Building Resilience by Becoming a Circus Artist

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Due to the traumatic events they may have experienced, refugee youth are vulnerable to mental health problems. Social Circus is a psycho-social intervention that aims to enhance resilience by promoting self-esteem, interpersonal trust and social support through classes in circus arts. To explore these effects on refugee youth, a qualitative study was conducted in south-east Turkey. Semi-structured interviews and participative observations revealed that circus classes offered participants structure and a new purpose in life. Participating youth became more active, while impulsive behaviour decreased. Experiencing success through visible progress and holding the positively valued position of a circus artist seemed to contribute to the children's self-esteem. In addition, the mental and physical support received during circus classes could increase interpersonal trust. By creating opportunities for social interaction and building relationships, Social Circus may also promote social support. This study provides preliminary evidence that Social Circus may enhance resilience in refugee youth.

Introduction

At the end of 2016, there were an estimated 22.5 million refugees worldwide, which is the highest number in 20 years (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017). The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2010: 3). Of the refugees, 51 per cent were under 18. Refugee children and adolescents may go through three phases of stressful situations: the period in the country of origin (pre-flight), the period of the flight and the period of resettlement in the new country (post-flight) (Fazel and Stein 2002; Lustig *et al.* 2004; Pacione *et al.* 2013). Potentially traumatic experiences in the country of origin include exposure to violence, loss of family and friends, limited or no access to education and general insecurity (Berman 2001; Fazel and Stein 2002; Lustig *et al.* 2004). During the flight, children and youngsters are forced to leave their homes, sometimes separated from care-givers, and can be exposed to dangerous situations (Berman 2001; Fazel and Stein 2002; Lustig *et al.* 2004). During settlement in the new country, other stressors are present, such as adaptation to a new culture and language, the asylum process that entails uncertainty and fear, social isolation and racial discrimination (Ehntholt and Yule 2006).

Traumatic experiences pose a risk to mental health and can negatively influence children's cognitive, emotional and social development (Ehntholt and Yule 2006; Peltonen and Punamäki 2010). Exposure to conflict-related trauma is associated with high levels of anxiety, depression, behavioural disorders (Dimitry 2011), hypo or hyper-responsivity of children (Falasca and Caulfield 1999) and problems with self-esteem (Strauser *et al.* 2006). A study among Israeli adolescents who had been exposed to terrorism found that they displayed high rates of risk-taking behaviours, including fighting, disobeying parents and school authorities, and using drugs (Pat-Horenczyk *et al.* 2007). Moreover, human rights violations and traumatic events may lead to a lack of interpersonal trust, because it is often unclear who can be trusted in the context of collective violence (Strauser *et al.* 2006; Nickerson *et al.* 2014).

Traumatic experiences do not always lead to sustained mental health problems (Peltonen and Punamäki 2010; Panter-Brick *et al.* 2015). The majority of children and youth who have experienced highly stressful situations show resilience or even post-traumatic growth (Barber 2013; Panter-Brick *et al.* 2015). Resilience is defined as 'the ability to maintain stable, healthy psychological and physical functioning despite being confronted with significant trauma' (Pacione *et al.* 2013: 341). During post-traumatic growth, improved levels of functioning are obtained after traumatic experiences (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004).

The psychological outcomes of refugee children and youth cannot be predicted by simply weighing the risks and protective factors (Tol *et al.* 2013). Rather, resilience results from complex interactions between many factors on different levels (McAdam-Crisp 2006; Sapienza and Masten 2011; Tol *et al.* 2013). First, psychological outcomes are related to the number of traumatic experiences and the nature of the trauma. Children and youngsters who have experienced more traumatic experiences are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or have psychological adjustment difficulties

(Punamäki *et al.* 1997; Falasca and Caulfield 1999; Panter-Brick *et al.* 2015). Children who live in chronic conditions of war and military violence have a lower risk of developing PTSD than children who have been exposed directly and personally to severe violence and losses (Peltonen and Punamäki 2010) or direct personal injury (Geltman *et al.* 2005).

Second, while social support has been identified as an important factor for the development of resilience and post-traumatic growth, social isolation and a lack of social support have been identified as risk factors for developing PTSD (Lustig *et al.* 2004; Ehntholt and Yule 2006; Daud *et al.* 2008; Meyerson *et al.* 2011). Good relationships with peers represent a protective factor (Daud *et al.* 2008), while a lack of close friendships is a risk factor for the development of mental health problems (Peltonen *et al.* 2010). Family, particularly parents, may also protect children and adolescents from developing mental health problems by offering safety, care and support (Daud *et al.* 2008; Peltonen and Punamäki 2010; Tol *et al.* 2013). Finally, the perceived support and a sense of security offered by teachers are associated with post-traumatic growth (Yu *et al.* 2010).

Personal characteristics are also related to psychological outcomes after traumatic experiences (Almqvist and Broberg 1999). Positive self-esteem enhances resilience (Daud *et al.* 2008), while low self-esteem is associated with a higher risk of depression (Fox *et al.* 2004). In addition, a structure to daily life and the undertaking of new projects are considered to be important for the mental health of refugees (Miller and Rasco 2004).

Interventions can promote resilience in refugee youth by supporting protective factors and mechanisms (Weine 2011). While psychiatric interventions are aimed at the treatment of mental disorders in individuals, psycho-social interventions aim to promote psycho-social wellbeing and to prevent or treat mental health problems in broad populations by restoring social infrastructures through the use of activities (Betancour and Williams 2008). Social Circus is a psycho-social intervention involving circus classes and has been offered since the beginning of the 1990s (LaFortune and Bouchard 2011). In the literature, slightly different definitions of the concept of a Social Circus exist; however, there is one important aspect in which these definitions agree: Social Circus is seen as a tool for achieving social or personal goals (Caravan n.d.; Cirque du Soleil n.d.; LaFortune and Bouchard 2011). Cirque du Soleil (n.d.: 1) gives the following definition:

> Social Circus is an innovative social intervention approach, which uses the circus arts as a tool for fostering the personal and social development of at-risk individuals. ... The primary goal of this approach is not merely to learn circus arts. Rather, it's designed to help participants achieve personal and social development by nurturing their self-esteem and trust in others, teaching them social skills, inspiring them to become active citizens, and helping them to express their creativity and explore their potential.

Social Circus is provided as an intervention for vulnerable groups, such as youth with mental health problems, physically disabled people and refugees

(LaFortune and Bouchard 2011). Several aims for Social Circus projects have been mentioned in the literature, including combatting isolation and exclusion (Bassel 2005), learning discipline, gaining trust in other people, expressing emotions (Caravan n.d.), promoting a healthy lifestyle (Fournier *et al*. 2014) and developing self-esteem (Caravan n.d.; LaFortune and Bouchard 2011). These aims are pursued by teaching participants circus acts, such as juggling, acrobatics and balancing acts, and having them perform these acts for an audience. The following characteristics of Social Circus may contribute to achieving those aims: an encouraging atmosphere, acceptance of failure, opportunities to experience success, a focus on controlling the body by learning challenging tricks (Trotman 2013) and expression and creativity (LaFortune and Bouchard 2011; Trotman 2013). Positive effects of Social Circus may expand to other life domains and might even have positive effects at a community level (Bessone 2017).

Although few studies have explored the outcomes of Social Circus projects, several positive effects have been identified. An evaluation of refugee youth in Paris showed that participation in a circus camp decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Bassel 2005). In Finland, a study using surveys and interviews with participants, teachers, instructors, nurses and specialists revealed positive results for the participants, such as increased self-esteem, self-confidence, concentration and more interaction with others (Kinunnen *et al*. 2013). A qualitative study among parents and teachers of a community circus project in New Zealand also identified outcomes such as increased self-esteem and confidence, positive interactions, interpersonal acceptance and a greater trust in others (Trotman 2013). A Social Circus project in Mexico was found to increase the self-confidence and expressivity of at-risk youth and appeared to increase the social support networks of participants' parents (McCauley 2011). A mixed-methods study in Quebec found that Social Circus participants experienced personal growth, which was related to the increased social inclusion and engagement of marginalized youth (Spiegel and Parent 2017). A large-scale study in Ecuador, also using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, found similar effects on the individual and social level of circus programmes. These effects appeared at least partially specific to circus arts (in comparison with other community arts such as music or dance) (Spiegel *et al*. 2019).

Social Circus activities may effectively enhance resilience in refugee youth by promoting self-esteem and interpersonal trust, and by providing opportunities for positive social interactions and support. Self-esteem refers to 'an individual's subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person' (Orth and Robins 2014: 381). Interpersonal trust is defined as 'a belief that the sincerity or the goodwill of others can be generally relied upon', as explained by Rotter (Tokuda *et al*. 2008). Interpersonal trust is negatively associated with loneliness during middle childhood and adolescence (Hamid and Lok 2000; Rotenberg *et al*. 2004). Loneliness in turn is closely related to social support (Newcomb and Bentler 1986), which is defined as 'the social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them by non-professionals in the context of both formal support groups

and informal helping relationships' (Gottlieb and Bergen 2010:512; in Table 1). Social support depends on the frequency and quality of social interactions (Shinn *et al.* 1984).

Little is known about the effectiveness of psycho-social interventions aimed at children and youth with traumatic war experiences (Betancour and Williams 2008) and even less about the effects of Social Circus for this group. Although there seem to be many testimonies (e.g. Bolton 2004; Kekäläinen 2014), and first evaluations indicate that it is a promising intervention for various vulnerable target groups, more extensive research regarding the effects of Social Circus is needed (Fournier *et al.* 2014; Kekäläinen 2014; McCaffery 2014).

Since 2011, the non-governmental organization Her Yerde Sanat Derneği (n.d.) (Art Anywhere Association) has organized events, projects, workshops and festivals involving different art forms for children and youth in and around Mardin, in south-east Turkey. In February 2016, this association started its first weekly course for children and youth, offering a mix of circus and language classes supplemented by visual-arts and music classes. At that time, Turkey hosted over 2.5 million Syrian refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017), many of whom stayed in border regions such as Mardin. The Social Circus project for refugee children and adolescents run by Her Yerde Sanat Derneği is called Sirkhane. As a first exploration into the potential effects of Social Circus activities for refugee youth through the Sirkhane project, specifically into how participating in circus classes may enhance resilience by promoting self-esteem, interpersonal trust and social support, a qualitative study combining interviews and participative observations was conducted at the start of this new intervention. For the observations and interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on the specific differences between Social Circus compared with other structured activities for refugee youth, such as language courses.

Materials and Methods

Location and Intervention

Data were collected during the relatively new Sirkhane course held in Mardin, Turkey, from the end of February 2016 until the end of April 2016. During this time, around 50 children and youths participated in the course, with ages varying from five to 20 years old, although most of the participants were aged 12–16. The children and youths were invited to participate in the classes either directly by the organization or through their social network. Most of the participants were originally from Syria, although some Turkish and Iraqi children and adolescents also participated. Most participants had already lived in Turkey for several years.

The children followed a five-hour programme two days a week. Whereas the children were always taught in the same group, multiple groups of

children joined the programme on different days and times. Each group took classes in the Turkish language and circus skills, supplemented with English-language, music, dance and visual-arts classes. Classes took place for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, with a joint lunch break between these sessions. The circus classes included games and exercises for warming up and training in several circus disciplines, such as acrobatics (alone or in groups, static or dynamic movements), aerials (such as static trapeze), juggling (such as juggling balls and spinning plates) and balancing disciplines (e.g. walking on a rope or standing on a large ball). The classes had started three weeks before the start of this study.

Procedure

A qualitative participative study design was used. Information was gathered through interviews and observations by the first author—a researcher who also participated in the programme as a voluntary circus teacher. Participants were asked to fill out questionnaires about self-esteem, interpersonal trust and social support but, due to language difficulties, this data was insufficiently reliable for analyses and reporting. The difficulties faced and recommendations for future research are discussed later.

Respondents

The selection of youngsters for interviews was based on maximum-variation sampling. Participants were selected to maximize diversity, particularly in sex, age and amount of experience with the circus, as some of them had taken circus classes in the past (Patton 2002). Most parents of the interviewed participants were also interviewed themselves, although a few could not participate due to transportation problems and work responsibilities. Teachers were selected based on their availability for an interview during the period of research.

The inclusion of new respondents finished when data saturation was reached. A total of 20 respondents were interviewed, including 11 participants, seven parents and two teachers (see Table 1). The participants, six girls and five boys, were aged between 12 and 20 years old. Nine of them participated in the new Sirkhane course, while two had already been involved in other activities and had begun training as teachers in the project. The participants had lived in Turkey for a period of between nine months and five years, and were all Syrian except for one participant, who came from Iraq. The parents were all mothers of one to three participating children and adolescents, except for one participant's sister-in-law, who is also mentioned as a 'parent' in the Results section because she serves that role in the child's daily life. One mother also worked as a teacher in the project, and she functioned as one of the interpreters.

All respondents gave consent to participate in the interviews and for the interviews to be recorded. The participants all consented to the anonymous

Table 1

Overview of Respondents: Pseudonym, Role, Sex and Age

Pseudonym	Role	Sex	Age
Aliya	Participant	Girl	11
Amena	Participant	Girl	12
Amin	Participant	Boy	12
Fadwa	Participant	Girl	19
Fayyaad	Participant	Boy	12
Khalil	Participant	Boy	12
Riham	Participant	Girl	16
Rowan	Participant	Girl	12
Zeinah	Participant	Girl	14
Kasim	Participant	Boy	17
Mahmoud	Participant	Boy	15
Parent of Amena	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Amin	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Ammar	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Mahmoud	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Riham	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Rowan	Parent	Woman	
Parent of Sayid	Parent	Woman	
Ayla	Teacher	Woman	
Deniz	Teacher	Man	

use of their information gathered from the interviews. Her Yerde Sanat Derneği also permitted the undertaking of this research and the use of the observations, and they participated by approaching the parents and children regarding this research and in obtaining consent. It was agreed that the authors of this study would not explicitly ask about war-related topics to avoid recalling traumatic experiences among the respondents. All names reported in this study are pseudonyms, and some core information has been altered to make the respondents untraceable.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over five weeks. Topic lists for the interviews were adapted several times in response to a preliminary analysis by the three authors and based on participants' answers, to increase the validity of the study (Morse *et al.* 2002). The final topic lists can be found in Appendices A, B and C. Questions were constructed to explore the possible effects of the circus activities from the perspective of the participants and their parents and teachers. By also interviewing the parents and teachers about the changes they observed in all children, and particularly in the children who were interviewed, the data obtained in the children's interviews was triangulated.

In total, 19 interviews were conducted, with an average length of 33 minutes. All interviews took place at the circus school itself, except for one

interview that took place through an online phone call. All interviews were conducted individually, except for one interview with two parents who were coincidentally present at the same time. Interpreters were employed for the majority of the interviews. Four interviews were conducted in English without translators, 13 were conducted in Arabic, one in Turkish and one in Kurdish with translators. The language used was either the respondent's mother tongue or a second language that they had sufficiently mastered. Two non-professional interpreters, who were also involved in the project as teachers, served as translators. The mother tongue of both interpreters was a language other than English, which can be seen in the quality of the language in some of the quotes in the Results section. The advantages and disadvantages of working with involved, non-professional interpreters are discussed in the Discussion section. We felt that the presence of other parents, interpreters and teachers helped the participants to feel comfortable and build rapport. To help prevent socially desirable answers and positive evaluations of the circus due to the presence of contributors to the course, points for improvement and negative elements of the circus classes were explicitly requested. In addition, the primary focus was on elucidating concrete experiences and examples, rather than normative evaluations.

Observations   Unstructured, participative observations were made during circus classes, lunch breaks and in the town of Mardin. Participants were not always aware that they were being observed (Patton 2002). As far as language allowed, small talk was frequently conducted (Driessen and Jansen 2013). The observations included all participants of the circus classes, not just those who had been interviewed. Notable events and observations were converted to field notes as often as possible immediately after each class, break or event. These field notes were used to further triangulate the data obtained in the interviews.

Analysis

Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and, together with all field notes, imported into ATLAS.ti, a software programme for qualitative data analysis. All data was open-coded, which resulted in a list of codes, such as 'bored at home', 'teachers take care', 'spending energy' and 'sense of competence'. The initial codes were further clustered into categories by the three authors, such as 'living circumstances', 'behavioural changes', 'showing yourself' and 'future perspective'. Finally, the results were analysed based on the defined codes and categories, and illustrated with typical quotes and fragments of field notes.

Results

To conclude the effects of Social Circus activities, it is essential to know more about the living circumstances and problems that participants and their

families faced. The living circumstances are therefore described first. The effects of the Social Circus classes on participants' lives are then discussed and their behavioural changes are described. The first author conducted interviews and observations. The results are described from their perspective, although the interview set-up and topic lists, interpretations and analyses were discussed with all authors. The quotes use literal transcripts indicating the language used by the respondents or translators, in order to be transparent in all elements of our analysis, including that of our interpretation of specific formulations and language struggles.

Living Circumstances

Lack of activities   One of the main topics that came up in the interviews was the lack of access to daytime activities. One participant, Rowan, described her situation as follows:

> At home I just sit, like this, I don't do anything. ... I didn't like to come here to Turkey, I want to stay in Syria. ... I feel here so boring, because I'm alone at home. But in Syria we were together.

Rowan and other participants and parents identified two things that made them feel bored: being alone at home, or 'not have friends close to home', and having nothing to do. Another parent described her children as 'lost', without school, friends or a place to go. As a consequence, the youngsters hung around in the streets. Similarly, the first author of this article observed that circus participants hung around in the streets, sometimes playing games, but most of the time doing nothing in particular. When passed, they would enthusiastically greet the first author, and the first author was sometimes asked whether they could join them in the circus to do some training. 'Loitering in the streets' was also mentioned negatively by some parents, who emphasized that 'organized play' is preferable to hanging around in the streets.

In one group, most participants went to school in Mardin, but most of the other group's participants did not attend school or only on an irregular basis. Some had gone to school in their country of origin, or Mardin, but had decided not to attend anymore. Many respondents described the situation of their former school in Syria or a Syrian school they had attended in Mardin; for example:

> There [at school] they punish us. And shout. They treat with us very bad. ... I do my best to do not stand in a position that I need punishment. I become quiet and don't do anything bad.

Here, Amena describes punishment in school, and later she said she preferred learning at the circus for that reason. Some parents stated that their children did not feel safe at school and became afraid of the teachers. A lack of adequate teaching style and having 'no care' for the children were also

mentioned by some parents. In other cases, the youngsters said they needed to work to earn money for their families and therefore could not go to an ordinary school. The first author also observed several young Syrian individuals working in different places in Mardin, such as in food stores.

Position in society   Besides a lack of activities and feeling isolated from friends, other consequences of being a refugee were discussed with the informants. Rowan's parent, for example, explained:

> We escape from a war and suffering and our children watched all of this there. Now we want our children to forget that pain, that war. And continue their life in safety and better life than now.

Even though we did not ask about respondents' experiences with war and trauma, they occasionally spoke about their experiences and the potential effects on the children. Similarly, and especially in informal conversations, they articulated worries related to living as a refugee. The unpredictability of the respondents' lives became visible in the stress experienced due to asylum procedures, the pressure to earn enough money and worries about children who needed to work to gain an income. Frequently, parents discussed being worried about their children not attending school for several years, and the uncertain prospects this gave their children.

Living in a foreign country without knowing the language and culture is associated with challenges, like those described here by Amena's mother:

> Here in Turkey as me myself I can't, I feel myself that I'm ignorant. Because I don't know the language of this country. I want my children to learn the language of this country to go out and know how to treat, how to behave, how to talk.

A circus teacher described the situation of being an outsider and the possible consequences for refugee youth:

> I mean, main problem of a child is that they are not really considered as a person, or their opinions are not that important in society. But for the refugees it's double, it's double disadvantaged. They are refugees, they don't know the language, they are most discriminated from the other children, or like the society. So they are kind of shy and blocked and they want to just be invisible. They want to be invisible because of this, they are like really not ready to go in front of the society.

Indeed, some timid and withdrawn participants were observed in the classes, although externalizing behaviour was also noted.

Overall, refugee youth are likely to have several problems. The most obvious problems are the lack of purposeful daytime activities and regular school attendance. Several participants felt bored or alone, and some hung around in the streets and 'made problems'. The refugees faced language

problems and, in some cases, discrimination. Past experiences in the country of origin and stress factors in the new country may also influence their present life. Consequently, refugee children may show withdrawn or externalizing behaviour. In the section below, the influence of circus classes on the circumstances of living as a refugee are discussed.

Changes in Energy

The circus classes allowed participants to join activities, play and experience enjoyment. 'Enjoying' and 'having fun' were mentioned many times by participants, parents and circus teachers. Many parents mentioned that their children played 'primary' (easy) games at home, or that they were 'just playing in the streets'. They pointed out that the circus classes offered 'organized play': playing, participating in new activities and having new experiences in a structured environment. As a circus teacher, the first author observed that the participants were eager to join new activities and learn new skills. Even relatively easy games involving counting, clapping or simple movements were played enthusiastically. Some parents noticed that their children continued practising the newly learned activities at home.

After only a few weeks of joining the Social Circus, several changes were observed in the children by the parents and teachers. Some parents mentioned that their children became more active. Riham's parent described the following change:

> Before she was very nervous. Nervous and sad. While she came here, ... she became more happy, and active. ... She slept until the afternoon, before. Now she get up early and become active and waiting to come to the circus. That's changed.

Similar changes were mentioned by other parents. On days with classes, their children woke up early and without parental input, which was very different from the days without circus classes or the days they went to school. It was noticed that the majority of participants arrived before the start of the classes. Towards the end of this study, the participants arrived in the early morning to request the training space be opened. At the start of the course, some participants stood along the side; however, after a few weeks, they began to join in spontaneously. Some participants, parents and circus teachers noticed that participants became less shy, both in the circus and at home.

Some parents also explained that attending the circus classes allowed their children to expend their energy, instead of 'wandering on the streets' or 'making a lot of troubles at home'. Mahmoud had participated in the circus for a long time and he described not only how the circus had changed his behaviour, but how, having become a teacher in the circus himself, he has observed similar changes in other children:

> I believe that circus is changing the behaviours of children and young people, because I observing that the kids, or young people outside, who is behaving very bad, fighting and hitting us. When they are coming to circus and I saw that how they are changing with the circus training. And I want to do this, because I don't want that the children or young people be loser in the street. And to gain them in the life, like to create and do something, stay on their feet and with these things you know, giving them a purpose.

An enormous amount of energy was found to be present in the participant groups, especially in those who did not attend school. Research notes taken on 6 April 2016 state:

> So much energy in this group. . . . They seem to have some kind of basic respect for me now, which makes it possible to use their energy in a more controlled way. It's still possible to correct them, and they accept the limits I set.

When the first author began teaching the circus classes, an uncontrolled outburst of energy was observed in the participants. Methods of successfully channelling this energy into circus activities were developed and behavioural changes were observed. In the beginning, participants showed relatively impulsive behaviours, such as overreacting in interactions with peers, handling materials carelessly and impulsively changing between different disciplines. This behaviour was mostly visible in participants who did not attend school and for whom the circus classes were their only structured activities. After a while, their behaviour became more controlled; for example, the participants learned to wait their turn, to focus on one activity for an extended period and they started to arrange materials instead of just throwing them on the floor. Interactions became less 'explosive'. In general, the behaviour of participants seemed to develop from relatively uncontrolled to more controlled and some previously shy, passive and withdrawn participants started to express themselves spontaneously and become more active. Taken together, we found that the circus classes caused participants to become more active, while at the same time allowing them to expend their energy.

Safety and Social Interaction

Respondents described the circus atmosphere generally in terms such as 'love', 'safety', 'freedom' and 'as a family'. Teachers and peers were often mentioned in explanations of this atmosphere. Participants and parents frequently described the circus teachers as 'polite and friendly', 'seem to be as mothers', 'taking care' and 'teaching with love'. Teachers confirmed that building a relationship with participants was an important aspect of teaching circus classes.

Participants described the teachers' support in their learning of the new skills as follows: 'If there is anything difficult, the teacher let it become easy' and 'I feel safety, because they always help me'. One of the teachers described

the importance of creating a safe environment (in this case, in the context of learning to walk on wooden stilts) as follows:

> You just explain it and just you give them a first hand, so like you see how they need to trust. Like they hold your hand like crazy and they want to trust and if they are there to give your first trust, like they are really trusting you little bit, but not that much. After they feel more like, the things that you say it's working okay make like this, make like this, ah they start to really trust you more and more.

Similar situations were experienced by the first author acting as a teacher. Sometimes participants did not dare to do a trick but, after physical or mental support from a teacher, they managed to do it. The next time they needed support, they quickly accepted the same teacher's help and showed trust. Similarly, a teacher described how participants also helped each other to put on their stilts and support each other while walking:

> I see in many students also, in the stilts. They trust in each other: 'ah come help me, will you come help me? Come help me to put my stilts, give me your hand.

Topics such as 'supporting each other' and 'being a group' were frequently mentioned in the interviews and many participants concluded that they made friends in the circus. Participants emphasized the importance of learning together. They stated that they felt supported by others and described that they were motivated to support others while learning: 'I want my friend to learn also, not just me.'

A few respondents explicitly mentioned that this non-competitive aspect, learning together instead of competing, is important in the circus. Mahmoud, on the other hand, believed competition between friends could also be important in a supportive group:

> It's like a competition, because I get to know many friends like me that making acrobatics and things. And I was chatting with one of my friends that, what can you, like, things that you are doing, like backflip or this. I said no I am not able to make backflip. ... And I start to practice. ... maybe it was like getting a purpose and working very hardly.

It seems that, one way or another, participants motivated each other to improve themselves, in many cases by being a role model for one another. By observing others performing tricks, they gained trust in their capacities and learned that they could improve their capabilities by simply persevering. In addition, they learned to trust the teachers and their peers. This seems to result from both the physical and balancing circus activities, which can be learned by perseverance and practising, but for which the (physical) support of and trust in others are also needed. The teachers nurtured an atmosphere of safety, 'being part of a family' and encouragement without pressure.

Progress and Performances

The circus-class training led to visible results. The participants learned to control juggling balls and their bodies while doing tricks, making them feel competent. Some respondents mentioned that it felt like they had a talent and that they could do something special that other people could not do. Research notes taken on 28 February 2016 state:

> The children seem to be surprised about what they're doing. First looking to themselves, then (realising that they're actually doing the trick?) looking around, smiling and making eye contact with other people in the room. They start shining even more when an applause follows or a high five is given.

This extract was written with regard to participants learning how to walk on a large plastic ball. After some practice, their walking improved step by step and, once they managed to walk by themselves, they looked around and smiled at other people in the room. This process happened a lot during the circus classes: participants gradually gained self-confidence and pride, and learned that, through perseverance, they could learn things they previously thought were unachievable.

Throughout this process, watching performances, which are part of the performing arts, appeared to be important inspiration and motivation for the participants. Mahmoud described his first experience with the circus as follows:

> At the first time when they made a show in our school, it was an amazing show for us. That they were making very great tricks, which is very impressing. And I was like (...) that I want to learn to do it, because it was really impressing, the people when they were making this. And I was dreaming during the show that I don't know how to go there and I want to join them.

In the interviews with participants, performances were mentioned several times from two perspectives: as the performer and as the spectator. Mahmoud's quote above illustrates how watching a circus appeared to be a source of inspiration. The artists functioned as role models for the youth in the audience. Many participants mentioned that they were impressed after they saw a show and became motivated to be like the artists.

Almost directly after the participants began classes, they started to explore the performer's perspective while showing their skills to others. Participants noticed how showing off their achieved skills made them feel proud and happy, and how they were encouraged by the spectators when in the role of a performer. To perform a circus act seemed to be associated with having the identity of an artist, as circus teacher Ayla described:

> Since you start to learn something that you are proud, and everybody is not looking that you are refugee, you are an artist, you are doing something on stage, they really appreciate it. And with our groups of people, nobody knows if

they are Syrian, Iraqi, Mardinian. Doesn't matter, they are on stage, doing something amazing and everybody want to make a picture with them.

Future Perspectives

Besides circus classes, the participants attended Turkish-language classes. The participants and their parents agreed that it is crucial to learn the language of the country you live in to be able to communicate with others and participate in society. Some parents also mentioned the importance of studying other subjects, such as mathematics, to build a better future. The participants appeared to be motivated to learn whatever was taught. Several participants mentioned that they 'want to learn everything' and 'want to learn as much as possible'.

Virtually all respondents stressed the importance of circus classes. This was surprising, as it had been expected that the participants would predominantly consider language classes the most important. The participants emphasized that the circus classes had an irreplaceable role in the project, even though they could not exactly describe why. Some differences between the language and circus classes were mentioned. Aliya described the following difference:

> I like both school, because I'm learning there, like become something, like become a doctor, or a teacher. But here [in the circus] also I'm learning something, very excited things, to like, in my dream. And I'm learning also this, and both is important.

Aliya described the circus classes as a place to learn 'exciting things', of which she could only dream. Many participants mentioned that they were excited about the circus, whereas this description was not used when talking about school or learning languages. One participant explained that he was internally motivated to learn circus arts, in contrast to learning languages, which he felt were necessary to learn.

The parents and participants also mentioned the importance of having new experiences, meeting people from different countries, discovering new things and becoming more open-minded. For some participants, the circus created a new future perspective in a direct way, as Kasim said:

> Actually the circus, it's the best. . . . Because for me it's the best, I like the circus too much, yes. This is my, when I become to, like about thirty years old, I will be juggler, nothing else.

One parent said that the course gave them hope that 'there is something good waiting' for their children. Similarly, the participants pointed out that they dreamed of showing off their skills, giving performances and being famous. Circus classes and performing acts were therefore inspiring, and sometimes even created clear future ambitions.

Discussion and Conclusion

It was expected that Social Circus activities would enhance resilience in refugee youth by promoting self-esteem, interpersonal trust and social support. Here, the results of the interviews and observations are discussed, as well as the limitations of the study. Recommendations are given for future research, and implications for practice are shared.

Self-esteem

Practising circus tricks led to visible progress in the participants, giving them a feeling of competence. The participants felt talented and able to do something special. Previous research suggests a relationship between the mastery of new skills and self-confidence (Copeland *et al.* 2012); therefore, learning new circus skills may indeed increase self-esteem. Furthermore, training and learning in a group may accelerate the learning process because the participants felt motivated to try new tricks and movements when they saw others doing the same thing. They encouraged each other verbally and non-verbally, which also increased self-esteem. In addition, the circus skills required lead to an increased control over and trust in their bodies, enhancing self-esteem.

A crucial finding is the importance of performances of Social Circus activities for the participants. Performances and presentations, whether big or small, gave participants a chance to show off their newly acquired skills. The participants were proud to perform and felt encouraged by the audience. Moreover, the performances allowed the participants to perceive themselves as admired circus artists. For refugee youth, this revered position is in contrast to their daily experience of being viewed only as a refugee. Experiencing success and being in the valued position of an artist may reinforce refugee youngsters' self-esteem and give them hope for the future, especially in their daily context of experiencing language problems, discrimination and uncertain prospects. These findings are similar to those of Bessone (2017) and Spiegel and Parent (2017), who described an increase in self-esteem and self-discipline, as well as more positive views of oneself, in a community of marginalized youth engaging in Social Circus programmes.

Interpersonal Trust

Human rights violations and traumatic events may lead to a lack of interpersonal trust (Strauser *et al.* 2006; Nickerson *et al.* 2014), whereas the perceived support and sense of security offered by teachers are associated with post-traumatic growth (Yu *et al.* 2010). In the circus classes, participants and teachers developed a trusting relationship because participants needed to and could rely on the teachers and each other for support, both mentally and physically. The friendly attitudes of the teachers appeared to contribute to this sense of safety. The participants stated that, as well as feeling safe in the circus school, they increasingly trusted their teachers and each other. The

physical support that teachers and participants offer each other while learning new tricks seemed to reinforce this relationship.

The observed increases in interpersonal trust may be a result of the mechanisms relatively specific to learning circus disciplines, because of their physical and often risky characteristics (Bessone 2017). Spiegel *et al.* (2019) found that the pre-post effects of parkour and capoeira on personal growth and social inclusion, measured through retrospective surveys, were similar to those of circus classes. Meanwhile, potentially less physically risky activities in comparative programmes (e.g. personal defence, dance, music, art and language studies) showed smaller effects. Mason (2014) mentioned that children participating in Social Circus in a warzone in Afghanistan showed an increase in eye contact, more open body postures and more physical closeness, indicating increased trust.

Social Support

Social isolation is identified as a risk factor for the development of sustained mental health problems (Lustig *et al.* 2004; Ehntholt and Yule 2006; Daud *et al.* 2008). The participants in the present study spoke of the importance of being part of a group, making friends and supporting each other during circus classes. Social isolation appeared to be successfully reduced in the circus classes because of the opportunities for social interaction and building relationships (cf. McCauley 2011). Social interaction may lead to social support, depending on the frequency and quality of the social interactions (Shinn *et al.* 1984). In learning and performing circus acts, the participants have specific interactions in which they require the physical and mental support of others while also receiving respect and encouragement (cf. Bessone 2017). Social Circus may also indirectly promote social support by increasing interpersonal trust (Hamid and Lok 2000; Rotenberg *et al.* 2004) and self-esteem (Marshall *et al.* 2014; Spiegel and Parent 2017). Our results are in line with findings from previous studies that identify greater social interactions and engagement with others (Kinunnen *et al.* 2013; Spiegel and Parent 2017; Spiegel *et al.* 2019) and decreased loneliness and feelings of isolation (Bassel 2005) due to Social Circus activities.

Activity Levels

The participants stated that, before they joined the circus, they felt bored or alone, and had few daytime activities. Some participants showed withdrawn behaviours. Others, especially participants who did not attend school, had lots of energy and displayed uncontrolled behaviour. According to the literature, refugee children may develop maladaptive psycho-social behaviours in situations of conflict or social unrest (McAdam-Crisp 2006). Similarly, children with PTSD, which several participants may have suffered from, regularly show hypo- or hyper-active behaviour (Falasca and Caulfield 1999). Although such behaviour might have been adaptive in previous, dangerous

environments, it can hinder adjustment to new and safer living situations (Lustig *et al.* 2004).

The circus activities functioned as daytime activities and provided daily structure. The classes provided a reason to get out of bed in the mornings and prevented youngsters from misbehaving in the streets. The participants became more active but were also able to expend their energy in a controlled and safe environment. Similarly, after just two weeks of Social Circus training, children in a warzone in Afghanistan showed less chaotic behaviour; fewer interruptions; increased focus, concentration and attentiveness; and better learning (Mason 2014). A study among Palestinian children showed a decrease in the internalization and externalization of problems after participating in structured activities such as dancing, art classes and sports (Loughry *et al.* 2006). The behavioural changes identified in the present study may therefore not be specific to Social Circus activities, although the physical exertion may be relevant.

By discovering new things and experiencing them with perseverance, it is possible to learn new and exciting skills. The circus activities may therefore improve the participants' perspectives of the future. For some participants, dreaming about a future as a circus artist created new ambitions to strive for. An increased sense of purpose in life was also found for circus participants by Spiegel and Parent (2017) and has been identified as a strong predictor of subjective wellbeing (Taylor 2015). Moreover, the importance of creating new projects and structure in life is stressed in research regarding the mental health needs of refugee communities (Miller and Rasco 2004). By creating a purpose in life, in both the short term and long term, Social Circus may therefore contribute to the wellbeing and mental health of refugee youth.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study shows the promising effects of Social Circus activities for refugee youth; however, this research has some limitations. First, the first author was in the position of both a researcher and a voluntary circus teacher during her stay in Mardin. This participative research design has both advantages and disadvantages. The participants and their parents occasionally wanted to express their gratitude to the first author as a representative of the project. As a result, the respondents may have mentioned the positive aspects of the project so as not to appear ungrateful. On the other hand, building rapport is important for gaining information (Patton 2002) and being a teacher presented opportunities to gain the trust of the participants before the interviews were conducted, providing authentic access to refugee communities (Miller 2004). In addition, the first author had the opportunity to observe participants without changing their behaviour as an outsider.

Working with non-professional interpreters also had advantages and disadvantages. Without doubt, information was lost or changed in the imperfect English translations in both directions. Moreover, not speaking the

participant's language made it impossible to obtain information from daily conversations. Finally, both interpreters were also involved in the project, which could have biased their translations of the questions and the respondents' answers. On the other hand, the participants already knew both interpreters, and all the interviewed mothers seemed to trust them and seemed comfortable in their presence. Some of the mothers even continued talking with the interpreter after the interview. Again, the importance of trust, necessary for data collection, was clearly visible here (Miller 2004; Patton 2002).

Initially, we aimed to include quantitative measures, using questionnaires measuring self-esteem, interpersonal trust and social support; however, the pre-test and post-test data obtained was not sufficiently reliable for such analyses. The main reason for this was that the language barrier was too significant. Although the questionnaires were translated into Arabic, several participants could not read or understand the Modern Standard Arabic used in the questionnaires. To overcome these language problems, an interpreter read the questions for all participants. Unfortunately, this led to the sharing of answers between participants, which likely influenced their answers. Second, the period between the pre-test and post-test analysis was short. Additionally, the pre-test questionnaire was taken a few weeks after the programme had started, rather than taking place before the start, as had initially been intended. Finally, we lacked the means (e.g. comparison groups) of gaining insights into the differences between Social Circus activities and other interventions.

In future studies, we advise that quantitative data is acquired individually and verbally. In this way, most problems associated with the reading and interpreting of questions can be avoided, and answers will not be influenced by other respondents (although they may still be influenced by the researcher). Concerning qualitative data collection, it would be beneficial if researchers spoke the same language as the respondents to avoid information being lost in translation, and so that informal conversations and focus group interviews could be included in data collection.

Although we found clear indications that Social Circus activities may positively affect the wellbeing of refugee youth, this study does not yield robust evidence of increased resilience. Only tentative conclusions can be drawn on the possible transfer of circus-class effects to daily life or the longer-term effects on mental health. Longitudinal research integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection is therefore recommended (Weine *et al.* 2014). Good examples of such data-collection approaches are the studies by Spiegel and Parent (2017) in Quebec and by Spiegel *et al.* (2019) in Ecuador, in which qualitative methods (observation, focus groups, interviews and more) are combined with the quantitative results from retrospective pre-post surveys. Specifically, prospective pre-post data may be collected in future studies to prevent memory bias. The comparison of different activities can also be informative with regard to the specific effects of circus and other (arts) interventions (cf. Spiegel *et al.* 2019). Studies may also consider the

broader community effects, while remaining sensitive to the critical discussions of the aims and effects of social programmes (Bessone 2017; Spiegel *et al.* 2019).

Implications for Practice

Based on our results, we suggest some approaches for improving the practice of Social Circus activities for refugee youth and activities for vulnerable youth in general. First, the participants and parents emphasized the importance of a safe environment and a warm relationship with the teachers. By taking care of the participants, showing love and respect, and continuously showing them that they can be trusted, teachers play a crucial role in creating a safe environment. Teacher support may enhance participants' feelings of safety and trust. Support can be offered both verbally and non-verbally in social interactions, and also by physically assisting youngsters while learning something challenging or risky. When teachers are successful in this, they can become role models, foster similar behaviour among participants and ideally create a sense of being part of a family (cf. Bolton 2004; Bessone 2017). The role of teachers in the success of such projects cannot, therefore, be overestimated.

The types of education that youth receive may also be important. It appears relevant that Social Circus is something 'exciting' that children may need to work hard to learn, but which results in admiration when it is being mastered through perseverance. In this respect, we had not anticipated the importance that performances seemed to have. Performances allowed participants to feel proud of themselves and seemed to boost their self-esteem. Giving and watching circus performances appeared to allow young people to dream about the future, to show off their capabilities and to be admired as an artist, giving them self-esteem and a temporary break from their identity as a marginalized and vulnerable refugee. Performances, whether big or small, are thus an indispensable part of the success of Social Circus as an intervention.

Appendix A

Topic List Participants
General information

- How old are you?
- How long have you lived in Turkey?

Introduction to the circus

- How long have you been taking part in the circus? How were you recruited into Sirkhane? What did they ask? What did you think it would be

like? What was the reason you wanted to join? What did your parents think of it?

First day

- Can you remember the first time you came to Sirkhane? What did you see? What did you do? How did you feel? What did you think of it?

General day in Sirkhane

- Can you describe what a general day in Sirkhane looks like? What do you learn in the Turkish classes? And in the circus classes? And what in music/dance/art?

General day outside of Sirkhane

- Can you describe what a general day in your life looks like when you do not attend Sirkhane?
- Do you have other activities in the week? Do you go to school? What is the difference between school or other activities and Sirkhane?

Circus

- Try to remember the last new trick you learned. What did you learn?
- How did you feel when you managed to perform the trick? Have you experienced this feeling outside of the circus?
- Did you show the trick to anyone? How did they react? How did you feel when showing your new trick?
- Do you think it is important to learn new things? Do you like trying things you don't yet know how to do? Why (not)?
- What have you learned in the circus, besides the tricks? How did you learn this?
- Can you describe the best memory you have of Sirkhane? Why is this your best memory?
- How would you describe the meaning of the circus for you in one or two words? Why this word?
- What do you like most about the circus? Why?
- What do you like the least? Why?
- What is the most difficult thing? Why?

Social

- Did you already know any other children that attend Sirkhane before joining?
- Did you meet new children?

- Do you see the children from the circus outside of Sirkhane? Did you know them already?
- What is the difference between the children in Sirkhane and children at home or at school?

Working together

- Try to remember the last time you had to do a trick together with another child, for example an acrobatic trick.
- What did you have to do? What did you feel while doing it?
- Is it hard to trust another child when performing a trick? Why (not)? Do you think your feelings about this have changed since the first time you did it?
- What do you think of working together, such as in acrobatics? Do you like it, or do you prefer working alone? Why?

Future

- Do you want to continue doing circus? Why (not)?
- What do you think could be improved in the circus? Why is this important for you?

Appendix B

Topic List Parents
Expectations

- How many of your children participate in Sirkhane? What are their ages?
- How did you hear about the circus? What was your first reaction? What did you think of it?
- What made you decide to allow your children to join the classes?
- What did you expect of the classes? What did you hope for?

Activities

- What do you know about the classes your child(ren) participate in? What does your child tell about the classes?
- What do you think about the classes in general? And about the different classes individually, such as Turkish, music, art and circus? What do you think about the importance of the different classes?
- What do you think he or she learns from the circus? How have you seen this?
- What do want your children to learn? Why is this important?

Behavioural changes

- Have you seen any changes in your child since he or she joined the circus activities; for example, changes in behaviour, mood or their interactions with others? What do you think about these changes? How do you think these changes have occurred?
- What does your child do on days they do not attend Sirkhane? Do you know how he or she feels then? How does he/she behave?
- How does your child feel in the morning, when he or she leaves for Sirkhane? And how does he/she act and feel when arriving home from Sirkhane?

Needs and circus characteristics

- What would you wish for your children at the moment? What do they need in their life at this point?
- How could the classes contribute to these needs?
- What characteristics of the circus do you think could be important for your child(ren)?
- Do you see any differences between circus and, for example, other sports or art classes?
- Why is Sirkhane important for you and your children? What does it offer?
- Can you describe the meaning of Sirkhane in one or two words? Why these words?
- What do you think could be improved? What would you do differently?

Appendix C

Topic List Teachers
Expectations and general ideas

- Can you tell me how you got started with Sirkhane? What was your ambition?
- What was the reason to use Social Circus in the projects? What do you hope to achieve with this?
- What do you think of the use of Social Circus in general? And what about for this specific target group of refugee children/youth?
- What do you think they need? How does the circus play a role in offering this?
- What characteristics of the circus could make it a useful intervention?
- What is the difference between the use of circus and other (non-verbal) interventions, such as sports and painting?
- What do you think is the role of the circus, and the role of the other activities, such as Turkish and art?
- Can you describe the atmosphere in Sirkhane in general? In what way do you think the use of circus activities contributes to this atmosphere?

Experiences concerning children

- The first moment this group of children came in, what happened? What did they do? What was the first circus class like?
- Which differences did you notice in the following weeks?
- Can you describe the relationship between you and the children? How did it develop?
- Can you describe the social interactions between the children? Were there any changes? What do you think influenced these interactions? Why do you think this?
- Can you describe the self-esteem of the children? Were there any changes? What do you think influenced this? Why do you think this?
- Can you describe the trust or distrust the children showed, both to each other and to you? Were there any changes? What do you think influenced this? Why do you think this?

Personal experiences

- What has been successful in the current project and previous projects? Which interventions contributed to the development of self-esteem? And to trust? Or to other developments? Which interventions did not contribute?
- What was difficult concerning the circus classes? What would you do different next time, or what would you like to change?
- Can you describe your most important memory about the children or a child in the current project or a previous project? Why is this important?

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