The Circus She Calls Me:
Youth at Risk in a Social Circus

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To everybody at Machincueppa for their kindness, laughter and, very importantly, patience…all qualities they have in abundance and all necessary for dealing with an Irishman and an Irishman’s Spanish.

To Leo for taking me in

To Olga, for taking me on, and for, I hope, enjoying what I was trying to do...

To Roger, Ha

To Mam and Dad
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Introduction

This thesis is based on research conducted at an intervention programme which uses the circus arts to work with Youth at Risk, Machincueppa Circo Social. The social circus provided the perfect opportunity to study the social networks of the children and of the parents first hand. I was able to investigate perceptions of both youth and parents on the role of family social capital and the children’s social networks in deterring risky behaviour. My hypothesis was that intervention in children’s social networks may help not only preventing or reducing risky behaviour in children but also improve the quality of relations between parents and children and the parental social networks, resulting in an increase in family social capital in the long term.

This issue of ‘Youth at Risk’ has been receiving increasing attention in recent years, particularly in Latin America. About half of Latin America's youth are considered "at risk," meaning that they engage in or are at risk of engaging in risky behaviours that are detrimental to their own development and to the well-being of their societies (Cunningham 2010:37).

There are a number of reasons why youth at risk deserve special attention. Firstly risky behaviour tends to develop in the younger years and carry on into adulthood; early intervention at this stage can save a lot of hardship in the future (Cunningham 2008:6). Secondly, circumstances that lead to enduring inequality tend to appear in the youth period, such as a lack of attendance at school manifesting itself in reduced future earnings in later years. Finally demographic trends in Latin America suggest that the cost to society of the risky behaviour of youth will increase in the future (Cunningham, 2008:6).

Despite the increasing attention there is still an alarming ‘absence of research’ on the Youth at Risk in countries such as Mexico (Cunningham & Bagby, 2010:5). The research that has been carried out is based on survey information from which is over ten years old, and which only have available cross-sectional data for a single year making it impossible to establish to causal relationship between the factors and behaviours. (Cunningham & Bagby, 2010:5). Furthermore most of the research on youth behaviour is based on US Data (Cunningham & Bagby, 2010:2)
One of the common factors in the research that has been conducted is the important role that relationships play in the prevalence of risky behaviour (Resnick et al., 1993 as cited in Henry and Reid, p.706). However, very little attention has been paid to how children can be encouraged to develop and maintain healthy relationships and the long term impact that this can have on the likelihood of risky behaviour.

My own interest in youth took off as a Kindergarten teacher in Taiwan. Playing games, singing songs and theatre are all part of any good English teacher’s repertoire and it was here that I first realised the power of play and playfulness as a means to connect. The right game at the right time had the ability to draw even the most reclusive child out of their shell. And when the kids were laughing and smiling, I could almost forget that I wasn’t the greatest English teacher in the world. This work confirmed a long held suspicion, getting more serious about something doesn’t necessarily mean getting better at it. When I first came across Social Circus, it immediately grabbed both my attention and my imagination. I realised I had come across the perfect platform from which to research the role that play and creativity have on the formation of a child’s relationships. Here was a programme which specifically aimed to develop values such as joy, creativity, a sense of humour and laughter with the aim of helping a child cultivate meaningful relationships. I felt that these were important values that often get pushed aside a discourse which favours more tangible goals such as economic and educational success, but these values have their place too.

My findings suggest that relationships do play a critical role in the likelihood of risky behaviour, that playfulness and the capacity to express oneself are crucial factors in the development of these relationships and that these values can be developed, given the right environment. Furthermore, the unique characteristics of circus, such as its ability to both capture the imagination and retain the attention of the children, while addressing multiple factors linked with risky behaviour make it very effective programme.
Chapter 1
Theoretical Framework

When dealing with the issue of children’s wellbeing there are three main concepts and theories which should be discussed: youth at risk, the sociology of children and social capital. The topic of youth at risk needs to be discussed in order to understand the research which has already been conducted. The ‘Sociology of children’ is a paradigm which emphasises the role of children as active social agents and is useful for understanding the social context of children. Finally, given that I will be exploring the social networks of the children and the relationships between children and parents, a review of the research on social capital and children’s well-being is warranted.

1.1 Youth at Risk

When one reviews the literature on Youth at Risk one thing becomes clear, nothing is clear cut when it comes to ‘Youth at Risk’.

“The processes leading to problems in adolescence are not completely predictable. In addition, specific problems are rarely linked to a single cause. Instead, the pathways leading to an end point of major problem behaviour or of successful transition to adulthood involve many factors in the environment interacting with the capabilities and endogenous characteristics of the individual.” (Burt et al 1997:24)

The lack of clarity in the field extends itself to the definition of risk, the term being used in a variety of different ways. Researchers and service providers often equate risk with existing dysfunction, resulting in the term risk or at risk becoming synonymous with already having problems. The term should at least allow for the possibility that the risk may not materialize. For the purpose of my research, I will take the definition of at risk as given by (Buurt et al 1997:28) as this allows the issue to be addressed proactively and early, and furthermore allows the consideration of strengths and competencies which might moderate vulnerabilities.

“All adolescents have a certain mix of vulnerabilities and protective factors that ultimately determine the likelihood that they will experience problems. This likelihood or probability is risk. In this view an adolescent need not-in fact, should not already
have behaved in problematic ways in order to be classified as "at risk." (Buurt et al 1997:28)

According to Buurt et al, the literature on Youth at Risk can be delineated into 4 distinct approaches:

(a) Theorists who view most adolescent behaviour as a phase of experimentation, or sensation seeking, that will pass rather than as problems in themselves and the precursors of future more severe problems; (b) theorists who try to lift the onus from individual youth by focusing on their larger environment (e.g., poor neighborhoods); (c) theorists who focus on factors that predict future problems but are not the problems themselves; and (d) theorists who use the behavior itself as part of their definition of risk.”

The Sensation Seeking approach is useful as it tends to focus on the normative or adaptive aspects of youth behavior. It has resulted in a number of programmes such as ‘Wilderness Abroad’ and other adventure activities which try to channel these ‘normal’ urges in youth in a healthy manner. It is also interesting as it casts a wider net in terms of target population, suggesting that the majority of the youth population needs to be catered to in this manner. The dangers inherent in this approach is that by viewing all behavior as a phase, we run the risk of being unable to distinguish the children who are truly in need of intervention. Further studies testing the different risk approaches have found that that much risk-taking behavior is not normative and adaptive but is poor adjustment to society (Lavery, Siegel, Cousins, & Rubovits, 1993).

The second approach attempts to remove the stigma associated with youth behavior by focusing on the environment in which the youth lives. Youth are not conceptualized as at risk because they engage in risky behavior but because they live in high risk areas, with high levels of violence, interfamilial problems, little or no employment options and drug and alcohol abuse. It emphasizes intervention at the community and family level. Despite this appealing counterpoint to the definitions of risk based on individual behavior this approach has a number of weaknesses. It is likely to stigmatize all youth living in poor areas, while resulting in youth in richer areas in need of help being ignored. It also downplays the fact that people with risk factors can be found at all levels of society, across the spectrum of wealth.
Finally there is a large range of research which demonstrates that growing up in an adverse environment can result in the development of factors which promote resilience in children, such as having personal characteristics as charm, intelligence, having a caring relationship with an adult (not necessarily a parent) and having access to social support outside the family. (Farrington, 1983; Garmezy, 1991; Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Rutter, 1993)

The third approach focuses on the personal characteristics and background to predict the likelihood of future problem behaviour. Common markers include economic and neighbourhood factors. Family environment may be considered a risky environment through parental drug or alcohol use. Common system markers are school performance and reports of neglect or abuse (e.g. selecting children who are performing exceptionally poorly or with home child protection services have been involved). This approach has been used extensively in intervention programmes, but has not proved effective in dealing with single outcomes, such as a programme dealing exclusively with drug abuse but the model has proven more robust when dealing with multiple problem behaviours.

The final approach waits until the youth exhibits problem behaviour until intervening; ‘Risk as Certainty’. This approach focuses on more intense interventions with youth who are already demonstrating serious behavioural problems, often with very low levels of success. The attractiveness of this approach is that there is usually fare more material available which document problem behaviour which makes identification far easier. The problems associated with this approach are that it attempts to address often ingrained behaviour at the expense of youth who are genuinely at risk.

Although there is contention about the appropriate definition of risk, what is clear is the pivotal role that the child’s environment plays in the likelihood of further problems:

“As a youth displays initial negative behaviours, the environment’s response to the behaviours will positively or negatively influence the chances that further problems will occur (Lorion, Price, & Eaton, 1989). At multiple points in a child’s or youth’s development, the environment’s response can increase or decrease the likelihood that serious and long-term problems will occur (Burt et al., 1997:24).
Multiple studies have demonstrated how individuals have been able to overcome high risk factors and vulnerabilities through a nurturing environment. (Rutter & Rutter, 1993; Sameroff & Fiese, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992):

“Factors in a nurturing environment, including parents, other adults, and neighbourhood or community resources, may modify the individual’s response to a negative situation that, under most circumstances, would lead to a maladaptive outcome. For example, acquiring an important skill, such as social competency, may help the adolescent avoid an escalation of problem behaviour or, better yet, attract supports and guidance that will promote healthy development.” (Burt et al., 1997:24).

Up until recently the many approaches to risk focussed on the problems and not on the strengths:

“When viewed from the problem focus, either the adolescent or the context in which the adolescent develops is seen as dysfunctional in some way, thereby exposing the developing youth to risk for engaging in problem behavior and experiencing negative outcomes”. (Burt et al., 1997:33).

A growing movement called the “youth development approach” emphasizes “individual’s competencies and strengths, with the underlying belief that building skills and competencies is the key to the prevention of dysfunctional behaviour” (Burt et al., 1997:34). Pittman and Zeldin (1992), for instance, want the approach from the obsession with intervention to thinking about how to interact with youth; from focusing on how to fit people into programs to being open to meeting people’s needs, however that can be done; and from concentrating solely on the problems to focusing on the contextual background of a youth’s environment.

Indeed, recent research in Latin America has paid more attention to protective factors. This research claims that positive youth behaviour is a result of a positive school environment, a supportive home life, absence of gender stereotypes, high self-esteem and self-efficacy, spirituality, peers with pro-social norms, trust in public institutions, and low levels of inequality and poverty. (Rew and Horner 2003; Zweig et al., 2002; Blum et al., 2000, 2002). This research further suggests young people who engage in one risky behaviour often engage in many (Zweig et al., 2002). The US data show that the majority of risky behaviour is being
undertaken by a relatively small group of young people who are engaging in multiple risky behaviours (Lindberg et. al. 2000, Bartlett et. al. 2005, Husler et. al. 2005, Brener et. al. 1998, and Zweig et al., 2001). Similarly, smoking, drug and alcohol use, early sexual initiation, violence, and delinquencies co-occur in the Caribbean (Ohene et al., 2005) and in Brazil (World Bank, 2007). This supports the developments in other approaches to risk which suggest that intervention programmes and policies should be aimed at addressing multiple behaviours rather than focussing on one.

As noted in the introduction, Latin American governments and societies are in recent years giving unprecedented attention to youth. This has resulted in several recent studies published at the country and the regional level aimed at better understanding the situation of young people in the LAC Region (CEPAL 2004, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2005). A shortcoming of these studies is that they ‘do not they do not identify the reasons that young people engage in negative behaviours, thus limiting the ability to design policies and programs that address the underlying factors driving choices that young people make’ (Cunningham & Bagby, 2010:3).

I believe that the failure of these studies to address these factors is intimately related to the difficulties many researchers face in establishing candid relationships with children, and the lack of opportunities to participate firsthand in the social world of children. With my research I hope to add a little to the understanding of why children engage in such behaviour, paying particular attention to the perspective of the children.

In sum, when dealing with the perceptions of the children, I needed to take into account the social context and relationships of the children; the ‘Sociology of Childhood’ provides some insight into how to do this.
1.2 Sociology of Childhood

“The character of children, their development, and their preparation for adult social life have long been subjects of debate in Western and probably other societies (Handel2007:11)”

In the early days of sociology, children were conceptualized as incomplete social actors. Indeed, Durkheim wrote of children as ‘fickle, changeable, and capricious…intellectually weak and fragile with limited faculties. (Durkheim1982:148) This viewpoint has been challenged in recent years. Children do not just react, they act, they persuade, they cajole, they find both individual and collective solutions to the challenges they face.

The relatively new paradigm of ‘Sociology of Childhood’ (James & Prout, 1997) criticizes the Durkheimian view, citing the more or less “inescapable implication” of viewing children as “a defective form of adults, social only in their future potential but not in their present being” Prout & James, 1998:13). It further suggests that we need to emphasize that children are active social agents who shape structures and processes around them and whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns about the future course of those children’s social lives. We must bear in mind that society is not liable to change in and of itself, it changes because of the actions of people, and children are no less people than adults in this respect.

The second paradigm is the welfare research paradigm that seeks to incorporate social context into health research and to explore the importance of place and lay knowledge into theories and research on health inequalities. These two paradigms complement each in that one emphasises the child as an active social agent while the other emphasises the importance of social context. This is an excellent combination when exploring welfare from the perspective of the child, particularly when dealing with the social networks of youth at risk.

According to DeKoning & Martin there has been a shift towards participatory research in both these paradigms for two reasons. (1) an ‘increasing awareness of the gap between the concepts and models professionals use to understand and interpret reality and the concepts and perspectives of different groups in the community’ and (2) the recent understanding that ‘cultural historical socio economic and political factors, which are difficult to measure have a
crucial influence on the outcomes of interventions and efforts to improve the health of people’ 
(DeKoning & Martin, 1996:1). Thus there are renewed efforts to generate knowledge ‘not 
only from the perspective of the researcher but also of the researched’. The Sociology of 
Childhood suggests that this can be applied to young people (Morrow, 1999:256). Indeed it is 
becoming more recognized that ‘Research about children’s lives is essential if policies and 
programmes are to become more responsive and relevant to their concerns and needs (Boyden 
and Ennew, 1997:10) As Popay et al., have noted, ‘a great deal of epidemiology and social 
survey work in the inequalities in health field remains profoundly non-social in the sense that 
it does not explore the complex interactive relationship between individual experience, social 
action and the way in which societies are organized at a macro level’ (Popay et al., 1998:629).

Health initiatives have tended to be based on questionnaire surveys of risk behaviours, which 
are useful for identifying broader trends in health behaviours like drinking and smoking but 
aren’t capable of giving meaning, and perspective. This is still the case with the most recent 
research on Youth at Risk in Latin America (Cunningham & Bagby, 2010) based as it is on 
survey data from 2000. Many researchers have assumed that children will not understand the 
survey questions, ultimately relying on teachers’ or parents reports of children’s’ attitudes and 
behaviours. However, there are plenty of reasons to be as sceptical of parents answers about 
children’s attitudes and behaviours as there are to be sceptical of children’s’ own answers. 
Firstly, children are liable to behave quite differently in the presence of adults than they 
would on their own. They may also provide the answers that they feel parents/teachers want 
to hear. Secondly, adult’s observations of their children are usually not based on systematic 
observations but rather on vague impressions. We tend to classify people according to these 
impressions and then pay special attention to the forms of behaviour which verify these 

The ‘Sociology of Childhood recognizes that the most direct way to study children is to 
observe them in the course of everyday life. Through participant observation the researcher 
participates to some extent in the activities of those being studied, allowing him to become 
well acquainted with those being studied, to observe them in different circumstances, to 
question them about their activities and to be better understand the context of their activities. 
(Handel, 2007:08)
One of the unique problems of participant observation with children is that children are used to dealing with adults as authority figures, the people in charge and as such will tend to change their behaviour in the presence of an adult; perhaps concealing information that they feel an adult would disapprove of. Researchers attempt to mitigate this effect by gradually trying to convince the children to accept them as a “big friend”. They achieve this by “not directing or correcting the children or reporting their forbidden activities to other adults, by accepting the children’s directions when invited to engage in their activities, by listening to them without being judgemental, and by refusing to intervene in their disputes or activities, except when physical injury seems likely” (Handel, 2007:30) This ‘big friend’ approach is, as we shall see, the one adopted by Machincueppa’s instructors, and one which I was, through my position as quasi instructor and juggler, able to assume.

Backett-Milburn and McKie argue that ‘health education research with children must be premised on the appreciation of the social context and world of the child...Health education researchers need to create potential for children to have their own ideas and explanations heard and understood’ (Brackett-Milburn & McKie 1999:397). The same thinking can be applied to research on ‘Youth at Risk’. Children and young people are frequently missed out in the participation process ‘precisely the group whose perceived lack of citizenship causes such a concern to many (Speak, 2000:31).

In sum, the perceptions of children have frequently been ignored in research in investigating their behaviour. With this research I hope to fill this gap by investigating their views on risky behaviour while taking into account the social context. Given that I will be investigating the role of their social networks on their wellbeing, it is logical to review the recent research on social capital and children’s wellbeing.

1.3 Social Capital and Children’s Well-Being

*Social capital keeps bad things from happening to good kids*

(Putnam, 2000: 296).
Social Capital is a concept that has received a lot of attention in recent years from variety of
different disciplines including psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, social workers and
economists. The modern concept originates largely from the work of authors French
Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 1993), Sociologist James Coleman (1988, 1990), and
There are a variety of definitions for Social Capital:

"…features of social organisation, such as trust, norms [or reciprocity], and networks [of civil
engagement], that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions”
(Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti 1993);

"….the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s
social interactions” (World Bank, 2000);

"….the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust embedded in social relations, social
structures and society’s institutional arrangements which enable members to achieve their
individual and community objectives” (Narayan, 1997).

Some authors claim that it can promote positive outcomes in a broad range of social
phenomena related to youth’s wellbeing, including reducing adolescent pregnancy,
delinquency, academic failure and child maltreatment (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987;Furstenberg &
Hughes, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996, 1997):

“Belonging to a community of others was the strongest protective factor against both
quietly disturbed behaviours such as having a poor body image or a high level of
emotional stress and acting out behaviours such as poly drug use, school absenteeism,
risk of injury or pregnancy” (Resnick et al., 1993 as cited in Henry and Reid, p.706).
It has been proposed that this “pattern may be the result of the increased access to
other forms of capital, together with the human and social resources for families,
acquired through their social relationships in the community” (Ferguson, 2004:8).

In most studies on social capital, the concept has been divided into two distinct categories,
family social capital and community social capital. According to Coleman (1988), family
social capital refers to the relationships between parents and their children, which encompass the time, efforts, resources and energy that parents invest in their children. In contrast, exterior social capital – or community social capital – represents the family’s interactions and relationships with the surrounding community, both with residents as well as with local institutions of socialisation, such as schools. For the purpose of my research I will focus on the Family Social Capital as the family is the main agent of socialization of children.

Quality of Child Parent relationships
Several studies have found that higher levels of frequency of interaction between parents and children significantly decreased the children’s likelihood of dropping out of school (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Teachman et al., 1996, 1997), while one study found that higher levels of social interactions between parents and children were related to a lower likelihood that children fared negatively in future outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). Parents’ high expectations for children’s school performance have been found to be associated with positive outcomes for children in school as well as in social and behavioural development (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Runyan et al., 1998; Teachman et al., 1996, 1997). Furthermore, elevated levels of parental empathy towards children’s needs have been found to have a positive impact on children’s future outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Runyan et al., 1998).

Social Support Networks
Multiple studies measure the social support networks – or social relationships – among parents in a community as an indicator of a family’s stock of social capital. Across these studies, families who were embedded in rich social support networks were consistently found to have increased access to information, material resources and friends and neighbours to assist them in managing their daily lives, as well as in resolving occasional problems that arise. Numerous studies also revealed that increased parental social support had positive effects on children’s outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Maccoby et al., 1958; Putnam, 2000; Runyan et al., 1998; Stevenson, 1998; Teachman et al., 1996, 1997).

Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) suggest that strong help networks for parents are related to favourable outcomes among youth in finishing school and attaining gainful employment. Likewise, high levels of social support for the primary maternal caregiver were associated
with both positive behavioural outcomes for at-risk preschool children (Runyan et al., 1998) and lower levels of depression in at-risk teens (Stevenson, 1998).

So while there is a significant body of research claiming that social capital has beneficial effects it has defined social capital in terms of family and community social capital while paying very little attention to the social capital of children themselves and the effects their personal social capital has on their outcomes. Furthermore the research that does exist is based largely on survey data, with very little in depth qualitative research to back it up. With this research I will examine to what extent and how the children’s social networks facilitate the creation of social capital. Social networks are ‘groups of people brought together by common interests, experiences, goals, or tasks; this implies regular communication and bonds characterized by some degree of trust and altruism’ (Cohen & Prusak, 2001: 56).

In sum, this research aims add to the debate on Social Capital by examining the role of the Children’s own Social Capital in determining their wellbeing. Research has shown that through building networks of relationships people can cultivate social resources that can enhance their lives in meaningful ways; I wish to see to what extent this is true with children.
Chapter 2
Mexico, circus and community; a background

In order to understand the general socio-economic conditions in which youth of Mexico grow up in I will give a brief overview of Mexico, touching on issues such as drug use, crime and alcohol abuse and demonstrating that despite apparent economic improvements in Mexico, there has been little to no improvement in the situation of youth at risk. Following this I will outline the phenomenon of Social Circus itself, at a global level, followed by a more in depth look at the specific form of Social Circus that Machincueppa adopts. I will also outline the theory of resilience on which social circus interventions are based and contend that the values that it aims to develop, such as joy, a sense of humour and creativity, play a critical role in the development of the children’s social capital. This will demonstrate the focus that Social Circus places on relationships and the types of relationships it tries to foster. Finally I will describe the community of ‘Las Aguilas’ in which the workshop takes place, paying particular attention to the social structures and the type of issues the children face.

2.1 Mexico

With an estimated population of 111 million, Mexico is the most populous Spanish speaking nation in the world. Mexico is considered to be ethnically diverse with the constitution defining the country as a multicultural nation. Although the country has no official religion, an estimated 83% of the population are Christian, 76.5% of the population is Roman Catholic, placing Mexico second after Brazil in absolute terms of Catholic population. Politically it is divided into 31 sovereign states. Each state has its own constitution, with the citizens electing a governor for 6 years terms. Mexico City is the both the capital of Mexico and the centre of the federal powers. Mexico City is referred to as D.F by the majority of Mexicans which stands for ‘Distrito Federal’ or Federal District.

In the early 1990’s Mexico underwent huge growth in both economically and socially. It is now firmly established as one of the world’s largest and fastest growing economies with a stable growth of 7.6%. In 2009 it went from a middle-high income country to become a high income country. It is considered a newly industrialized country and an emerging power.
According to World Bank the population in poverty has dropped from 24.2% to 17.6%. As of January 2009 4.6% of the population is impoverished if measured by using the United Nations set international poverty rate and 14.4% of the population is considered to be impoverished by asset based measurements.
Despite these economic advances, income inequality is still a big problem, between rich and poor, north and south and rural and urban areas.

These economic advances in Mexico have largely been overshadowed by drug related crime. Mexico has received an enormous amount of attention in recent years for largely negative reasons. The Mexican drug war, an armed conflict between rival drug cartels fighting for regional control and the Mexican Government which is attempting to reduce drug trafficking.
These cartels have existed for a long time but have become more powerful in recent years due to the demise of Colombian gangs such as the Cali and Medellin gangs. The Government’s efforts to reduce drug trafficking appear to be working, however it is having the effect of a deteriorating security situation in Mexico with the homicide rate rising annually.

The official crime rate in Mexico is 12 per 1000 people. Drug related crime has received a lot of attention in recent years with drug trafficking remaining a constant problem. There was a huge increase in violent crime in 2008, with more than 5,000 killings, double the figure in 2007.

Education in Mexico is very competitive and Government spending on education is one of the highest in world in absolute terms and as a percentage of GDP. Primary and secondary education is both free and mandatory. At 98%, Mexico has had one of the highest net primary school enrolment rates in Latin America for the past 5 years. At 1%, Mexico has one of the lowest percentages of primary school-aged children who are not in school. Between 2002 and 2006 the rate of secondary enrolment rose to 70%. This figure is relatively low given the economic status of the country.

Reports on the prevalence of drug use among youth are conflicting. Although the United Nations World Drug Report of 2008 documented the stabilisation of drug consumption, preliminary results from the 2008 National Addictions Survey in Mexico showed that in the last 6 years the number of individuals addicted to illegal substances increased 51%. Among
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Mexico City adolescents, lifetime prevalence of drug use in 2005 was estimated in 5.2%, and a survey of middle and high-school students reported that 4.6% had consumed a psychoactive substance in the last month (Frost, 2006).

Although statistics for alcohol abuse amongst the youth in Mexico are not available, health studies show that hepatic cirrhosis is one of the ten leading causes of death. Furthermore, 1.3 of each ten adult males living in urban areas are dependent on alcohol (Secretaria de Salud, 1996).

Mexico City itself is a giant sprawling metropolis, renowned throughout the country for its high rates of crime and violence. Mention D.F (Mexico City) to any non resident, and you are bound to hear either stories about the dangers of the city, or jokes about being robbed. Despite apparent economic improvements and impressive education statistics, the average Mexican child is growing up in an increasingly perilous social environment.

2.2 Circus

In the following section I outline Social Circus as a global movement, the different forms it takes, the theory on which it is based and the specific form of intervention that Machincueppa applies.

Social Circus refers to the growing movement which uses circus arts as a medium for social intervention. Social circus uses alternative pedagogical tools to work with youth who are marginalized or at social or personal risk, teaching them skills such as juggling, balancing, clowning and acrobatics. The type of circus used is commonly referred to as ‘modern circus’ which evolved in the 70’s in Europe.

Although there are many adaptations of social circus the common thread is “the use of the performing arts and playfulness as an alternative to transform the world through the transformation of individuals, groups, communities and the experience life” (Broda 2009: 20).

There are numerous organizations involved in social circus around the world. The largest and most visible is Circo de Monde, the main social program of circus entertainment giant Cirque de Soleil. This programme was launched in 1995 in conjunction with Jeunesse du Monde, Oxfam International and other community organizations. Today it is present in over 16 countries around the world and in over 50 communities. In 2007 almost 12000 youth in
difficulty participated in Circo de Monde programmes. The original aim of these intervention programmes was based on building self-esteem and self-confidence.

The theory on which Circo de Monde interventions are based is known ‘Resilience Theory’.

“The ability of a person or group to develop themselves, to move forward in the face of hardship.” (George Frierzman, my translation)

Essentially it aims to develop the capacity to overcome problems in a creative and positive manner. This approach has a lot in common with the “youth development approach” mentioned earlier as it also emphasizes competencies and strengths, with a focus on building abilities and personal skills. While it is beyond the scope of this research to investigate the application of this theory in full, it is worth briefly describing the theory in order to contextualize the circus and also give a feeling about its principles and mechanisms.

According to Resilience theory, the instructors do not work directly with the trauma or negative experience the child has experienced. Rather they work with the interior story the child has constructed and the self-image they have of themselves. A lot of emphasis is placed on the development of creativity in this process. Through developing their powers of creativity a child learns to re-interpret their own life story.

Through novel forms of interaction in a group format the child learns to new ways to interact and relate to people. The theory recognizes that violent habits and behaviors which a child may have developed in a hostile environment cannot be unlearned without a new context in which to learn them. Furthermore it states that self-image is largely defined by social circle, by providing a new social circle in which the child’s opinions and abilities are valued, confidence can be restored. Through the workshops a child can learn new ways to look at the world.

The importance of a sense humor is highly emphasized, and the development of it within the children a high priority, furthermore laughter is an essential ingredient in creating a new social environment where a child doesn’t feel on the defensive and can learn to laugh at himself.

“A sense of humour is an adjustment strategy par excellence, humour involves almost the whole person, their intellect, emotions, physiology. A sense of humour
provides charitable support whenever we face a gap between our ideals and reality. This gap is often the cause of sadness, grief and mourning” (Morella and Lafortune 2003:16) (my translation)

For the instructors the circus provides a pretext to interact with the children on an intimate level. Through the use of creativity, joy, and a sense of humor the instructors have the opportunity to help the youth rebuild their self-esteem. The instructors try not to assume an authority position.

The following is a synthesis of the basic function of the workshops (Broda, 2009:114)

- The workshop is a place of affection where the children feel fully accepted
- It is a place of action where their abilities are valued
- A place of creation where, through the artistic endeavours, the children learn to express the emotions.
- A place of talking where they felt listened to, where they can discover new ways relate and communicate, in contrast to what they have learned through their own personal experience
- A place where it is possible to question beliefs and prejudices, allowing the introduction of a destabilizing element which is the basis for change

Social circus has various forms throughout the world. Some programmes focus on creating professional artists from marginalized populations; others work exclusively with street children.

Ultimately Social Circus is a reflection of the failure of modern society to provide a forum for creativity, a forum for the creative exploration and interaction of oneself and others. In Mexico, social circus has evolved as a form of community intervention which aims specifically to address this lack. Time therefore, to turn to Machincueppa Circo Social, where I undertook my fieldwork.
2.3 Machincueppa Social Circus

The Machincueppa program claims to have a positive impact on individual development and on the risk taking behaviour at risk, placing particular emphasis on the role of relationships in facilitating this development. One of the common claims of Social Circus its unique ability to connect to the most marginalized people in society, in fact, social circus evolved from circus artists working with street children.

Machincueppa is essentially divided into two divisions:
The newly formed (2007) Services team and the Operative (Community Team). The Services team is officially tasked with diffusing the methodology of Machincueppa to other parts of Mexico, as well as sustaining the organization economically. They work offering workshops, training, consulting and support in the development of initiatives social circus aimed at public agencies and civil society (Broda2009:116). In last 3 years they have been involved in training scheme for the Department of Justice of Guanajuato which resulted in the first government sponsored use of Social Circus, in which 24 social circus instructors utilize the Machincueppa Methodology in a state wide intervention programme with delinquents.

The other team is the ‘Operativo’ or Community Team which has been operating in the ‘Las Aguilas’ community for over 10 years and which will be the focus of my thesis.

The programme is aimed at youth aged between 9 and 18 years old. The age limit is security related as the youth will be engaging in ‘risky activities’. This ties in with the Sensation Seeking approach mentioned in the theoretical section, as the circus aims to provide an alternative form of ‘risky’ behaviour to youth. The circus offers 3 two hour sessions a week, one of alternates every week between completely male and completely female. Each session begins with a greeting, or introduction dynamic. This is followed by a warm up, stretching and exercise. The next stage focuses on the particular skill or technique that is being taught and in the last 10-15 minutes there is a closing activity and discussion.

The programme is broken into 3 distinct levels.
Youth at Risk in a Social Circus

The first level is called ‘reception’. This can last up to 6 months and is orientated towards capturing the youths’ imagination with the magic of the circus and instilling in them a desire to participate while constructing an atmosphere of security and confidence. The specific objectives are:

- generate empathy and good relations between the instructors and students
- identify the specific capabilities and needs of participants
- strengthen group values such as confidence, discipline, empathy and non-violence
- introduce topics such as equality and gender issues

The second stage is called ‘Integration’. This level is usually attained between 1 and 2 years, depending on individual process. It aims to reduce harm through promoting the values of circus which are: democracy, equality, enjoyment, plurality, security and evaluation of risk. This stage continues to develop the values mentioned earlier but also focuses on the developing the child’s confidence in order to participate in events in front of both family and community. At this level as well, the instructors further try to identify which disciplines the youth are particularly interested in and develop these skills further.

The final stage is called the ‘reference stage’. At this stage the workshop aims to develop the youth’s interests beyond the circus and employ some of the skills they have learned in the wider community. The youth should function as a reference point for both their families and the wider community. They support and motivate other participants for continuation of their academic studies and the development of a ‘life project’. When a student has been deemed to have passed a certain stage, a public event is hosted in which the circus recognises the success of the child in front of the community.

Machincueppa aims to work at personal, group and community levels. At the personal level, through learning various circus skills the child can develop values such as self-esteem, perseverance. At a group level the group learns skills such as co-operation and team work. Finally through the events organized by Machincueppa they aim to strengthen links between families and the community in general. The timing of the events are specifically fitted into the socio-cultural cycle of the community. The circus helps to organize events on the festival days such as ‘day of the dead’ or the ‘pastoleria’. This serves the purpose of connecting the
integrating the circus instructors more tightly into the community, making the presence of the circus more visible in general, and strengthening connections between the children and the community. As such, the methodology of Machincueppa is line with the most recent research which suggests that intervention programmes should be aimed at addressing multiple behaviours rather than one.

2.4 The “Tarango” Community

The Machincuepa social circus workshop is located in the urban colony “las Aguilas” Eagles better known as "Tarango". The actual administration section of the circus was located in a different part of the city and the instructors either took a taxi or drove to the community centre 3 times a week. Meetings took place in the office. It was clear in the short time that I was able to spend outside the community centre that the instructors were well known by the community in general.

“Tarango” is considered high risk area, belonging to the Delegation Alvaro Obregon. The risky nature of the area was confirmed to me numerous times by other residents of DF. Josefina Flores (2000) in his thesis research on family issues in this colony found that “this neighbourhood is characterized as hazardous by the numerous groups of young people and adults who consume alcohol continuously, throughout the main street of Tarango. Others emerge later in the evening are the "users" or "drug addicts" who also have high presence in that area and have their centres of drug supply in some stores or houses within the same community”.

The most visible form of risky behaviour is drug taking and alcohol abuse. This is common place in the community amongst youth and is undertaken in public places. The community itself is made up of people who come from a variety of different rural areas such as Guanajuato, Guerrero, Michoacán, Veracruz and Oaxaca. The population is approximately 5000 people, consisting of 200 families. The living conditions of the population are difficult, with the majority of mothers working long hours to support their families.

The workshops take place in the community centre which is located on the main street of the community. The average attendance of the workshops ranging between twenty to
twenty-five children. This centre is multifunctional and offers a variety of services such as a doctor, dentist, and a variety of recreational activities. The lack of open spaces which characterize the community, and which adds the intensity of the issues the children have to face in the street also means that the open space the community centre offers is in high demand, and competition for the use of the hall is high. The compact nature of the community also means that social networks are quite compact.

It is quite common for a family of 6-10 to share 2 rooms. In study carried out by Machincueppa it was found that over 80% of the families are one parent households. This also tends to affect the ‘family social capital’ in terms of the quality of child/parent relationships as the parent often doesn’t have time to commit to their children as she, less often he, has to take sole economic responsibility for the family.

The first day I arrived in the community, I accompanied the team on a ‘walk about’ of the community, in which they re-establish connections with the community and notify former participants and families that the workshops are beginning again.

Within 5 minutes of beginning our walk we were accosted by an extremely inebriated man, who forcibly took one of my juggling pins and in a quite aggressive manner began gesticulating and claiming to be ‘Rocky’. It took some minutes to get away from him. This incident was my first introduction to one the issue highlighted above in Flores study and one that was re-iterated by both instructors and parents, namely that the children live in an extremely violent, instable and insecure environment in which they have to face drunkards, drug abusers and drug dealers daily. In this sense the children of this area could most definitely be defined as at risk according to the definitions of at risk offered in the theoretical section.

As discussed above, despite recent economic improvements rates of alcohol abuse, drug use and crime remain high and Mexico. Social Circus is a growing movement which places emphasis on the role of relationships in deterring such ‘risky behaviour’ in youth. The Machincueppa Social Circus is a particularly relevant location from which to study Social Capital as a form of intervention as I had unique opportunity to study the Social Networks of the Children first hand, as well as access to both instructors and parents facilitating research on the effects of these networks on family social capital. Furthermore the organization has

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built up a level of trust with the children and families which allowed me a greater level of access than might otherwise be the case.
Chapter 3
Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology employed during my research I will discuss what I had planned to do in the field, what I actually ended up doing and the type of data I collected.

In section one I discuss how I operationalized the research question and relevant concepts. In Section 2 I discuss the specific methods and techniques I used and the units of analysis. In the third section I consider the reliability, scope and limitations of this research and in the final section I address ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Question

Initially my intentions had been to focus on the 3 forms of social capital and their perceived effectiveness in preventing/reducing risky behaviour, namely the children’s social networks, the quality of parent/child relationships and the parents social support network. I had also intended on focussing on the role of playfulness and creativity in the development of these capitals. However, the security situation in the community forced me to remodel my questions based on issues of access. Although frustrating in the beginning ultimately I found that this ‘impediment’ forced me to pay closer attention to the role of the children’s social networks and relationships on risky behaviour and also led to some interesting insights on the inter-relationships of these forms of capital.

Thus my question evolved from ‘Which form of capital is perceived as being the most effective in reducing the likelihood of risky behaviour in youth’ to

‘Does intervention in children’s social networks reduce the likelihood of risky behaviour and does this lead to perceived improved family social capital in the long run.’

With my renewed emphasis on the role of children’s social networks I was able to focus more on different relationships were formed, what these relationships meant to the children themselves and how this impacted both their own lives and other forms of social capital. Furthermore as my research developed and the pivotal role of relationships in defining behaviour became clearer I was able to focus more clearly on this aspect, so that my research
Youth at Risk in a Social Circus

didn’t become muddled with too many concepts. It was clear to me that refining my question early was very important, especially when dealing with an intervention programme which attempts to impact so many different areas. Finally, having the opportunity to observe the social dynamics of the children first-hand, combined with the possibility of triangulating my observations with the perceptions of three different sets of actors intimately involved in these dynamics, was an exciting opportunity to develop a very under researched phenomenon.

3.2 Research Design

For the purposes of my research I took the definition of risky behaviour drug or alcohol abuse, violence and crime. The Children’s Social Capital refers to both the child’s social connections, and their capacity to make and maintain new social connections. I paid particular attention to the role that qualities such as playfulness, creativity and expressiveness played in the formation of these relationships and closely examined the ways in which the circus fostered and encouraged these values.

I took Coleman’s definition of Family Social Capital, which is the one which has been used in the majority of research on this topic; ‘the quality of relationship between parents and their...

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children, which encompass the time, efforts, resources and energy that parents invest in their children’, and extended the definition to include, community social capital, as this represents the family’s interactions and relationships with the surrounding community. Again I paid particular attention to how the values encouraged by the circus impacted this form of capital, as well as taking into account more concrete measures of Family Social Capital, such as knowing who the child’s friends are, time spent together etc.

The Parental social networks refer to the relationships that a parent has that they can rely on when they have a problem. It also refers to the capacity of parents to build social capital through their social networks.

3.3 Conceptual Scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risky Behaviour</td>
<td>Child’s</td>
<td>Drugs/Alcohol</td>
<td>What are the perceived causes for risky behaviour?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>abuse</td>
<td>How does the Social Circus deter this drug/alcohol abuse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime/Violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why do children engage in crime/violence?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Has the child engaged in crime/violence before participating in Social Circus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Have the criminal/violent activities stopped/lessened since then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How does Social Circus affect criminal/violent behaviour?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Social Capital
### Social Networks of Child
#### New Friends/Peer Group
- Has the child made a lot of new friends since participating?
- How does the child feel about these new friends?
- Are these relationships perceived as different than non-circus relationships?
- Where and with who does the child spend their time?
- Has this impacted his/her behaviour?

## Other Social Connections
### Social Capacity
- Is the child more capable of making new friendships?
- Are they more expressive/talkative?

## Family Social Capital
### Child/Parent Relationships
- Do they spend more time together since joining the circus?
- Do the parents know more of the child’s friends since joining the circus?
- How has this impacted their relationship?
- Has the parent’s opinion of the child increased since participation in the circus?
- Has their relationship deepened?
My initial intention was to use a combination of semi-structured interviews with the three sets of actors, namely the parents, children and instructors. I had hoped to be able to focus on a small number of families and follow up initial interviews with more in-depth interviews at a later date, as I got to know the families better and as they became more at ease with my presence. I had imagined that I would be able to observe first-hand some of the family dynamics as well as the general dynamic of the community and the problems they faced. I believed that this integration process would be facilitated by my association with the circus and my role as an ‘instructor’.

Initially the instructors had not been a major part of my research. While I had intended to interview a few of them in order to get a better understanding of the community and particularly of the progress of the children, their views on children at risk in general had been outside the scope of my research.
Ultimately I had to change my both my research question and methodology somewhat in order to take into account unforeseen circumstances. Though I was able to spend as much time as I had planned in the community centre, I had underestimated the ‘high risk’ nature of the community, the reality being that spending time in the community, outside of the community centre, particularly as a foreigner was untenable from a security point of few. The security issue was exacerbated soon after my arrival by a number of murders in the area which was followed up by a number of arrests, which put the community in a state of high alert.

Accordingly, I changed my research plans to incorporate more input from the perspective of the instructors, getting a better insight into how the circus was different from other programmes. I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with the instructors, who came from a variety of different backgrounds. Furthermore I had the opportunity to participate in a 3 day workshop in the city of Guanajuato in which the Machincueppa were training a group of 24 social circus instructors who had been training in social circus for 3 years, and had been using social circus in 5 different states with ‘delinquents’ for the past year. Ten of these filled in a survey for me, in which I inquired into the perceived reasons for risky behaviour. Those 3 days were some of the most fruitful of my entire research project. I had the opportunity to talk informally with people who had a wide range of experience working with youth, as well as getting a better understanding of what exactly social circus aimed to do. Again and again the importance of relationships and the pivotal role that playfulness and creativity play in their formation was emphasized.

I also conducted semi structured interviews with 5 of the instructors who worked directly in the community. Everybody has their own nuances and values when it comes to ‘how to help children’ but I felt I got a very good overview and opportunity to pick out the common trends. Furthermore I participated in a new diploma for social circus which Machincueppa has launched this year, this gave me more contextual background and insight into the theoretical side of social circus, combined with the opportunity to spend time and talk with people who had aspirations to work with social circus in the future. This gave me a much more thorough understanding of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the circus and helped me refine my research to focus more on its unique characteristics. Indeed, I learned a lot through listening to the frustrations of the Diploma alumni’s, about which approaches were ineffective and why.
I also had the opportunity to build good relations with the children and eventually completed 11 semi structured interviews combined with 11 territory maps and a list of the ‘people who were important’ in their lives. I had the opportunity to conduct 5 semi structured interviews with the parents of the children, who offered to come to the community centre in order to complete the interviews. Finally I had access to a huge amount of material which MCS had accumulated and generated over the years, including diagnostics on the different families in the community.

**Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>11 semi-structured interviews, Territory Maps, Relationship Table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors</td>
<td>6 semi-structured interviews, 10 questionnaires, Informal conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>5 semi-structured interviews, Observation at meetings and interactions with children and instructors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parents**- semi structured interviews with 5 parents; these took place in a formal setting, participation in meetings, talking.

**Children**- semi structured interviews with 11, territory maps, and participation in workshops.

**Staff**- working with staff, participation in meetings, planning, semi structured interviews, informal talks. I participated in a 3 day training course with 20 social circus instructors, I had the opportunity to interview the head organizer and had 10 surveys.

This mix of both techniques and target groups helps in the process of triangulation, which is looking at phenomena from different angles so as to achieve maximum reliability. Participatory techniques, such as the territory mapping, were particularly useful when gathering data from the children, especially the younger ones. (Mizen 2005, Grover 2004, Okane 2000, Abebe 2007). I sat down with each child, and placed colours and markers in front of them. I asked them some easy opening questions and then asked them if they would
draw a map for me, where they spent time, with who, doing what. I continued to ask them questions as they drew the maps. Figure 4.1 in the analytical chapter.

Initially the children were a little nervous around me, somewhat wary, but by the time I began doing the interviews they were all very eager to participate. I felt that my role as an instructor combined with previous experience working with children helped me connect quite quickly to the children.

3.4 Reliability, Scope and Limitations

This section pays attention to the reliability of the data and discusses to what extent the research outcomes are relevant to draw generalizations on the impact of child’s social networks on risky behaviour and on other forms of capital.

My research was a case study. However, in conversation with both instructors and parents I ascertained that ‘Las Aguilas’ was by no means a unique community in terms of the problems it faces---despite the fact that this is a ‘high risk’ area. A point that was repeatedly made to me in and outside of the circus that although the unique physical nature of the community added somewhat to the issues of context environment and things of this nature, the community and the problems it faced would be typical of a number of communities in and around Mexico. I therefore believe that my findings are generalizable.

Reliability in terms of my interviews with the parents is questionable in that I only had the opportunity to interview parents who had attended the parental meetings organized by the circus, as such I only interviewed parents who already had a strong enough interest in their children to attend such a meeting, as well as a disposition towards the circus which led them to volunteer their time to do an interview with me. Secondly as stated above I didn’t have the opportunity to observe the children outside of the circus, so my results are based on observations within the workshops and perceptions of parents in terms of children’s behaviour, social networks etc. Finally, given that the circus is one of the few free recreational activities available to the parents, theoretically the parents may have been biased in favour of the circus and unwilling to openly criticize any aspect of it, perhaps fearing that my research
might result in the eventual closure of the circus. However, in my opinion the parents were honest in their appraisals and opinions of the circus.

Research took place over the space of 10 weeks, in this time, I believe I got to understand the inner workings and philosophy of the organization itself, furthermore I believe I got to understand first hand, how the circus can affect the kids, paying specific attention to the dynamics. My position as instructor certainly aided me in developing relationships with the children which made it far easier and more comfortable during the interview process. Unfortunately, given the situation in the community at the time, I don’t feel I really got to grips with the daily reality facing the kids or the daily struggle of the parents.

Furthermore I was warned/advised by MCS to steer clear of what might be considered ‘sensitive issues’ such as drug abuse of spouses etc. This is certainly limiting given my focus on such behaviour.

Given my limited access to the community itself and families I had to rely on data gathered by MCS in order to ascertain family dynamics. There is a danger that this can lead to bias but I cross checked information with parents where I could. Furthermore the limited opportunities I had to talk to parents were limited to those parents who had already demonstrated sincere interest in their children, by attending the parents meeting and by ‘offering’ to be interviewed.

Although the circus has 3 distinct stages in which the youth participate. The majority of the children were either at level 1 or 2, with very few having progressed to the final stage. This is largely due to the age profile of the children, which averaged 11 years old. This was a relatively ‘new’ generation of circus children, and as such my ability to get into more subjective personal interpretations on the circus and the impact it had had on their lives was limited. However, I feel that the unprecedented access I had the workshops, my part time role as instructor and my previous experience working with kids all helped to give me a unique insight into social world of the circus, this combined with the triangulation of perspectives from all 3 major actors ensures a reasonable level of reliability.
3.4 Ethical Considerations

Working with children, inevitably raises ethical issues. According to Woodhead and Faulkner, children need to be able to participate in line with their understanding, interests and ways of communicating, particularly if it is about issues that directly affect their lives (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000:31).

I explained to children and all other interviews the interviews would be used for my research and would ultimately be published. I tried to deal sensitively with issues which may have caused some form of the distress to the children, saving more sensitive topics for my interviews with parents and instructors. I spoke with the instructors beforehand and we discussed which topics would be considered difficult for the children and how to deal with them. The children were informed that the information they gave me would be treated confidentially, but would ultimately be used in a thesis, I would not use names or details which would make it easy to identify them. Although I didn’t get explicit permission from all the parents to interview the children, the parents have been made aware by Machincueppa at an earlier date that sometimes the children may be interviewed by researchers or the programme sponsors. By using participatory techniques I feel I reduced the power relationships and received accurate results.

In the following chapter I will analyse the results of my participant observation, paying particular attention to how the circus uses games to leverage the social networks of the children. I will also discuss the results of the territory and relationship mapping.
Chapter 4

In chapter three I gave a broad contextual overview of the circus and how it aims to help ‘Youth at Risk’. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section I will describe the results of my participant observation, describing the unique social context of the circus and its impact on the children. In the second section I will discuss the results of the territory mapping and in the final section I will describe the results of the relationship mapping.

4.1 The circus, people, play and playfulness

In this section I will describe the specific rules of the circus, how it deals with unruly behavior, some of the games that it uses to develop values such as trust and co-operation and how it leverages the social networks of the child to achieve its goals of reducing the likelihood of risky behavior.

For every new child or volunteer that enters the circus there is an initiation rite. It is a simple procedure. One of the children is elected to instruct the ‘newbie’. The ‘newbie’ lies flat on the floor, with their arms folded across their chest. The children and instructors surround the ‘newbie’ and get their hands underneath him or her, sometimes including the ‘pig squeals’ or dog noises. They raise the ‘newbie’ above their heads. The ritual has several purposes. Firstly it serves as an ice-breaker for the newbie and the children, secondly it develops a level of trust in the newbie, and thirdly it re-establishes a consensus amongst the children of the ‘rules’ and social context of the circus a, based on values such as trust, humor and co-operation.

On my first day in the circus I underwent the ritual and I certainly felt that these three functions were fulfilled. I had the opportunity to observe the ritual numerous times in the following weeks, and each time I found it astonishing how effective such a simple ritual could be. In one particular instance a newcomer who had been unwilling to hold hands with anybody in the beginning, and appeared extremely nervous with physical contact in general, was surprisingly comfortable undergoing the ritual and afterwards seemed much more comfortable both in different social contexts and in contexts which required physical activity. For me this was a striking example of how the social networks of a child can be leveraged to
achieve things that would be very difficult to achieve with a direct intervention from an adult. Furthermore it demonstrates how the unique social environment of the circus facilitates types of interactions between children which would not normally happen in their everyday lives.

Following the initiation rites, if there are any, everybody gathers around in a circle, and a discussion takes places on what the plans are for the day, what particular skills are going to be learned, and what topics are going to be discussed. When discussing these topics there is usually one member of the team elected ‘Bos’, the person in charge of instructing and leading the discussion. The other team members move about group, attempting to draw the attention of children who are becoming unruly. It is very important to notice these things early as direct confrontation is generally avoided in order to maintain an atmosphere of fun and excitement. When issues do arise the instructors attempt to diffuse them with humor or by initiating a new game. Indeed, when the level of enthusiasm and excitement is maintained to a high level in the group, there are rarely any problems with misbehavior. Problems tend to arise when the children become bored or restless with the activity. Indeed, from what I observed in both the ‘operativo’ team and the ‘communitario’ team, the key skill of a social circus instructor is to be able to read the mood of the group and know when to change up activity. It is this sensitivity which makes an instructor a particularly valuable resource when conducting research. If an instructor doesn’t notice the mood of the group changing, by the time the kids become restless it can become very difficult to resuscitate the mood of the group. Again this speaks to the important role of the group in this type of intervention.

The discussions themselves are based on the idea that the children may not have the opportunity to express themselves in their family environment, or may not have anybody to listen to them. Topics such as equality, female rights, co-operation, domestic violence, drug use etc. are broached and the children are encouraged to give their opinions. In many cases, the discussion is a reflection on whatever activity has taken place beforehand, what the children learned, how they felt during the game etc. Since each activity is usually based on a specific goal or value, the instructors try to allow the children to discover for themselves what the ‘aim’ of the game was, how important that value is, and where they see it reflected in their everyday lives. Some of the children can be quite vocal, others have to be encouraged to speak while others obviously have very little interest in the discussion and are merely waiting for the next game to begin. The relationship the children have with the instructors is pivotal.
for the ‘success’ of this discussion. From what I have observed the more the children perceive the instructors as friends the more open and expressive they are, the more willing to share their opinions. Children who perceive the instructors as more of an authority figure tend to be more reticent in answering and more skeptical of the process itself. Again, this demonstrated to me the importance of play and playfulness in establishing a close connection between the instructors and the children. Furthermore it showed me that the more successfully an instructor can integrate themselves into the group, to be perceived more as a friend than an ‘adult’ the more effectively the social networks of the child can be leveraged to develop positive values.

A particular game/activity which captures the ‘spirit’ of the circus is the ‘human pyramid’. In this activity, 3 children get onto their hands and knees, side by side, 2 more children assume the same position on top of the 3 children, and finally one child perches on top. The fundamental value behind this game is co-operation. The instructors take a back seat in this as much as possible and allow the children to work together to figure it out. It also requires a lot of trust, and each child has to take responsibility for himself. Each time I saw this attempted there was a very palpable sense of camaraderie amongst the children afterwards, having worked together to achieve a common goal.

Another game is called ‘Pajaso Maximus’. In this game, 3 children are selected. The first child is instructed to perform an action. For example, a child imitates a chicken laying a little egg. The second child repeats the action but exaggerates the size of the action, grunting and clucking loudly to demonstrate how much more difficult this is than the last. Finally the last child wildly exaggerates the size of the egg, screaming and clucking, unable to lift the giant egg, he/she has laid. The purpose of this game is twofold, firstly it allows the children to express themselves in ways they haven’t yet attempted and secondly it teaches them that it is ok to be laughed at, that there is no need to automatically react aggressively to laughter. On numerous occasions I observed children initially performing such actions tentatively but as soon as they got a laugh from the children, they began to perform more confidently and theatrically. Again, it is important to the note the role of the social networks and context in facilitating the development of important values such as trust and confidence within the children.
The majority of circus techniques which the child learns such as acrobatics, juggling, and the ribbons are aimed at developing values such as perseverance, discipline and confidence. While it was beyond the scope of my research to investigate the impact of each of techniques on the internal development child, I did pay attention to the social dynamics and interactions which took place during the learning process. What struck me most about the process was the eagerness of the children to pass on what they knew to children who were just beginning. As such, the instructors might teach a skill, such as 3 ball juggling to some children, after which the children would teach the skill to other children who were learning. Not only did this provide an obvious sense of satisfaction and confidence to the child who was in the position of teacher but it also provided an opportunity for two children to interact in a new way. The passing on of skills was encouraged by the instructors and seemed to be built in to the social dynamics of the children. Furthermore, when a child finally accomplished a skill he/she had been working on, there was a palpable sense of achievement for both him/her and his ‘teacher’.

As I have described above, the circus provides a new social context in which new forms of interactions are encouraged and supported by the social consensus of the children within the circus. Up until this point I have relied on participant observation describe how the circus affects the behavior of the children. In the following sections I will describe the use of territory and relationship mapping to gauge the impact of the circus on the behaviour of the children.

4.2 Territory Mapping

In my interviews with both parents and instructors, the primary reason for children behaving badly was ‘poor family environment’... The second most cited reason for poor behavior was ‘social context’ or ‘friends’. When I asked the children, why do kids do bad things, the majority replied ‘because their friends are doing it’. According to both instructors and parents, the majority of risky behavior takes place on the street. The more time a child spends in this social context the more likely he is to be influenced adversely both through exposure to risky behavior and through the likelihood that they make friends with children who behave riskily. Accordingly one form of measuring the impact the circus has on the children’s’ likelihood of engaging in risky behavior is to measure where they spend their time, with who, doing what.
After my initial interviews with instructors I decided it would be prudent to use territory mapping with the children, I felt this participatory form of research would give me greater insight into the social world of the children. Furthermore I felt it was far more comfortable for the children to talk about where they spent their time than prying into specific details of their family life. The children were far more comfortable having a task to complete than they were when they just had to sit and answer questions and I felt that it was far more natural for me to enquire into things that they had drawn.

Figure 4.1 Territory Mapping

What immediately became apparent when I started the mapping was the extremely limited number of places which the children spent time. This issue had been raised with me from both parents and instructors beforehand but I still found it startling. All the children marked school, their home, and the circus as places they spent time. All the children except one, marked houses of family members such as uncles and aunties or cousins as places they spent time. Indeed, the importance of family was re-iterated to me on numerous occasions by both parents and instructors. Given the precarious socio economic position in which many of the families exist, they rely heavily on family to look after children when they are working. Only three of
the children marked friends’ houses as places they spent time. The amount of time they spent per week in their friend’s houses averaged out at 3 hours per week. As I conducted the territory maps, I was surprised at this lack of time spent in friends’ houses, when I asked the children and parents about this, they generally replied that it just wasn’t common. Only 3 of the children marked ‘calle’ or the street as a place they spent time. When enquired into this, 6 children responded that they weren’t allowed spend time in the street, while 2 failed to understand or at least answer my question. When I asked why they weren’t allowed to spend time in the street, 3 told me that it wasn’t safe, 2 said that people do bad things on the streets, and one told me that their mother was over-protective. Only 4 of the children marked places other than those mentioned above, which included piano lessons, the local arcade, a room one used for playing guitar and the park. Both children who drew the park mentioned that they had to be accompanied by their parents when they wanted to go.

In terms of activities undertaken by the children outside of the circus, television, the internet and computer games were the top activities undertaken alone and in the company of friends. In fact, outside of the circus, only one child mentioned participating in a physical/sport related activity, which was soccer.

When I cross checked these maps with the parents I interviewed and enquired into the lack of alternate places in which the children could spend time, the answer was the community didn’t have the facilities to accommodate the children in a safe manner. Although there were other activities such as swimming, piano or painting, the children had eventually become bored with these activities and decided that they didn’t want to go anymore, furthermore these activities were located outside the community and required time and effort to get to. Furthermore, this was the case with a minority of the children, the majority having never participated in activities outside of the circus or school. Indeed, the ability of the circus to attract and maintain the attendance a broad range of children appears to be one of its key strengths. Its broad appeal was confirmed in my interviews with the children. When I asked them ‘what their favorite activity was’, answers came from the entire spectrum of activities of the circus. Not only does this appeal ensure that the children spend time in the circus and not on the streets, but it also means that they have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with the other children and benefit fully from the intervention in their social network.

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All 5 parents expressed concern with letting their children spend time in the street unsupervised because of the likelihood of bad influences, or the possibility of the children making friends with the wrong people.

“I don’t let him hang out much with the people outside, because there are many things he would seem for example, people drugged outside, or drinking, or saying things out of place”

Indeed all 5 parents repeatedly expressed gratitude in having somewhere where their children could socialize and develop new skills in a safe manner. When I asked the parents what the children would do if they didn’t have the circus, three of the parents replied that they would keep their children at home, supervised, while two admitted that they would be forced to allow their child into the streets out of fear of the child becoming isolated socially, as had been the case before they had begun the circus. 2 of the other parents also mentioned that before their child had begun in the circus they had spent a lot of time alone in their house. This was a paradox the parents were faced with before the circus, allow the child into the streets, to be connected and develop socially while also exposing them to some of the risks in living in the street, or, alternatively, keeping them at home, under supervision, which would result in them becoming socially isolated and detrimentally impact the development of their social skills.

In conclusion, through providing a social forum the circus provided an alternative to the streets and reduced the children’s exposure to this negative social context while still allowing them the opportunity to socialize in a non-school environment. Furthermore the broad appeal and novelty factor of the circus ensures that the children attend regularly giving them the best chance to benefit from both the circus and the relationships they establish in it.

4.3 Relationships “That’s where my friends are”

Given the fundamental role that relationships play in the likelihood of risky behavior I wanted to see what types of relationships the circus fosters and how it had impacted their friendships both within and outside of the circus.
One of the first questions I asked the children was what Machincueppa meant to them.

“A place to distract myself, to make friends and to talk”

“A very agreeable place, happy and fun”

“A place to help people so they don’t close up completely, where they learn to live with others, where you learn more things about people and about the circus”

Although the answers were varied number of key factors emerged. Out of 11 children, 8 directly mentioned a place to make friends, or a place to talk, 7 referred to it as a place to learn new things. The social function of the circus was certainly not lost on the children. Without exception the children were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the circus.

Accordingly I asked the children, what it meant to be a friend. This helped give me an insight into how the children viewed friendship but also helped clarify the concept in their minds before exploring the impact of the circus on their friendships. 8 of the 11 children defined it as somebody that you could talk to about personal things, somebody to share with. At first I was surprised at how quickly the children were able to formulate a definition of friendship, but I realized that ‘friendship’ was certainly a topic which had been broached in discussions before in the circus. This was confirmed to me by the instructors in conversation.

The average number of friends per child was 9, of this, the average number of ‘circus friends’ was 6. 3 of the children exclusively had friends in the circus. Determining to what extent the circus had had detrimental effects on other relationships was difficult, with only one of the children mentioning that he spent less time with some of his ‘other’ friends. When I pressed him about his other friends he became uncomfortable so I changed topic. When I followed the matter up with one of the instructors they told me that this particular child had been involved in a gang before coming to the circus. On two occasions the child left the workshop to greet ‘non-circus’ friends. And on one of these occasion I noticed his friends re-enacting a fight scene.
Another question I asked the children was whether their relationships with their friends inside the circus was different than with those outside the circus. For the younger children it this question was confusing, only 3 of the children were able to make a distinction, and these were the older ones, aged 12, 13 and 14 respectfully.

“In the circus, we learn a lot and we talk a lot, some of the things we talk about in the circus, I don’t talk about with my friends in school”

“I play with girls and boys in the circus, at school, I only play with the boys, we play soccer, we do boy things”

“Here we are always doing new things, with my friends in school, we are always doing the same things”

Here it is clear that at least from the perspective of these children, the circus does provide a platform for them to interact differently with other children, be it talking about things they wouldn’t normally talk about, playing with a the other sex, or interacting in new ways as they learn new things.

I had the opportunity to cross reference the maps with the parents. 2 parents told me that before the circus, their children had been ‘loners’, spending a lot of time at home alone. In fact, the number of non-circus friends had grown since they began participating in the circus, as their confidence developed; they began to make friends at school as well.

“He spent a lot of time at home, playing computer games. I was worried about him but didn’t know what to do. Now he has many more friends, both in the circus, and outside of it”

I had the children fill in a relationship map, listing the most important people in their lives, and discussed the answers with them. ALL the children placed family members, including parents, aunties, uncles and cousins first in the list. Friends came next, followed in 6 out of the 11 cases by one or more of the circus instructors. Significantly, circus instructors were the only non-familial adult mentioned in any of the relationship mapping. This confirmed to me that the circus provides a unique platform from which adults can connect meaningfully with
children. Furthermore, when I asked about children’s role models, the circus instructors featured in 6 answers, the remainder again being family members. When I asked why the circus instructors were their role models, 3 of the children had difficulty expressing themselves, beyond, “I want to be like them”. The other 3 mentioned traits such as helpfulness, caring, fun. When I asked about whether they had any other significant adult relationships, taking the example of teachers, 3 children responded that teachers weren’t really interested in their lives, and 3 responded that teacher was not ‘for’ them. This gave me an expanded understanding of what was necessary in a relationship for children to deem it significant, a sense of interest about their lives and a feeling that the person is genuinely concerned for their welfare.

Figure 4.2 Relationship Map

As we have seen above, at the very least through intervening in the social networks of children interventions such as in the Social Circus, can develop more positive relationships with both children and adults and impact the territorial behavior of children, thus significantly reducing the likelihood of risky behavior. However the question is whether such intervention is sustainable. Does this form of intervention build family social capital and can this social capital be sustained once the child has left the circus?
Chapter 5
Family Social Capital

As was outlined in the contextual chapter, the majority of parents have very little time to spend with their children, given the range of socio-economic problems they have to deal with daily. In this chapter I explore how social circus impacts family social capital both in terms of the quality of relationship between parents and child (section 1) and in terms of the impact on the social networks of the parents (section 2).

5.1 Quality of relationships

The immediate impact on family social capital in terms of the relationship with the child is easily discernible. In order to enroll in the circus children must provide a health certificate and permission form from their parents. Furthermore parents are strongly encouraged to take part in the events the circus organizes. At the very least parents know where their children are on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and over 80% take part in at least one event each year. Furthermore all parents I interviewed demonstrated a significant knowledge of the names of their children’s friends and of the names of their children’s friends’ parents, which is a key indicator of family social capital. This was not the case with friends of the children in school, the difference being that parents were actively encouraged to participate and meet other people within the circus. The circus also has a person responsible for liaising with the families who makes periodic house calls, encouraging participation in the circus events. The community liaison officer can make the parents aware of any issues that they feel the child is dealing with, and that the parents may be unaware of. However, the instructors have to be very tactful when broaching topics relating to the children, particularly ones of a sensitive nature, and usually attempt to raise topics in an indirect way.

In terms of time spent together, none of the parents indicated to me that they spent more time with their child on daily basis as a result of the circus. However, they did spend more time on average with their child as a result of attending the various events that Machincueppa organized every year. However, these could be considered ‘short term’ family capital gains, as soon as the child leaves the circus, the majority of this capital would be lost. Furthermore,
in many cases the lack of time spent with children doesn’t stem from a lack of interest but from other commitments. What is more telling is how the circus impacts quality of the relationship in the long term. I believe that this is achieved by developing children’s ability to express themselves.

All 5 parents mentioned changes in the personality of their children and their being more expressive, friendlier, more talkative and more confident. In other words, what the circus impacted is the sociability of the children.

“He was very aggressive, now he’s calmer, speaks very well, chats with the whole world, it’s great”

“She still has some problems, but at least she’s talking about them now”

One of the girls had been seeing a therapist for 3 years before joining the circus, dealing with issues of nervousness, lack of confidence and an inability to express herself. Within 6 months of joining the circus, the mother had seen fit to withdraw her child from the sessions, due to the dramatic improvements in confidence in her child.

“Actually she was very timid in school, wouldn’t talk with anyone, she was always alone. Since being in the circus she’s more sociable, has more friends”

This increase in sociability and expressiveness not only resulted in an obvious sense of pride for the parents but directly affected the quality of their relationship.

”More talking, it’s like they have more confidence in me, to talk with me or their father about what happens. If there is a problem in school or some child is bothering them, or if the teacher is shouting at them, I have more confidence that I can help them resolve their problem….we’re more united”.

“She expresses everything that she feels to you, everything that she wants, what she likes, what she doesn’t like”
As the children grow in confidence and expressiveness they begin to share their problems more freely with their parents, and they try to resolve the problems together, which is important development in their relationships, and one that would not be quickly eroded if/when the child left the circus.

The distinct feeling I was left with after each interview with the parents was one of gratitude. All parents obviously felt very grateful for the changes that the circus had brought about in their children, and there was a palpable sense that the circus had greatly lessened their worries.

As we have seen, the circus has the capacity to improve the quality of child/parent relations in the short term, in terms of how much time they spend together during the year, how many of their child’s friends they know by name etc. However, it could be argued that these changes could be achieved if the child participated in other sports or arts programs and is not a unique characteristic of participation in the circus and that, furthermore, these changes may be lost as soon as a child leaves the program. What may be considered a unique feature of the circus is its ability to develop the confidence and expressiveness of the children which has the capacity to deepen the quality and intimacy of their relationship with their parents. As such the circus uses the social networks of the children to develop the child’s capacity to have meaningful relationships. In the following section, I will explore the impact the circus has on the social support networks of the parents.

5.2 Social Support Networks

The importance of Social Support Networks and their impact on risky behaviour has been outlined in the theoretical section. Through my observations and interviews with both instructors and parents it was clear that the circus had a significant effect on the social support networks of the parents in a variety of different manners.

According to the instructors one of their primary roles is to provide support to the parents of the children in whatever manner possible, be it in the form of emotional support, advice or just somebody to listen.
“Sometimes the parents can feel very isolated, they may have problems but don’t feel comfortable sharing them with other family members. I think it’s important that they have somebody outside of their family and friends who they can talk to”.

I observed that as the children enter the community centre, some of the instructors waited inside and greeted the children while at least two of the instructors greeted the parents who were accompanying the children to the workshops. In many instances the parents stayed chatting with the instructors for a considerable time after the workshops had begun. Given that the instructors knew a lot about the children, there was always a viable pretext for initiating a conversation.

“It is very easy to get close very quickly to the parents. Once you show an interest in their child they usually open up very quickly and begin talking about all sorts of things. Maybe it’s also that people outside of their family rarely show an interest in their lives, and so they’re just happy to have somebody to listen to them. Also, when they see that their child likes you, that helps too”

Here again the crucial role of playfulness and creativity in forming a close bond between instructor and child which ultimately impacts the willingness of parents to interact. Because the parent can see that the instructors have a meaningful relationship with their child, they are more willing to open up. In many ways, the instructors assume the ‘Big Friend’ position researchers using participant observation aim at.

Four out of 5 parents mentioned the circus when I asked who they go to when they have a problem.

“Everybody at Machincueppa is very friendly and helpful. It’s good to know that I have people who work with children to talk to if I have a problem.”

“Normally, when I have a problem I go to my sister’s house. She knows me best. But if I have a problem with x, I would talk to Machincueppa about it, they know x very well, and they know a lot about children.”
In some instances the circus can have a more concrete impact, beyond advice and emotional support. One particular instance demonstrated to me succinctly the important role the instructors play in the social support networks of the parents. One of the child’s parents had recently been jailed for a very serious crime. The circus put the spouse in touch with both legal aid and a counseling service, and was in continual dialogue with both services as to the well-being of the spouse. Without the circus acting as a go between for the spouse she may not have had the ‘social capital’ necessary to be put in contact with the right organizations.

Another direct way the circus impacted the social support networks of the children was in giving the parents an opportunity to meet other parents, as they dropped off/picked up their children from the workshops, participated in community events organized by the circus, or took part in bi-annual ‘parents’ meetings organized by the circus. All of the parents had gotten to know more people through the circus, although only two mentioned having made new friends through it. One of the parents confided that participating in the events organized by Machincueppa had helped her personally grow in confidence

“It ‘unwrapped’ me, I think too much………..spending time with different people doing different things was very good for me”

Another parent who worked in the community in a social role told me that she had gotten to know more people through the circus and worked harder at her work as a result

One of the parents also mentioned that the time their child spent in the circus was one of the few times in which they had time to spend alone with their partner and confided that this time was very important for their relationship.

“The time they spend at the circus is time we need to ourselves as partners, time to be alone, time to talk”

Two other parents mentioned that the time the circus freed up allowed them to spend more time with their friends instead of having to supervise their children. Thus, indirectly the circus can play an important role in the social support networks of the parents as it gives them time to develop and re-energize other relationships.
Another parent mentioned that now that her daughter had more friends, she had the opportunity to invite more parents to her house.

“Now she has more friends, when her friends come to our house, I go out and introduce myself to their mothers, and we talk a little bit. It’s nice”

Although the circus appears to directly impact the social support networks of the parents through providing opportunities to meet new people, to spend more time working on their relationships and in terms of the support the instructors can provide, the most significant impact on their social networks came about indirectly through the increased sociability and expressiveness of their children. When I asked in what ways had the circus impacted their own lives, 3 of the 5 parents responded that they now felt more comfortable bringing their children to new places and into new environments. They knew that their children were better equipped to handle social situations and didn’t have to spend so much time worrying about their well-being. As such the changes in the children’s social skills had a direct impact on the parent’s capacity to socialize as it both freed up mental energy and allowed them to go to more places with their children.

“Before he joined the circus, I didn’t like to leave him at home on his own, because I felt guilty. So either I brought him when I went to visit people or I just didn’t go. Now he has more friends, I don’t feel so bad when I leave him at home, and when I do bring him places, he is much more talkative than before”.

The other two parents said that they were happier because their children seemed happier.

“I think that through the circus, my child is happier, he has more energy. That’s all I want”

“She laughs a lot more now, I don’t worry about her like I used to”

Although it is difficult to demonstrate a direct correlation between the parent’s sense of well-being and their social support networks, I imagine that their relationships can also benefit as a result of their increased sense of well-being.
Thus, outside of the direct impact on the social networks of the parents, the increased sociability of the children resulted in an increased sense of well-being in the parents and more confidence in bringing their children to new places, all of which increases the capacity of the parents to develop meaningful relationships and extract maximum benefits from their social support networks. Furthermore this increased capacity to make connections is not something that will dissipate when the child stops attending the circus. Thus, it is the child’s social capital which has the biggest perceivable impact on the family social capital.

In sum, according to all three principal actors in my research namely, the children, the instructors and the parents, the types of relationships a child has, and their capacity to develop and sustain these relationships play a crucial role in their behavior. It is then possible to intervene in such a way as to provide an environment in which children learn how to create meaningful relationships. Values such as creativity, playfulness and fun are important in the development of these relationships for a number of reasons. Through developing a child’s confidence and ability to express themselves in different ways, the circus provides a platform for children to create their own social capital. This demonstrates conclusively that children are indeed important social agents with the capacity to better their lives through their social relationships. The attractiveness of the circus, based as it is on these values means that children continue to attend, and this sustained attendance allows them to gain maximum value from the relationships they develop. This attendance also means that they spend less time in social contexts and environments where they are more likely to be under social influences and pressures which might lead them to engage in risky behavior. The novel context of the circus teaches them to behave in different ways and this is reinforced through their social networks. The use of playfulness also allows the instructors to engage and connect with the children and ultimately serve as role models. Thus it is clear that the children’s own social capital is increased in a variety of forms and this reduces the likelihood of risky behavior in and of itself.

The children’s social capital also has a positive impact on family social capital, which has been found to be a key indicator of the likelihood of risky behavior. The quality of the relationship between child and parent is improved because as the child becomes more confident and expressive, the quality of communication between parent and child is improved. The circus has the potential to impact the parental support networks, as the parents are more
comfortable bringing their child into new social environments, and are also more confident leaving them on their own. The circus also functions as an emotional and information support network for the parents. Finally, the time the children spend in the circus, is time parents can devote to developing new relationships or focusing on improving existing relationships.
Chapter 6
Conclusions

Children are important social actors with the ability to create their own social capital. This social capital can play an important role in reducing risky behavior in and of itself, can also positively impact other important indicators such as Family Social Capital. Critics might argue that the same Social Capital could be created through any collective social undertaking, such as soccer. There are a number of arguments against this.

Firstly, the wide range of activities the circus offers means it appeals to different types of children, which allows different types of children, with different abilities to mix. Soccer will generally only attract a certain type of child which means that the child wouldn’t be exposed to different children certainly not to the other gender. Furthermore, sports such as soccer don’t have the same novelty value and mystique as the circus, and children may grow bored more quickly it, stop attending and lose out on the social capital they have generated through it.

Secondly, most activities or sports have a fixed set of rules with minimum room for maneuver, meaning children mightn’t learn to express themselves fully. The lack of rules in the circus means that children learn to develop their creativity and expressiveness, which is a key skill in developing relationships.

Thirdly, one of the unique features of the circus is the relationship the children develop with instructors. Playfulness and humor play a key role in establishing this relationship; in other activities the instructors generally assume a much more authoritative role, making relationships much more one-dimensional.

Ultimately, circus gives children different voices to express themselves and different ways to look at themselves and others. It creates a space where children can be children again, exploring, curious, excited and imaginative. These are the kind of spaces and attitudes that are being sidelined in favor of economic efficiency and progress and yet, these are the spaces, moments and attitudes that we live for.
This study is by its limited to a small intervention programme dealing with youth at risk, but I feel that some of the lessons learned have implications far beyond this case study. If, as this study suggests, values such as joy, playfulness, creativity and expressiveness ultimately play a vital role in our wellbeing through the formation of healthy relationships, then we have some questions to ask ourselves. Are these values being expressed in our own relationships? Does society actively encourage these values, these types of interactions? Will our children value these qualities? Will values such as these be side-lined in favor of more measurable values?

The United Nations Development Programme defines development as the ability “to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community.” It’s time that we recognized that a sense of humour and playfulness are also important resources, and begin to look at ways to include them in a broader understanding of what a ‘decent standard of living’ actually means.
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