“LOOK AT ME!”

The circus approach: working with children and young people through the circus arts

Steven Desanghere

Stories and methods on how to deal with diversity and accessibility
Colofon

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“Look at me!”

“Damn everything but the circus! ... damn everything that is grim, dull, motionless, un-risking, inward turning, damn everything that won’t get into the circle, that won’t enjoy. That won’t throw its heart into the tension, surprise, fear and delight of the circus, the round world, the full existence...” (E.E. Cummings, American writer and poet, 1894-1962)
About the author

Fifteen years ago, Steven Desanghere was bitten by the circus bug. He has since taught hundreds of classes, run numerous workshops and social programmes, worked with various ‘special target groups’, and started the neighbourhood circus project at Circusplaneet vzw, in Gent, Belgium. He himself is a huge fan of juggling, and the art of working with groups.

Foreword

“I wish to aid in the development of our most precious natural resource – the minds and hearts of our children and young people. It is their curiosity, their eagerness to learn, their ability to make difficult and complex choices that will decide the future of our world. We need the help of all of our young – the despairing, alienated youth of the ghetto, the aimless, affluent youth, the serious, thoughtful children, the whole great mass of our young people – if we are to preserve this fragile planet and build a future world worthy of persons. The only way we can be assured of that help is to assist our youth to learn, deeply and broadly, and above all, how to learn.” (Carl Ransom Rogers, Psychologist and psychotherapist, 1902-1987)

“We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions -- if they have any -- and helping them explore the things they are most interested in” (John Holt, Education Expert, 1923-1985)
Steven Desanghere’s booklet ‘Look at Me’ offers an intelligent and thought provoking insight into the relationship between ‘learning’ in the conventional sense and ‘learning’ which embraces the physical arts - represented in this instance by circus. Using the argument for the physical arts being an educational tool, Steven offers a powerful, enhancing demonstration of how important, inspiring and life changing this approach can be to the learning experience of young people.

He presents a compelling argument within the framework of the perceived learning experience which, whilst placing a strong emphasis on an ‘in looking’ holistic approach, also reaches out to embrace the wider community offering, in his words, ‘diversity and accessibility’. An approach which ‘translates well across a broad spectrum of special target groups, who aren’t always easy to reach through regular channels or youth, sports and culture programmes’.

I feel that it is best summed up using Steven’s words, ‘it’s not about the tricks and the material itself, but about the approach. This approach is something educators, youth and art workers and physical education teachers could learn a thing or two from. Without having to learn a single circus trick’.

A valuable addition to the discussion around the physical arts. Enjoy!

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Introduction
The circus arts as a method of working can be particularly successful. Those who have taken part in circus workshops or projects, afterwards often are very enthusiastic about their experience. They refer to the power of Playing, conquering their insecurities and fear while Learning and Practicing numerous circus techniques, or the excitement and the tension of Showing their newly acquired skills. Playing, Learning, Showing – the Holy Trinity of the circus approach. The beauty of this approach is that it translates well across a broad spectrum of special target groups, who aren’t always easy to reach through regular channels or youth, sports and culture programmes. Think of newcomers to a place, who speak a different language, the socially disadvantaged, children or young people with learning or behavioural disorders, autism or ADHD, people who are overweight or of an older age, those who are less able to walk or see properly, or have a mental illness or are in prison, children in special youth care or arriving from warzones, and numerous introverts or those that don’t quite fit in. In short, the circus works for (almost) everyone.

People teaching circus arts will never tell you how it’s done, when it comes to handling diversity, and accessible methods of working. But they can show different methods of working to achieve goals, what works for them, and the possible reasons for its success. After all, it’s not about the tricks and the material itself, but about the approach. This approach is something educators, youth and art workers and physical education teachers could learn a thing or two from. Without having to learn a single circus trick.
This is not a booklet that helps you set up a specific target group oriented method of working, nor is it a manual for organising the inclusion of members of special target groups in your regular method of working. There’s plenty of helpful literature on these topics already. Our basic principle is that everyone is unique and special in their own way, and it’s impossible to truly pigeonhole any of us. Organisations that distance themselves consciously from mainstream thinking and conformity, will spontaneously become more open and accessible. In their eyes diversity is a strength, rather than an obstacle. Or, as critical teacher Ron Scapp (‘Teaching Values’, 2003) puts it so eloquently:

“Difference enhances life. This is not to be confused with shallow notions of inclusiveness or experiencing diversity where one stands in the space of privilege, taking in and from those who are other. But rather where one is fundamentally moved - transformed utterly. The end result of this transformation is mutuality, partnership, and community.”

Therefore we prefer not to speak of (target group specific or inclusive) ‘social’ circus, but rather of Community Circus, circus that unites people and creates community. The following pages take us on a wonderful journey through the Community Circus, past the Self and the Group, Learning, and the six basic principles of the circus approach according to Reg Bolton. Circus arts teachers picked up a lot along the way in the youth-, sports- and cultural sector, as well as in traditional education. Now it’s time to give something back from the good practices in the circus workshops. “Ladies & Gentlemen: Welcome to the Circus!”
Circus arts schools in the 21st century
"Circus originates from the ‘freaks’ and the marginalised. Not surprising then that the circus arts work well on the margins... It elevates ‘being different’ from a problem to an art form.” (Hans Vanwynsberghe, circus teacher)

This booklet is not specifically written for circus-folk, on the contrary. Therefore we will not delve/dive deep into the inner workings of specific circus techniques, but rather take a look into the successful methods applied by circus schools when it comes to dealing with people in the margins... and how this can inspire you in your method of working.

The circus traditionally likes to work from the margins. For hundreds of years now they’ve been bringing together kids, adults and ‘freaks’ from various backgrounds to unite communities in collective “Oh’s!” and “Ah’s!”, gasping in amazement, laughing and crying. Archetypes such as the clown, the acrobat, the ringmaster, the thight rope walker, the lion tamer are embedded in our psyches, our dreams and our fairy tales. Or at least, that’s the case in the western world. The traditional traveling circus, with its large circus tent and rink, and variety of performers and artists, gradually took shape over the past 250 years. Originating in Western Europe and starting from unimaginable horse riding tricks, the circus arts became more and more animated,
gaining momentum: music, clowns, acrobats, thightropes, jugglers, (wild) animals, and so on. In its heyday the circus could attract crowds of up to 10,000 in one arena. The techniques used in the circus, of course, date further back in time. The Chinese, for example, were already using the first form of the diabolo 4,000 years ago, or the Egyptians, who were already mastering the art of ball juggling at that point. Over the centuries we’ve come across many other non-western civilisations who were also developing various art forms and means of entertainment, comparable to those of the circus. Circuses generally comprised closed communities of families and friends, in which it wasn’t generally considered acceptable to teach outsiders the tricks of the trade. This makes sense when your livelihood depends on these tricks, and the mystery that surrounds your craft, that manages to attract such large crowds.

Circus-folk were often outcasts and ‘freaks’, people who couldn’t, or didn’t want to find their place in ordinary, civil life. They had an appetite for adventure, the gypsy life. Over the years, fascination for the traditional circus has faded somewhat. The rise of television, of course, and the zoo, and other inexpensive forms of entertainment, leading to its diminished popularity. Traditional circus communities have disappeared from our villages and towns. Modern day circus arts, born from the ashes of the traditional circus, has adapted itself and caters to the demands of the modern day public. It experiments extensively, often works outside the arenas, on the streets amongst the public, at festivals and cultural events. The world’s biggest modern day circus, Cirque de Soleil, lists its eight most important circus-elements as follows, partly from traditional circus arts and borrowing from other cultural traditions: acting, art forms from across the world, acrobatics, imaginary worlds, dance, courage, skill and elegance. Workshops and circus arts schools, that have popped up all over the world in the last few decades, dismiss certain aspects of circus tradition. They find their place somewhere on the intersection of youth, culture and sports. The secrecy that surrounded the circus, and how to learn the skills involved in the craft, is also no longer prevalent. There has been a conscious effort to break down the barriers. Nowadays you have national and international circus arts federations and specialised schools, artistic education programmes and courses. Moreover, there is a general interest in the power that circus arts education offers in reaching those who are otherwise difficult to reach, for whatever reason. This is done through target group specific workshops,
inclusive methods of working, social programmes, neighbourhood circus festivals, intergenerational programmes, circo-motor skills with toddlers, etc. Circus schools are geared towards one or several of the following techniques: aerial and ground acrobatics, object manipulation (juggling, diabolo, flower stick, spinning plates, etc.), physical theatre training (character and clown work) and balancing techniques. Besides this, there are a number of specific techniques (magic tricks, knife throwing, sword-swallowing, fire breathing, etc.). Naturally, it’s not always appropriate to practice these techniques with non-professionals.

The University of Tampere (Finland) recently conducted a widespread survey, researching the vast and numerous intangible effects of ‘well-being’ resulting from the circus experience. Members of circus schools feel connected and safe in their group, they build friendships, find peace, channel their frustrations, become more focused, resolve fears, and more. In a nutshell: practising circus techniques stimulates the development of numerous social, emotional, cognitive, and motor skills.

It is, however, possible to develop these skills via non-circus related activities and in your own organisation or school.
Me and the Group
“No curriculum or teacher can take account of everything going on in a learning group: the diversity of learning channels, the variety of kinds of intelligence, the participants’ differing degrees of experience and background in the content matter, the complex realities of rank, class and ethnicity that influence participation, the projections being made on the teacher or facilitator, the degree of participants’ self-confidence and assertiveness, the relation between the mainstream of the group and its margins, and the multiplicity of individual learning goals.

But a self-organizing group can, given some time, operate with this degree of complexity! It can create a system in which an amazing number of needs can be met.” (George Lakey, ‘Facilitating Group Learning’, 2010)

If we recognise diversity as a reality and adjust our work accordingly, this will have a significant effect on our agogical approach. Traditional education left its mark on many of us: all too often it left us feeling trapped, bored, insecure or stressed out at school. Who amongst us has never sat at the school desk, daydreaming to escape from the educational system that sentenced us to a state of lethargy, sameness, fear of failure, and conformity? Averse to our interests, enthusiasm, tempo and background. Not that some teachers wouldn’t want to see things done differently. What do you do with a class of 20 delirious kids full of energy, a rigid curriculum passed down the hierarchy, relentless learning goals and severe inspections? This often leaves little room to teach on an individual level that speaks to the child and motivates the child according to his or her interests. Fortunately, these days there’s a lot of trials being conducted to experiment with new methods, which take into account the diversity amongst students. Still, a large section of the child population living on the margins of society feels left out, and ill at ease, when it comes to school. All too often, when the time comes to leave school, it leaves them marked, with limited job prospects, and a lack of equal opportunities. Let alone the scars left behind by being labelled as either ‘disruptive’, ‘unreliable’, ‘dumb’, or ‘bad behaving’. In general we are far removed from a truly learner-centred educational system.
In leisure activities it could be far easier, but here we also see children and young people falling by the wayside. Accepting, and handling diversity in a pluralistic way, it seems, doesn’t go hand in hand with one youth worker having to manage a large group of children. “Adapt...or get out” seems all too often, to be the motto. Coordinating a group, after all, you need to be able to keep your head above water, and our classic approach is often one of uniformity, involving group activities that every participant simply must accept and enjoy. Behaviour seen as disruptive is subsequently blamed on the individual, rather than questions being asked of the method behind the group dynamics, or the approach used, which might be encouraging behaviour seen as disruptive. Circus arts, inherently, sidesteps a number of these obstacles, which is possibly why most participants are so pleased with this method of learning. When circus teachers visit schools or youth programmes, it causes a stir and creates an energetic atmosphere, and they learn a thing or two! It’s not uncommon to find that teachers or facilitators are shocked at the reaction of students who are normally speaking not involved or engaged in group activities, who usually seem unhappy and disenchanted: “He normally never gets involved, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him laugh like that before – he normally can’t do anything”.

In this chapter we examine a number of aspects that arise in groups in general, which can help us be more open and accessible in our approach and methods of learning.
More than 70 years ago, Abraham Maslow created the hierarchy of needs. It’s an interesting ‘check-list’ to determine whether or not the needs of participants are being met, in order to enjoy an activity effectively. In many cases, behaviour of individuals that is seen as disruptive, is caused by feelings of insecurity in a group, not feeling safe or accepted, or simply because they feel too warm, too cold, tired, thirsty, hungry or ill.

It’s not necessarily correct to assume children will indicate themselves which needs are not being met, if they are even aware of it at all.
The Rhythm of Differentiation and Integration

Differentiation and Integration are like inhaling and exhaling. Each participant in the group feels the need to be connected now and then (Integration), and to be divided into smaller groups, or work alone for a while (Differentiation). Group leaders who stubbornly stick to whole group activities all the time, may notice some member of the group starting to tail off after a certain amount of time, becoming distracted or talking to others. Some feel fine in a group of 15 or more; but most feel more comfortable subdivided into smaller groups combined with individual practice, learning, and playing.

Often there are more ways of differentiating then you first might think. When participants are motivated and challenged, differentiation moments don’t tend to become chaotic, on the contrary. You can delegate specific tasks or goals to individuals or subgroups to work around, or simply provide a free space where partipants can choose each for themselves what they want to practice or play.

In practice: Kobe has a difficult home environment, and on the streets he compensates this by acting tough. He longs for attention and recognition, but he doesn’t have a lot of friends. When the circus workshop gets underway, he tries to stand out by making loud, negative remarks, annoying the other kids, climbing onto the climbing frame. Instead of casting him aside, the facilitator asks him to bring the boxes of juggling balls and place them in middle of the hall, and whether he can help with collecting all the materials used in the rest of the workshop. The facilitator praises him in front of his peers, and thanks him for his effort. During the rest of the workshop, Kobe is helpful and participates, and, as it turns out, he’s a natural with the diabolo.
The multitude of circus techniques at our disposal and the inexhaustible sources within the arts, enable circus arts teachers to provide for each their own. But this applies to various disciplines, given some creative preparation. Creating challenges in subgroups, agreeing on individual learning goals, possibility for demonstration at the end, self-study – making a variety of sources of information available (books, internet, photos, etc.), or exchanging experiences and trick sharing in small groups. Groups can be formed spontaneously, or through a game, letting fate decide, which is frequently leading to members forming new friendships.

**In practice:** One of the most straightforward methods for dividing into subgroups is the ‘phonebook’. Simply ask the participants to line up in a row, alphabetically organised by surname, then chop the row into small groups and you have a random division. Another way is the ‘big friend game’. Say the word ‘mingle’ and everyone must walk randomly amongst each other, call out a number between 1 and 5, also signalling with your hand, and everybody must divide into groups of that number as quickly as possible. Groups not with the right amount of people, must perform a task of some sort, determined beforehand. Then everyone walks around again until a new number is called out and all the children will try to form groups of that number together, hustling and bustling, without hesitation. You can do this a couple of times until you settle on what you see as the right number of groups.

**Tensions in the group: role, status and norms...**

Group workers are generally not therapists. When there is a case of disruptiveness in a group caused by individual factors, there is a number of things to contemplate, in order not to get off track completely, and without needlessly singling out a partici-
pant and making them feel unnecessarily guilty. It is not uncommon, however, that the group dynamic causes some friction, or tension, often resulting from the following three elements:

Role: What can I do in this group?
Status: How am I perceived in this group?
Norms: What is expected of me?

It is often a case of confusion, or lack of clarity, regarding one of the three above factors that leads to tension and conflict.

When trying to empower children and young people, it is important to pay attention to this. Within the (usually) non-competitive circus arts, we try to strike a balance with sufficient differentiation, enabling each member to contribute and feel needed, helping with the workshop, helping arrange the space or putting on a small show. This can be achieved by determining different roles and task, allowing the participants to feel comfortable with their own unique role in the whole. Those who don’t wish to be on stage for example, can help with the setup. There is no need to feel the fifth wheel on the wagon!

Providing sufficient status, is sometimes more difficult to determine. Traditionally in the circus arts, various tricks or acts are demonstrated, leading to a rewarding experience, assuming good coaching has been given, and therefore the participant can be pleased and satisfied in terms of status. Everyone can find their thing, their trick, whatever this may be, with enough perseverance, and demonstrate what they have practiced, which is unique to him or her. Even when you are overweight, shy, or disabled. We try to make sure that everyone is appreciated for their part in the group,
and doesn’t have to be confronted with some kind of social exclusion. The risk of being socially excluded is of course not only possible in schools and in society, but also in the youth movement. Avoiding this can be a long and difficult process. But as a starter it is good to recognise the privileges we, and the so called ‘stronger’ pupils in the group, have. Privileges of social status in a group can be earned, as well as unearned. All too often people are judged by language fluency or accent, social class, pocket money, ethnic background, religion, school level, gender, looks, size, physical disadvantages, (lack of) confidence, etc.

Arnold Mindell, a world renowned group therapist, claims that those who have privileges generally aren’t aware of their privileges. Only once a ‘lower’ status or ‘social status’ in a group has been personally felt, e.g. by being ignored or ridiculed, only then, will a person be aware of (the lack of) privilege. Arnold Mindell pleads with us to become conscious of our own privileges, and make positive use of them. Only then, with clear communication, can the authenticity of pupil and coordinator be preserved, without getting stuck in a sterile social script. It prevents us from different forms of abuse of power and unintended exclusion. How many unspoken conflicts and frustrations in a group could be resolved this way?

In many groups you’ll come across unclarity in terms of arrangements and norms. Sometimes group leaders are too strict or intolerant, or there is a lack of structure and it goes the other way. This leads to a lack of clarity and an unsafe group environment and, of course, conflicts.

In practice: there is no perfect formula for laying down guidelines and making good arrangements. Some coordinators like to make it clear beforehand what these guidelines are, with or without the participation of the members; others trust in the groups’ self-discipline and capacity to organise individually, stepping in only when needed. Some would like to compile a list of dos and don’ts, others apply a rule of three: “respect yourself, others, and the material”.

The biggest challenge remains not so much in the formal arrangements made, but in the unspoken rules in a group. Each group adopts a sort of mainstream behaviour
type, which sets the tone for how the entire group communicates, laughs, works, plays, and how each member fits in, or gets somehow pushed to the margins. This unspoken mainstream is often not even consciously supported by the majority of the group members. It can be steered, subconsciously by a small, but dominant, minority of a group, or by a coordinator. This kind of normative thinking in leisure activities can easily strengthen social exclusion mechanisms, once again accentuating social disadvantages of particular minority groups, if the person in charge isn’t aware of these factors. All too often, we still see vulnerable children ending up as the culprits, leading to unnecessary dropouts.

Those who enter our circus room, soon find themselves in a situation where different norms and rules apply, with different expectations compared to those of the streets, at home, or at school. The circus hall is a world of its own, where everyone can shine, and no-one needs to be excluded. There is room for spontaneous comments, and it’s okay to laugh a lot or play wildly amongst each other, and make physical contact in the process. People ask each other for help and applaud one another. These norms make it possible for kids to flourish and demonstrate the variety of skills and poses they have been taught during the workshop. They can play, uninhibited, and be themselves. The workshop, or, lesson, starts off in a circle, in which everyone can face one another and the facilitators can introduce themselves, and outline what is expected during the course of the activities that lie ahead. At the end of the workshop, another circle moment is held to wrap things up. Naturally, this isn’t some sort of miracle formula: children still carry their baggage with them from the past; the size of the group and how it is organised is key, as is the approach of those in charge, the infrastructure, materials, the group phase (read further), age (difference) and, of course, the contents of the chosen group activity.

Are children or adults necessarily disruptive, or naughty, when they can’t sit still for half an hour, are vocal about repeated exercises they consider boring, or, if they don’t speak with the proverbial stiff upper lip?
Group Phases

Each group goes through a number of phases, long or short. A psychologist called Bruce Tuckman, designed a model for group development that contains five stages that a group will go through, commonly known as the 'Orming-model'. People who regularly work with groups will recognise this.

1. FORMING: A new group is established. Members sniff around to determine who the other members are and what are the roles and status they could take up in this new group. Conflicts are avoided but the participants are on guard.

2. STORMING: The storm gathers in the group! This is also referred to as the conflict-phase and is essential to shaping the group. Many groups don’t get here, as conflict is avoided at all cost, or, a lot of groups get stranded as they can’t get past conflicts that have arisen. However, it’s important in this phase to speak up for ourselves and make our dislikes clear.

3. NORMING: Members now get into a real, and tightknit, group. They know their roles and responsibilities, what to expect, how decisions are made, and can act as a loyal member of the group.

4. PERFORMING: There is an open and trusting atmosphere in the group. Members are flexible and the role of the facilitator moves more into the background. Participants independently take on a lot of responsibility. The group performs to its maximum capacity.

5. MOURNING: The group comes to the end of its process, members say their goodbyes, and hopefully look back on the experience favourably.

If a new member joins in phase 3 or 4, the group will often fall back to phase 2, until the new member is integrated, or remains an outsider. Therefore it is good to think twice before allowing new members into an existing group project. Every time this happens it changes the group dynamics. This can cripple the creativity and potential of certain group members, if they happen to feel less comfortable following the addition of a new member. The facilitator has a firm hold on the group during the first and the last phase. He or she can let go somewhat during the other stages, allowing room for initiative in the process.
Running a group
Although there are many misconceptions on this subject, there is more to being a youth worker than organising a bunch of games to play, and handing out the afternoon snacks. In the world of circus workshops, it is common to speak of three primary qualities a group coordinator should demonstrate, in varying degrees, throughout the process: Officer, Nurse and Clown. After all, a group facilitator must be able to conduct, be caring, as well as entertain. He or she ensures that a planned activity goes well, while also making sure there is a good atmosphere, as well as providing a safe container, an environment in which the pupils feel comfortable to be themselves in the group, to feel safe and motivated. Only in this way, can each and every one prosper and actually learn. This definitely isn’t an easy process. The following chapters contain methods, and some tricks of the trade, to help in this process.

A person who works with children, or with young people that have been marginalised, is hopefully driven by empathy and a pluralistic attitude, rather than showing pity or a patronising demeanour. Firstly, people from all sorts of special target groups want to be respected and feel like fully fledged members of the group. They don’t want to be treated differently, or pigeonholed. They seek trust and authenticity in their teachers and would rather see them laughing, or cursing, than maintaining a condescending mask, without ever displaying their true emotions.

**As a youth worker, showing your emotions and your real self is a form of deep respect to children with less opportunities or abilities.**

This is possibly the most worthwhile trick in the book. You don’t have to be an expert in the problems of children who suffer from a hearing disorder, or brain damage, or mental health issues. You don’t have to be an expert in working with children (or adults) from another culture, or with people who don’t have documentation or who have been locked up.

If an experienced group coordinator is aware of his or her own privileges, and approaches members of a group in a sincere way, that is half the battle won already. “Trust yourself, as well as the group”, and this will take you far. If you work target
group specifically, it doesn’t automatically mean you needn’t consider differences. Therefore it is good to ensure that field experts (healthcare/social workers, physiotherapy, youth care workers, etc.) are available, who you have sat with in advance and are able to work with. This can help you conquer the situation if you get cold feet. Most youth workers feel under-qualified when it comes to working with special target groups. Once they jump in the deep end, and realise their own capacities can carry them far in their situation, confidence grows and they want to discover further possibilities in working with group diversity. There is always a fear of the unfamiliar. Sometimes you will have to throw a new colleague in at the deep end. You can allow them to assist projects in a safe way and let them help coordinate group projects with special target audiences. Before you know it your organisation is a whole lot further in terms of working with diversity amongst groups.

There is no need to adopt a neutral stance at all costs. If you are working with people who have no documentation for example, or the disadvantaged or less-abled, it is fine to be angry for the unfair treatment they have received, or for the exclusion they experience on a daily basis. This can be a form of empathy, and can make a person or group feel heard. A true pluralistic attitude goes further than a neutral or passive stance towards diversity, according to African-American critical pedagogue bell hooks. It puts our own privileged and dominant environment in question, in the quest for more justice in the world.

When we replace the conventional monologue with a sincere dialogue, it presents a chance for growth on all fronts, as a group worker and a human being. Outsiders, whomever this may be, can often teach us more than we suspect, or ever considered possible.
Aside from having a pluralistic attitude, a group worker can encourage more open and diverse results by considering the following five elements. Is your offering: Accessible, Affordable, Available, Valuable and Understandable for children and marginalised youths?

- **Accessible**: Is it physically possible? Can participants come alone, or under supervision, and how? Are the hours OK?
- **Affordable**: Are there financial barriers? Is it difficult to ask for a social fee?
- **Available**: Is sufficient, applicable support available? Is there a designated contact person? Do they listen?
- **Usable**: Do participants benefit? Do they get a say?
- **Understandable**: Do the children or youngsters understand where support is possible or necessary, what is expected? Is the language used adapted accordingly?

Remember that a facilitator doesn’t have to know everything or be able to do everything. It can be great to learn something new from the children, or young people, yourself.
“Learning isn't the result of teaching. Learning is the result of the activity of those who learn.”

(John Holt)
Hopefully we all agree that the sector of leisure activities doesn’t receive sufficient funding. However, youth care workers, sports clubs and cultural centers are not always the best advocates of their own work. How many people think that the leisure sector exists only for the amusement of children and people? And if there are cutbacks then we just have to make do and be more creative, right?

There is nothing wrong with amusing ourselves, on the contrary. But isn’t there much more to our clubs and associations? From a broader perspective? Yet, we hesitate to see these activities as true education, in such a way that would require additional support from the government. Do we merely associate stuffy classrooms with education, where playtime is kept to a minimum?

In the next chapter we delve deeper into the power of non-formal education, backed up by a number of learning-models. Learning, that is indeed what happens in our organisations!

**Non-formal Education and Lifelong Learning**

Following World War II, France, amongst others, examined the role of education in our society. The atrocities that occurred during the war, which had only recently come to an end, were carried out by people who, largely, would be considered ‘educated’ people. They weren’t stupid, but they weren’t averse either to the brutality, cruelty and inhumanity aimed at people with a different way of thinking.

The question then was whether or not there is a potential system of education that could prevent a repeat of the nightmares that Europe, and the world, endured? A system in which people are taught to be critical, self-responsible and empathetic, to resolutely say no to war and discrimination? In the decades that followed, a vision grew within the European Council that places non-formal forms of education on equal terms with formal education, such as the schools and universities. Significant funding was made available at European level to work towards this, in order to raise awareness and gather support amongst local, regional and national governments and the average tax payer, for non-formal education in the youth, sports and cultural sector. This presents an excellent opportunity to defend our sector, our job or our volunteer work, and to demand more support!
Europe formulated a number of learning objectives and basic competences (see further), that are vital for civilians to remain critical, and live and work side by side in relative harmony. Where formal education, schools, excel in the first three competences, non-formal education bodies complement this with other competences. It is up to every organisation to look within and determine which competences they strive to work by, and it is up to the individual members to formulate specific learning objectives for themselves.

The 8 basic competences established according to the European vision of Lifelong Learning are:

- Communication in the mother tongue
- Communication in foreign languages
- Mathematical competences and basic competences in science and technology
- Digital competences
- Learning to learn
- Social and civil competences
- Initiative and entrepreneurship
- Cultural awareness and expression
These basic competences are explained further in a host of documents. For example, under civil competences, you will find a number of basic principles listed for our society, such as: knowledge of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights. Empowering children and young people who find themselves living in precarious circumstances, teaching them to act against injustice and exclusion, is not seen by Europe as a sideshow that should remain on the margins, but vital to success with working with groups in the long run.

**IN PRACTICE:** young members of a juggling group are asked to put together an original performance for the grand finale of a show the circus school is doing. Together with the teacher, they go over YouTube videos of tricks and put together a performance based around the tricks they chose. They try them out, string them all together and decide, following lengthy discussions, to use cooking as a theme to the performance. The coordinator gets involved only when required. The group members film each other’s tricks on their smartphones and offer feedback. The end result is an excellent performance by the juggling group. During the process they have worked on, and applied, five or six of the basic competences of Lifelong Learning, with the help of a number of core strengths as summarised below.
Besides the 8 competences, Europe sums up a number of core strengths, inextricably linked with non-formal education. These are:

- critical thinking
- creativity
- taking initiative
- problem solving
- assessing risks
- decision making
- constructive management of feelings

A good youth worker will be looking to encourage these traits in his or her group, guiding all pupils to develop themselves further, according to their own set of talents and areas of interest. Whether we are heading a children fanfare or a frisbee club, we are continually dealing with the aforementioned competences and qualities, whether we like it or not. It can’t hurt therefore to highlight this with the relevant government bodies. Because, youth work – it cannot be stressed enough – is so much more than simply filling time, or simply keeping children occupied, or merely to pass on a limited set of skills.

**Creating a comfortable learning-context**

Individualised education that is person-centred assumes an individual is unique, and seeks an individual path for learning. Certain things we do well, but we do not necessarily enjoy. Other things we may love to do, but don’t excel in. But when talent and passion meet, and we enjoy, as well as perform well at, a given task, we find our element, according to well-known education professional Ken Robinson. And if an individual finds this element and develops it further in his or her own way, he or she can grow up to be a strong and inspiring person. Nothing could be more beautiful!

Learning can be done in a variety of ways and, as mentioned previously, this can be done within the structures provided by formal, informal, and non-formal education. Despite diversity, different learning methods and backgrounds among participants, we notice that a group is a lot of times the best way to learn things. Key elements here are learning methods, style of learning and the aforementioned container. Some learn better by auditive means, others by more visual methods or by using
their motor skills. Others use feeling and emotion as a learning channel. A good group worker will appeal to all these when working with kids; hearing, seeing, moving and using intuition and feelings.

David Kolb, a psychologist, made it clear to the world that there are different learning styles.

In order to learn a new skill, some start from their own direct experience, whereas others start from the reflection, whereas others will work from a theory that explains the skill or active experimentation based on the findings. An ideal learning-context ensures that these various learning styles are considered when setting up an activity.

The Kolb Learning-Cycle has proven that it is a keeper: it has been applied all over the world, and maybe some time soon you will use it too.
Direct Education-pedagogue George Lakey introduced the term ‘container’, referring to a safe learning environment, in which participants feel connected with one another, and empowered, in which they learn from each other, and are encouraged to “be themselves, as opposed to trying to act like the ‘model student’, in order to naturally allow true and authentic curiosity to surface.”

**In practice: creating a good learning environment or container is interesting for any activity.**

**In our circus workshops we pay attention to the following additional factors:**

- **Is there enough space and tools/materials available to the group?**
- **Can we make sure there aren’t any prying eyes present at the activity (e.g. nosy parents, bickering, staring, non-active teachers, social workers or supervisors)?**
- **Are there too many visual or auditory distractions?**
- **At the beginning can we gather the group in a circle to sketch the outlines of the upcoming activity and establish a set of ground rules?**
- **Can we prepare a few games, to channel any residual excess energy or restlessness and focus everybody and create a comfortable atmosphere? If the activity lasts anywhere over an hour then it is important to ease it off every so often and make sure the attention span remains OK.**
- **Can we prepare fixed moments at the beginning and end where everybody gathers together?**
- **Can we try to organise ourselves in a way that we don’t just allow new members to join in the middle of an intensive project?**
- **Can we prepare time and room for individual moments and time allocated to subgroups?**
- **Can we make sure there is enough failing pleasure, so participants can let loose while learning new skills? In our school we never cease to emphasize that you can only learn new things if you are not afraid to make a lot of mistakes. Or as the old proverb reads: “A master has failed more times than the student has ever even attempted”.**
More than eighty years ago, a Russian pioneer of education, Lev Vygotsky, came up with the Zone of Proximal Development. He pointed out three zones in a developing child. A comfort zone in which there are skills a child has mastered and is able to put into practice. The zone of skills that the child is unable to perform, not even with help. Finally there is the zone of proximal development. An area of knowledge, insights and skills that are achievable for the student, given a tailored approach with the necessary help from an experienced person.

This booklet doesn’t stretch far enough to examine this theory in depth. Below you will find a number of key elements and thoughts to consider for yourself moving forward:

**Can we make sure we don’t overestimate the participants and they don’t panic as a result of given tasks? Can we push them gently in the right direction, for instance by showing them how to do it? Or by allowing them enough time to experiment, fail and correct themselves and be able to analyse every small step?**

Vygotsky reminds us that quite some transfer of knowledge is the result of peer education. It is easier for peers to reach their peers, so to speak, as opposed to people who are older and/or more experienced. Sometimes the message from the teacher doesn’t come across that well. Don’t forget that teachers often enjoy privileges which make them very different from the youngsters they teach (they are older, stronger, more verbal, more confident...) and therefore a student can possibly be shut down or be scared off. Arranging groups in subgroups or pairs can give the necessary space for unforced peer education and gives the chance for more individual opportunities for development. Everyone wins!
The Flow Model: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

One of our favourite learning models was created by Hungarian-American Psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, born in 1934, a couple of months after the death of Vygotsky.

The Flow-psychology continues along the lines of the zone of proximal development. Csikszentmihalyi interviewed people who were top of their field: artists, athletes, chess champions, etc. He posed the question: how can these people acquire so much knowledge and skill in such a short space of time? And what factors in their learning process enabled them to prosper?

He subsequently discovered various parallels between the interviewees. What is more, the flow-model that resulted from this research provides a good checklist for our own activities in setting up a tailored learning environment.

He starts with an axis, placing the skills to be learned/acquired against possible challenges. If the challenge level is low, we arrive in the zone of boredom/dullness; if the challenges are too hard, the panic zone looms. It is up to pupils and teachers to make sure the acquired skills are adjusted according to the challenges, and vice versa, in order to ensure that flow is achieved, in which it is easier to learn difficult new skills, in a playful way and without too much effort. A child who is just starting
to play an instrument doesn’t need to be pushed onto the stage immediately. But there is no need to wait too long either. In either scenario, the chance is always there that the student chuck it in altogether, despite the talent, passion and enthusiasm they have. This model is applicable to many fields and sectors. Each of us can hopefully recall that wonderful feeling of being in the zone, in the flow, whether it be painting your wall, learning to cycle or trying to understand algebra.

According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi the feeling of being in the flow can be characterised by at least a number of the following eight features:

1. There’s a clear goal.
2. Sufficient concentration is made possible.
3. There is a loss of self awareness – being immersed in the activity and forgetting your Self (together with your supposed limitations).
4. Loss of awareness of time – time ceases to exist or time seems to go faster.
5. Direct feedback is possible: success and failure in terms of the task or activity become apparent immediately, enabling the person to adapt or adjust.
6. There is a balance between capability and the challenge to be completed. There is a challenge involved, but not too much that it becomes impossible.
7. There is a feeling of control over the situation or activity.
8. The activity is in itself rewarding, for instance because it is fun.

The next time a participant in an activity finds a task stupid or too difficult, or simply shuts off, it could be due to the fact that certain conditions aren’t being met.

Is the task or activity clear to the student? Can they concentrate? Is there enough chance for feedback and positive reinforcement during the process? Does the participant believe there is a chance for succeeding in the given task?

And above all, does everyone involved feel they are being challenged enough?

Differentiation may be necessary, if you wish to keep everyone motivated!
Nobody puts it better than renowned educator and philosopher, Paolo Freire, when it comes to the ultimate goal of education:

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”
Recent research has shown that some people assign themselves a learning identity, while others have a more fixed identity. The latter often says “that they simply aren’t capable” or “this is just who they are”. The first group may sooner say “I don’t understand...yet”, when quizzed on their knowledge regarding a topic, or skill. Naturally, the role of the parents and the environment the subject grows up in are important to the development of their identity. People with a learning-identity, are less inclined to pigeonhole themselves, or others, too quickly. This can often result in more tolerance of others, and an increased capacity to learn.

Alice and David Kolb, who conducted in-depth research surrounding learning-identity, said the following:

“The learning way is about approaching life experiences with a learning attitude. It involves a deep trust in one’s own experience and a healthy scepticism about received knowledge. It requires the perspective of quiet reflection and a passionate commitment to action in the face of uncertainty. The learning way is not the easiest way to approach life but in the long run it is the wisest. Other ways of living tempt us with immediate gratification at our peril. The way of dogma, the way of denial, the way of addiction, the way of submission and the way of habit; all offer relief from uncertainty and pain at the cost of entrapment on a path that winds out of our control. The learning way requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure; but opens the way to new, broader and deeper horizons of experience. Learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery.”

(‘On Becoming a Learner: The Concept of Learning Identity’ - Alice Kolb and David Kolb)
The Circus-hand by Reg Bolton

Monday’s child is fair of face

Tuesday’s child is full of grace

Wednesday’s child is full of woe

Thursday’s child has far to go

Friday’s child is loving and giving

Saturday’s child works hard for a living

Hard Work
Persistence
Resilience
Process

Trust
Touch
Co-operation
Sharing

Risk
Adventure
Courage
Defiance

Self
Individuality
Identity
Image

Dream
Aspiration
Imagination
Symbolism

Humor
Fun
Happiness
Laughter

The Circus-hand by Reg Bolton
Teacher of circus arts, Reg Bolton, presented society with a very useful model known as: the Hand of Bolton. It demonstrates firstly why the circus arts can be the answer to a number of fundamental human needs. On the other hand it makes for a useful checklist for those who aren’t involved in the circus, to see if their group activity is appealing and challenging enough. Applying the circus hand model in your own group can bring about a more open and accessible way of working.

Pleasure
The palm of the hand stands for Pleasure, Laughter, Play. Some group leaders are so fixated on order and discipline, or the goal of the activity, that pleasure gets left behind, for the participants as well as the group leaders.

A group in which people genuinely laugh together, encourages people to be themselves and this builds mutual trust and community. The coordinator doesn’t have to be a joker or a clown, or entertain in any way. In a group environment that is comfortable, this will develop spontaneously.
But a smile goes a long way and is often the best way to build bridges between groups of people of a diverse nature. Laughing together = diversity in action!

**Is there room for joy in your planned activity?**

*In practice: An amusing energiser-game, Cat and Dog (many variations exist), is useful for children, as well as adults, who are enough mobile and enthusiastic. Those who just want to watch, can make sure fair play is upheld! You need a proper open space. All participants get on their hands and knees and crawl around. A small part of the group is a "dog" and the majority are "cats". Both sets make their relevant animal sounds and the barking dogs aim to tag on the back or the arm of the meowing cats, who, when tagged, become dogs. The game goes on until there are no cats left.*

**Self-expression**

The index finger stands for Self-Expression, Identity and Showing. The phrase teachers of circus arts hear most throughout their career is: “Look at me!”.

When we are in a new group, or uncomfortable in an existing group, we like to blend into the background. Nevertheless, we all have an identity, and the desire to demonstrate this once in a while, without the fear of being laughed at or ignored. This is where facilitators play a crucial role.

It’s not just the strongest or the smartest who deserves credit or recognition in the group; everyone does. There are a number of tricks for this. It is possible for you to ensure that each participant is publicly encouraged and empowered. They can occasionally demonstrate something to the rest of the group, activities can be differentiated, making members more visible and allowing them to show what they are good at.
If certain activities are made competitive, to the point where you can predict more or less who the typical winners and the losers will be, then something is fundamentally wrong. Nobody wants to be on the losing side time and time again. What does this do to the self-image? What status does this give them in the group?

In practice: circus workshops not only have a vast array of techniques and material to allow each other to shine, but above all it’s inherent in the nature of the circus arts that groups work in long projects towards a performance piece. It can be daunting to perform for family or friends or classmates but the relief and the exhilaration that is experienced makes it all worthwhile. For some it is enough to play their part and have a brief on-stage experience, for some it is much more. It can become a huge inspiration and guidance for life. But for most it is just a really nice amateur experience. It is up to the coordinator to ensure that students needn’t enter the panic zone and that everyone involved realises it is natural to make mistakes on stage and if embraced, can even be charming.

Not every discipline ends in a performance that lends itself to reducing the competitive element, but it should be possible for people in the group to show themselves and their identity in some way, right? The heavy set central defender of the football team will never be the top scorer but he might do a mean moonwalk! The goalkeeper who lets in sloppy goals might be a great joker! Showing can take many shapes

Are we making sure everyone in the group is seen and gets their chance to shine before the group? In whatever way, big or small? How would you feel as one of the members? Some are confident in this and just take their space, whereas others wait until an opportunity is given to them and the space has been created.
and forms. For example, by showing a newly acquired skill in the circle, making a photo or a short video clip and uploading it for the group on Facebook, or simply by the facilitator acknowledging the qualities of a member and vocalising it in front of the group.

**Taking risks**

The middle finger sticks out the furthest, and is most likely to be hurt and bandaged, while playing circus. Therefore it stands for risk, adventure, daring and rebellion. Those who practise circus arts for a year, and never get somewhat bruised at least, are possibly not giving it their all. It is rare that a doctor is required, but occasionally this is the case. As is the case for judo, football, scouting or most youth sports clubs. There is no such thing as a 100% safe environment, and that is not a bad thing actually.

An over-protected child, whether it be because of the parents or teachers or society, is likely to seek out danger. If you don’t feel the adrenaline running through you in a positive way, channelling your energy properly, it is likely you will try to find your kicks elsewhere, through misbehaviour, drugs, bullying, petty crimes or sexual experimentation on a too young age.
Naturally, there are many, many urban arts that can achieve this goal. But often the element of competition builds a barrier. It adds stress and the possibility for failure. The last thing that kids under stress want, is taking the risk of publically being, once again, the ‘loser’.

When circus arts teachers are busy working they often see concerned parents, wincing on the side-lines, as their child attempts a difficult trick or prepares to do a somersault, for example. The strange thing is that accidents are extremely rare while doing ‘dangerous tricks’. Many accidents are caused by small details that aren’t considered dangerous beforehand. Whether it be a towel on the floor that somebody slips on or the border of a safety mat somebody twists their foot on, or a juggling ring that goes astray and hits someone on the head. Learning to assess risk is an important quality of course, particularly in non-formal education. Don’t eliminate all the adventure for pupils as it is healthy for their development. And don’t hesitate to be adventurous in front of a group or to try something a little different once in a while yourself... It benefits us all and keeps us on our toes.
Obviously this doesn’t mean we should to be stupid or careless. But teach pupils to recognise this and be responsible with it. Classes in the circus arts often begin with a number of warm-up exercises or games, and safety is always a priority due to its nature. Risks are assessed as best as possible. The rest of the responsibility lies with the pupils themselves.

**Hard work**

Our thumb refers to the necessity of hard work, perseverance, self-development, outside the comfort zone of the known. Meaningful leisure activities are not always free of obligation, on the contrary. If you are busy working with young people with disadvantages of some sort, it doesn’t help to patronise or set the bar too low and compliment needlessly. Don’t underestimate children, from any walk of life. The joy and exhilaration is so much more rewarding when kids have to push themselves, outdo themselves and learn something new, leaving behind old negative thoughts of not being able to do something. Now that deserves an applause! You don’t make an activity necessarily more fun by lowering the bar. Children want, and need, to be challenged, fulfil challenges, even if they initially show resistance or fear for the unknown. As mentioned before, it is up to the facilitator to make sure they don’t fall into the panic zone and to guide them through tougher parts of a project or challenge. Otherwise it can become monotonous and boring, with a lack of challenge leading to potential conflict and bad behaviour.
This doesn’t mean that the reins must always be held tight either, nor does it determine that everybody would want to be continuously challenged. For certain pupils who are experiencing difficulties, it is often best simply to make them feel at home, providing a carefree atmosphere in which they aren’t obliged to do anything, but have the space to express themselves. But there is no harm in leisure time being demanding. “No pain, no gain!” as they say sometimes.

**Consider how you praise your pupils. Have you acknowledged them for things they have done (“You’re smart/strong/sweet/savvy!”) or rather for the effort they put in (“Wow, you worked hard/did your best! You never gave up!”)**

**In practice: a difficult group challenge. This exercise is often used in the circus arts at the end of a session. The group sits in a circle, with everyone kneeled down with their hands on the floor in front of them and their own thumbs touching. The hands are then moved forward until the little fingers connect with their neighbours’, creating a closed circle. The challenge then is to all rise in unison always keeping the circle closed. It requires a high level of focus and concentration and highlights the need for everyone’s input. Each part of the circle is necessary otherwise it doesn’t work.**

**Imagination**

The often forgotten little finger stands for Imagination, Fantasy, Dreams and Creativity. We usually dare to be creative and authentic when rules and regulations are less rigid. Acting the clown, imagining the absurd, creating a magical world through stories, movements, and costumes, can be liberating. Within circus workshops this element is frequently used. The history of circus lends itself to this intrinsically, a world of imagination and fantasy. Those who spend time
in the circus arts, often come together in a production group and artistic projects in which they brainstorm and experiment with creativity to put together a performance. But also when you just watch a performance, a stream of imagination is activated in your head. The value of this more passive culture participation is widely underestimated. In social-artistic projects, the emphasis is often more on the growth of the active participants, and less on the effects a good performance can have on the audience. While a good live performance can also be a truly magical experience for a passive audience, something most people in our society never, or hardly, experience.

**In practice:** In recent years, circus workshops have shown themselves to be the ideal environment to elevate the cultural competence of a neighbourhood. Talent is everywhere and often amongst children with a difficult background who are vulnerable and often don’t get the opportunity to demonstrate their talent to their broader environment, except maybe amongst their group of friends. A circus arena on a neighbourhood festival doesn’t have to limit itself to traditional forms of circus. It might as well include some powerful parkour-somersaults, local beat boxer or a break dance act.

There are also easier ways of stimulating some extra imagination in your activities. You can introduce your games with some more fantasy elements in it, you can bring along a story telling book or dress up trunk, stimulate a vision circle on which jobs we want to do when we grow up, or search together for at least fifty applications for a paper clip. Anything goes!
Trust and Touch

“We live together because we are making the show; we don’t make the show because we live together [...] We are not obliged to like each other to make the ensemble work, but it is because we make the ensemble that we become to admire and respect each other.” (Guy Carrara of the Archaos-circus collective, quoted by Reg Bolton)

Our ring finger points to Trust, Working Together and Touch. We live in an overly sexualised, yet individualised, society where mutual physical contact in work with children or young people is met with distrust and scrutiny. If you look around, it is clear that many cultures encourage physical contact. Most people need to feel connected with their peers. Sometimes this involves touching each other. The circus arts, just like many other activities, are a good excuse to feel each other and get rid of a lot of mainstream social codes of distance and alienation.

Even more important than physical proximity is psychological proximity, when people are working together intensely, and mutual trust is key. When you are reliant on one another for an act or performance, all doubt goes out the window. Each has a clear role and status, which are acknowledged and valued by the group. You don’t need much more to be happy, contented and carefree.
Working together is not always easy and needs to be learned, and it is a good exercise in social skills, democracy and compassion. We have to learn together how to handle diversity and conflict, nonviolent communication, responsibility and tolerance. We therefore need to understand basic mechanisms that apply in group dynamics, in order to understand and find out more about abuse of power and exclusion. It is a difficult path, but necessary if we are to avoid falling again and again in the trap of anti-democratic and violent tendencies.

According to Arnold Mindell:

“Creating freedom, community and viable relationships has its price. It costs time and courage to learn how to sit in the fire of diversity. It means staying centered in the heat of trouble. It demands that we learn about small and large organisations, open city forums and tense street scenes. If you step into leadership or facilitatorship without this learning, you may spend your time recapitulating the blunders of history.”

Are contact and trust encouraged in your group? How can you stimulate this?
In practice: Bambi and the Hunter. A fun exercise allowing people to make contact in a playful way. Everyone gathers in a circle with a clear view of the rest of the group. The coordinator asks everyone to think of one person in the circle without revealing who. That person is their personal Bambi, from the Disney fairy tale. Then everyone is asked to think of a second person, again without revealing their choice. This person is the Hunter. The group is then asked to stand in a space between their Bambi and the Hunter, creating a human shield, in a span of ten seconds. The outcome obviously involves the whole group hilariously criss-crossing amongst themselves whilst everyone is trying to save their own Bambi.

Beware: this game can get a little rough. There are more calm variations on this available. For instance by letting each member choose a Hunter and a human shield and by playing Bambi themselves, trying to keep their human shield between their Hunter and themselves.
Local circus in Brugsepoort neighbourhood in the town of Ghent
Circusplaneet vzw was founded twenty years ago, based in the neighbourhood known as Brugse Poort, a former textile workers area located in what is called the ‘19th century belt’, in Ghent, Belgium. It’s a bustling area with more than 15,000 inhabitants, of which 3,600 are below the age of 20. Two-thirds of these youngsters are of migrant descent, with almost 100 nationalities living side by side. Poverty and unemployment levels there are far higher than the Belgian average and the area, in parts, has suffered from urban decay, with quite some houses currently in a severely bad state. Various efforts are being made locally in terms of youth, sports and culture. But participation in leisure activities is lower amongst youth of migrant descent and/or with a societal disadvantage. Youth care group vzw Jong works with groups of children and young people in this area. Regular initiatives in youth care only reach a fraction of the people in the neighbourhood. The same applies to Circusplaneet vzw who, until recently, mainly attracted children from middle-class backgrounds, from other areas, backed up by parents that are involved and have the time and the budget for leisure activities.

The area of Brugse Poort is crying out for structured leisure activities but these aren’t being implemented sufficiently. The barriers are of a diverse nature and we won’t examine those here, besides referring again to a model mentioned previously in this booklet, that comprises the following five factors; is it: Available? Affordable? Accessible? Usable? And Understandable? The activities made available by Circusplaneet vzw, apply a successful formula, with weekly classes for general and specific circus techniques, attracting hundreds of children as well as adults, but not so many vulnerable children from the neighbourhood.

So the circus school went in search of other formulas, more fitting for the latter group. It spread its wings through the neighbourhood and made contact with relevant neighbourhood teams and organisations that work with young people. This brought them in contact with the Buurtteam (neighbourhood team), Bredeschool, vzw Jong youth care, and various Go-Betweens of schools in the area. One of the objectives of the Bredeschool and Go-Betweens programme, is to get children acquainted with the local organisations and where possible to get them into the regular local leisure activities.
Circusplaneet concluded that schools could be perfect partners in this, as they can reach all the children in the area. However a referral to regular leisure activities often doesn’t work: often it’s fully booked, requires weekly commitment for the entire school year and it can be somewhat daunting or off-putting for the kids or the parents. Circusplaneet established a tailored-system, which would allow kids, step by step, to familiarise themselves with the circus arts. It is a tailored approach adapted where necessary and, for this reason, the reaction was positive from teachers and local authorities.

They experimented with the following approach:

- Circus introductions at school, gymnastics, or at sports days.
- Storytelling about the old circus, using ancient circus posters and showing small tricks in the classroom.
- Coaching a group of pupils to put on a small performance at a school event.
- Inviting a class of pupils to the circus school and giving them a small workshop there.
- Giving a circus workshop at school during noon break or in after school care.
- Offering 5 consecutive workshops for a small and interested group of kids, selected out of 1 or 2 classes, in the gym hall of the school, just after the classes.
Offering 5-10 classes in the circus school, for kids from one or two schools. This is coordinated with the Go-Betweens of the different schools and with the parents, to arrange who collects them after the lesson etc. With a performance or open circus space at the end of the process for parents and friends and teachers.

Inviting children and facilitators from Stibo’s (afterschool care) to the local circus festival.

Starting a weekly Open Practice space in the gymnasium at a school, inviting kids from other schools to this space and offering other services such as homework guidance and an afternoon snack.

Circusplaneet tried various formulas with neighbourhood partners, with respect for the child’s specific situation, taking into consideration any language barriers that may apply, problems with behavioural or motor skills, family situation, etc. Time and time again it became clear that with the right, tailored offering, in collaboration with neighbourhood bodies such as youth care teams and schools etc., using clear communication, children of all backgrounds were motivated to get involved; with the same discipline, punctuality, continuity and dedication as less vulnerable children!

At this junction, where the leisure sector, youth care and education sector meet, it can give way to a win-win situation and we all learn from each other in the process. The potential is huge and the enthusiasm even more so. Let the walls be broken down further...

Naturally, at times, this was a slow and painstaking process for Circusplaneet, with successes and failures along the way...But nobody ever said it would be easy!
The curtain falls
If mainstream-thinking dominates our reality and maintains the status quo, clinging to the past, it will spread dullness, boredom and insincerity, eliminating every dynamic or playful behaviour, paving the way for apathy, fear, and intolerance. It creates a society in which people offer no more than criticism of anything that appears different or dynamic.

Artists, philosophers, activists, innovative thinkers, social workers and idealists alike believe in the possibility of change, and always work towards this from the margins. They are often met with distrust, as well as admiration. The aforementioned prefer to let life run its course by staying close to the authentic self, and this is felt by everyone. Those who remain in the mainstream, bend to social expectations, and are allergic to experimentation or self-expression. Imagine what people would think!

It is not without reason that all societal, cultural or scientific revolutions find their roots in the margins, where people dare to question the status quo to pave the way for renewal:
Herman Hesse via the Steppenwolf almost 90 years ago wrote the following:
“There is no reality except the one contained within us. That is why so many people live such an unreal life. They take the images outside of them for reality and never allow the world within to assert itself.”

Youth care workers and teachers have a huge societal project ahead of them. Can there be more understanding and equal opportunity? Can we encourage kids to be themselves and help build a better and brighter future, where war, inequality, exploitation and discrimination are largely condemned to the past? A future in which active and critical citizenship is the norm?

Parents and teachers alike are ready for the task ahead, but they need the help of youth workers, sports clubs and artists from across the board. Children and young people need meaningful and structured leisure activities, under the tutorship of inspired adults, who value them for who they are and complement their, sometimes tough, background, by offering a chance at: Pleasure, Self-Expression, Adventure, Trust, Imagination and Perseverance.

Currently there is a severe lack of options when it comes to leisure activities for the youth who are socially disadvantaged. Poor, overcrowded neighbourhoods have lengthy ‘invisible’ waiting lists filled with children and young people who would gladly get involved in a tailored activity offered to them. Children labelled with limitation X or Y often yearn for opportunities but will generally revert to what is familiar, with the ‘special’ activities on offer to them a safe haven, but still leaves them feeling left out somehow.

There is also plenty of expertise and drive with many youth workers, which strive to reach the children on the margins, but don’t have the necessary contacts or working methods, or simply need to get over the initial hurdles.

Fortunately, significant strides are being made in towns like Ghent, through initiatives carried out by neighbourhoods, schools like the Bredeschool and their initiatives, mobile social workers, referrals from newcomers with a different first language, social-artistic neighbourhood initiatives and clubs etc.

Organisations set up for the disadvantaged are also lending a hand. They deserve widespread support. It is these kids, young people, and adults from the margins, who can teach us so much about life, beyond all the jargon and middle class truths.
Those who are bound to a wheelchair, or speak a different language, kids learning to live with ADHD or autism, cancer patients, people who live in extreme poverty … are often fighters and true heroes. They keep their chin up and, in the face of adversity, having conquered the sadness, laugh from the heart! All this without our privileges or knowing what tomorrow will bring. Meeting people from all walks of life brings us closer to reality and often, to our true Self.

Engaging in dialogue with the marginalised, will bring about fundamental change in youth care and education until it represents a true reflection of our world, a world full of diversity, pluralism and equal opportunity. A world full of amazement and “Oohs!” and “Aahs!”. Where tears and laughter are shared and we take care of one another...

Or in the words of Frantz Fanon:
“It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of this freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?”
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