, and ‘difficult’” (1999:5). For children who have often felt that those words apply to them, this can have a significant impact. Further, because circus acts depend on “impossible feats” all of which take performers outside of their comfort zone, children who are training to undertake such acts find that they need to try to learn how to let go of negative and restrictive notions of what is possible.

When autistic children begin to respond to their involvement in social circus training, a wider circle, a “circus family”, forms as family and friends are drawn to share in the experience that is benefitting the children. In these ways different families begin to become engaged with each other through being within an outside in which positive things are happening. The circus family, which also tends to express itself as “a sense of being part of a community”, can consist of parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, and neighbours. These people not only attend shows to watch their daughter/son, brother/sister, cousin, friend or neighbour perform, they also become involved in supporting the circus – helping to build sets, make costumes, find sponsors, design posters, programs and websites, sell raffle tickets and the popcorn as well. They become involved in the overall experience of the circus and share in its group dynamic.

Alan McKee (2003) reminds us that:

The recognition of a group 'identity' to which you can belong is currently seen to be a vital part of mental health. How we make sense of our own identity isn't an abstract issue: it has real effects. (42)

Given the many difficulties that families of children with autism daily confront in helping their children negotiate the public world, they readily become part of circus families, which offer the possibility of a community of odd bodies and misfits (and their friends) who pass no judgements on each other, and appreciate each other's difference as a key element of what brings them together. Autistic children and their families can often find that their ways of seeing the world mean that they easily become part of the "group identity" that a circus encourages. Circus people like to see the world differently, and circus as an art form encourages everyone else to see the world differently as well; to laugh at the serious, send up the pompous and question the "normal".

Agamben (1993) suggests that the "coming community" could be based in how each of us forms temporary affinities of one sort or another with others, understanding that we are each "whatever singularities" – that is, groups based on difference rather than sameness, formed around potential affects rather than around pre-existing classes of identity. Such groups become possible when we are engaging with others in terms of our own "being, such that it always matters" and respecting the being-such of the other as well (1993: *passim*). The circus offers this experience for those who participate in it.

In relation to current communities, McKee observes that "how we make sense of ourselves in relation to others is important for living in human society" (2003:42). How an autistic child and his or her family make sense of the world in comparison to how neighbours, schoolmates, and work colleagues do is bound to be very different in many respects. I often meet parents who automatically apologise for their autistic child's behaviour, before they have even introduced him or her to me. Why is this? It could be due to the discourses that surround children with "special needs", which in turn can influence the way parents perceive their own child.

Kirsten Fritz, drawing on her experiences as a behavioural therapist working with autistic children, explains the effects and affect of the communicative circumstances in which such children exist:

The most pertinent characteristic of a child diagnosed with autism is his or her impairment in communication. There is an abundance of communication/discourse surrounding these children – about these children – and I observed that the communication impairment extends to the surrounding discourses as well... This discourse surrounding the child can also be a barrier to the well-being of the child. (Fritz, 1999: 11)

That is, it is already difficult for the child to communicate and for others to communicate with the child, but the power of the medical, psychological and therapeutic discourses *about* that difficulty is such that people, including parents, can become unable to talk about the child in any terms other than the kind that categorise the child or raise the difficulties involved in living with that child. Instead of talking about their child in terms that have developed in the course of everyday family life and ordinary family relationships, because parents anticipate that they will need to explain their autistic child's behaviours, and feel obliged to do so, they can too readily pathologise their own child.

And perhaps, too, parents are concerned that most people they meet will not "make sense" of their child's behaviour and as a result will treat their child differently, so reinforcing their child's own sense of difference and/or increasing the chances that other children might bully their child. Possibly it has become part of their everyday practice as parents of "special needs" children to deliver a disclaimer to anyone who does not share their circumstance: an automatic response to people outside the outsider-group identity shared by parents of autistic children.

In any case, this automatic apology from parents is clearly a product of their own recognition that their child does not behave the way "normal" children are expected to behave *and* a reaction to the looks, comments and demeanours of others that reinforce their own pre-conditioned attitudes and discourses.

Respite in a community of difference

The opportunity to spend time as part of a circus community that does not make them feel that they should pathologise, apologise or explain their children must come as a very welcome change to parents:

Many of the parents have reported feeling more positive about their child's potential, the benefits of meeting other parents, and the joy of being part of a group in which their child was not the 'difficult' or 'different' one. It [circus] reduces a focus on therapy to improve the areas that are challenging for the child, and focuses on success and a strengths-based approach.

Fiona Jones, Occupational Therapist, Interview: May. 2012

This reinforces that the experience of the circus not only brings "mis-fits" together in a group identity that is safe and inclusive, its community members come to see themselves and each other differently. Autistic children can see themselves as confident, active children who can achieve feats that their "disorder", doctors or other therapists might position as impossible. They can see each other as role models and support teams.

Further, the circus provides a platform for the wider community to see them differently. For autistic children to participate in a social circus performance that is showcased in their local community offers an opportunity for them to break out of the labels that have usually been placed upon them. They can be seen and perceived, by their schoolmates and neighbours as well as the wider community, in positive ways – in ways that they may not have been before.

These benefits to the special needs child of circus skills training can also be carried with them into other school and community contexts:

I had a young lad who was mildly developmentally delayed and he came to me aged 13 in grade 8 and after seeing me for a year, in grade 9 at his high school he entered the school talent quest. Now this is a child who had never really achieved much, felt a bit defeated, had low self-esteem. He really took to juggling. He stood up on the stage in his top hat and tails, and juggled...and he won! His mother rang me thrilled, saying his self-esteem, just went right up.

Kaye Dixson, Physiotherapist, Interview April, 2012

When others – including family and friends – see children taking risks physically and creatively on stage, they may re-think how they see children with special needs. And perhaps in seeing how circus welcomes people from all walks of life into its domain, they too will come to value difference in themselves and others.

Psychologist Francesca Happé suggests that we can learn more about autism through examples of task success than of failure – a line of thought that I find particularly refreshing, and that sits well with Agamben's emphasis on the importance of singularities and of examples. A cultural tendency to look at each other's faults first, before finding strengths, seems most apparent in the case of those who occupy a place outside the box marked "normal". Happé (1999) asks us to look at the ways in which an autistic child "naturally" interacts with the world in his or her "own way", and to tap into that to find a positive. Happe reminds us that autistic children see the world differently, drawing on Frith's work to demonstrate that people with autism "have a tendency towards fragmented perception" (1999b: 218). She suggests that this may be why autistic children can register as "low intelligence" in some domains, while also registering as "highly functioning" in others (1999). Happé recognises the "enormous theoretical and practical benefit" of theory of mind in accounting for autism, especially for the kinds of cognitive impairment that characterise the condition, but she works through a range of research to support her view that "understanding this disorder...will arise chiefly through exploration of what people with autism are *good at*" (1999b: 217). She argues that:

...the theory of mind account, as indeed any deficit account of autism (e.g. executive dysfunction), fails to explain why people with autism show not only preserved but also superior skills in certain areas.

Take, for example, the young man with autism who draws like a master, although he is unable to fasten his coat or add five and five. Or the girl with autism who has absolute pitch and can play any tune by ear after only one hearing. Or the boy with autism who can tell you, within seconds, on what day of the week any past or future date falls. Or less spectacularly but more commonly, the child who can construct jigsaw puzzles at lightning speed, even picture side down; and the adult who, despite general low ability, recalls the exact date and time of your last meeting 20 years ago. How can we explain these abilities, which sometimes exceed the performance of ordinary individuals of the same chronological age? (Happé, 1999:1)

For Happé, recognising that people with autism encounter the world through different perceptual mechanisms to “normal” people, autism needs to be thought of not so much as a matter of cognitive deficit as of “cognitive style” (1999b).

Tim Sharp *is* that young man who draws like a master. When Tim was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, doctors told his mother: “he’s got autism and the best thing you can do is lock him away and forget about him” (*Courier Mail*, April 8, 2012: 6). Leaving aside the matter of whether doctors actually said quite that, it was obviously the message that his mother took from the situation of diagnosis – a situation, we need to note, of markedly unequal power-relations. In any case, Judy Sharp did nothing of the sort. She persevered, introducing Tim to drawing at the age of four and by the time he was 11 years old Tim had created his own superhero character, “Laser Beak Man”. Through his artwork Tim has won awards, held showcases and exhibitions at high profile venues and “Laser Beak Man” has even been turned into an animated television series, with talk of a film in the near future. Tim’s mother saw the potential for success in Tim rather than the signs failure, and because of her positive perspective, he was able to flourish, becoming a proud and confident young artist.

Frith tells us that the term “autistic intelligence”, coined by Asperger, is often used to describe the profound abilities of people like Tim Sharp who challenge any preconceptions about what an autistic child can and can’t be expected to achieve.

[Asperger] believed autistic intelligence had distinct qualities and was the opposite of conventional learning and worldly-wise cunning. Indeed he thought of it as a vital ingredient in all great creations in art and science. (Frith, 1997: 25)

Despite such alternate views of autism, more often than not, autistic children continue to be distributed into categories of deficiencies rather than talents. In circus training and

performance, they experience the effective and affective difference that the opposite approach can make.

Through the example of circus, perhaps we can all start looking at ourselves and each other in terms of success rather than failure. After all, it was famous clown Red Skelton who once said, "I've got the sixth sense. I just don't have the other five." (cited in Bolton 2003: 12)

Conclusion

Circus works as an art form because its essential composition recalls profound experiences of childhood. (Bolton, 2004)

Social circus is more than a few back flips on a tight wire, more than sequins and fairy floss. It is about physical therapy, it is about creative chaos. Social circus is about community engagement, taking snapshots of the world from different angles, and offering them back in the form of performance. Social circus promotes the self, the singularity, at the same time as encouraging connection to the group; the ability to stand out while also “fitting in” with others who value you for the different potentials and skills that you bring. It brings people together who often feel on the “outer” and makes them each a star. Circus can bring the entire family unit together in a creative experience that supports them emotionally and connects them to a community that celebrates their difference. With its magic and mayhem, it breaks down the barriers that the social has placed upon them and makes it okay for them to sit outside the square.

It gives autistic children the opportunity to achieve physical feats that they are often told are impossible for them to attain, promoting new levels of self-confidence and new levels of connection between the children and their families. For parents to see their child struggle with everyday life, and then watch that child hold herself in a handstand, gives those parents a new found sense of hope and inspiration for their child's emotional and physical well-being.

A lovely story I had from a parent was that her son had been able to go on the flying fox at the park for the first time. She thought this was probably a result of increased upper body strength and confidence from activities such as the trapeze.

Danica Lindstrom, Occupational Therapist, Interview: May, 2012

The roll-on results of circus training that can lead autistic children to enjoying the physical adventures of childhood, such as using playground equipment, and can also see them being able to achieve ordinary tasks such as doing up their own buttons or tying their own shoelaces. Surely these small but significant achievements bring a ray of hope and a new perception of what is possible not only for the child, but also their parents.

Childhood play that was once highly physical and outdoors orientated is, we are told, rapidly becoming a less familiar experience. Children are physically active and inquisitive

about their bodies, and yet, in recent decades we have provided them with numerous ways to sit still and stare at a screen, and increasingly “cotton-wooled” them in the hope of protecting them from social harm and from “dangerous play”. This means that many children are discouraged from undertaking relatively safe risk-taking behaviour that helps them develop physically and cognitively, to get to know themselves and explore what the world holds. Circus has the capacity to nurture those elements of children’s experience, putting controlled risk and creative expression at their fingertips. It also instills the ideals of hard work and focus, as Bolton reminds us:

Today’s child is more likely to get exhausted by watching too much television than by walking too far, or playing rough games for too long. S/he is more likely to suffer anxiety than blisters, insomnia than muscle fatigue. Before we have two or more generations of people who have forgotten the joy of physical exhaustion, and the satisfaction of a tough job well done, it is well worth looking for a children’s activity that can revive these pleasures. (Bolton, 2004: 41)

For children with autism, circus can provide an opportunity to have the kind of childhood experiences that they may have come to understand that they cannot have – experiences that hold risk, adventure and magic. Circus can allow them to share in the “normal” rites of passage that other children can take for granted: to play in increasingly risky ways and develop increasingly competent skills; to connect their bodies with those of other children in an adventurous and creative activity; to achieve things together that build their confidence and encourage them to grow physically and emotionally; and to help them cope with change.

Bolton argues that the wonder of childhood is reflected in the circus:

Seen up close, and often in the magical ambience of a tent, the circus presents undeniable manifestations of intense experiences very close to those of childhood. Here is real wonder, real fear. Here is limitless ambition, infinite mischief. Here are hope, love, danger and survival. Here are the dreams and nightmares that are the daily and nightly currency of childhood. Here are obstacles and mysteries, overcome and solved with ingenuity and determination. Here are lofty beings of incalculable status, and alongside them buffoons more foolish than the silliest child. (Bolton, 2004: 195)

In exploring how circus can enhance the physical, emotional, cognitive and creative well-being of autistic children and their families, I have shown that social circus sets up a space that is inclusive, creatively chaotic, and holds therapeutic benefits. I have suggested that as an art form circus can teach us how to respect and support each other and how, through the community of circus, our differences can help us work together to break down labels and negative social perceptions.

In the many years that I have spent teaching and performing circus, I have witnessed how circus can change the lives of young people and their families. I have seen children who were too shy to speak on their first day at circus training go on to become confident group leaders. I have seen parents mend the strained relationship with their distant teenager by nurturing their love of juggling. It is my hope that every child experiences circus in some capacity, particularly those who struggle to find their place in the world. The work and research I have completed through this project has further cemented my belief in circus as an art form and a social tool. It is my hope that through this research I can continue to work with children who need an alternative form of therapy and bring something positive to their world, and that they will in turn bring inspiration to mine.

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