**THE SOCIAL CIRCUS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITIZENSHIP.
A STUDY FROM CITIZENSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR
A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE**

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the role of the Social Circus in the construction of citizenship through the learning and practice of citizenship competencies. The Social Circus provides a platform for learning circus and creating spaces for collective creation to promote personal, group and community empowerment to improve the quality of life of the participants and the society that surrounds them. Previous research has focused on the Social Circus' personal and group workspace, but there's still little literature on the construction of community and citizenship. This research studies the qualitative component in more depth, using a case analysis approach and *The Reference Framework of Competencies for Democratic Culture* developed by the Council of Europe (2018). To achieve so, two projects that use the concept of Social Circus and have a community perspective have been selected. Semi-structured interviews, group discussion and data analysis were used for the selection process. The results indicate that the Social Circus is an ideal setting to learn and practice citizenship competencies for a Democratic Culture during class, in the preparation of the show or final exhibition and/or in the community spaces related to the project.

Keywords: Social Circus; socio-educational action; citizenship competencies; citizenry; participation; democratic culture.

Introduction

The Social Circus provides a platform for different artistic languages to be learned and put into dialogue, and at the same time, it creates spaces for collective creation to promote personal, group and community empowerment to improve the quality of life of the participants and the society that surrounds them. This practice emerges as an innovative experience that contributes to generating new

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models of cultural, social and educational reference. This tool is used by different local, state and international organizations; the Association of Circus Professionals in Catalonia (APCC), the Spanish Socio-Educational Circus School Federation (FEECSE), Cirque du Soleil (in Canada) or the Caravan Circus European Network are some examples.

Although the concept of Social Circus has been constructed and used in the context closest to its practice, knowledge about its understanding and systematization has not been widely generated. There is little research to support it: in Spain there is only one doctoral thesis, carried out by Aida Ballester in 2020, which focused on socio-educational action and pointed out that community building through circus was a thread worth continuing to research. Thus, this article is framed in the growing interest around the concept of Social Circus and aims, as a general objective, to identify its contributions to the construction of citizenship through the case study of two Spanish projects: Ateneu Popular 9Barris, in Barcelona, and the Donyet Ardit Association, in Alicante.

This study focuses on four specific objectives: to investigate the interpretation of the concept of Social Circus set by each of the projects; to understand their concept of citizenship; to recognise the challenges faced by Social Circus projects concerning the construction of citizenship; and to identify the citizenship competencies that each of the analysed projects work on using the *Competencies Scheme for a Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2018).

Next, we itemize three concepts that, to our understanding, are key in our research: the circus as an educational and community-building tool, citizenship competencies for a democratic culture, and some basic elements about citizenship and participation.

The circus as an educational and community-building tool

In the last decades, the circus has evolved and has taken its practice from colourful marquees to community spaces, becoming a tool for socio-educational action and community construction: it's the Social Circus. The Association of Circus Professionals in Catalonia conceives the Social Circus as "a process of teaching and learning circus techniques that aims to the development of communities and the inclusion of people in a situation of social risk" (Ballester & Renau, 2014: 3). The Caravan Circus European Network defines Social Circus as "an innovative tool for the education and social inclusion of children, young people and adults with less opportunities. An intercultural tool that boosts the community bonds between the participants, raising their self-esteem and trust, improving their physical alphabetization and developing their life skills" (Dubois *et al.,* 2014: 9).

Some authors formulate that Social Circus "can be understood as the relocation of said art from the colourful marquees into community spaces to be used as a psycho-social community intervention tool, becoming a means to intervene in a ludic way in children and young people in a situation of social risk" (Pérez

Daza, 2008: 15). In this regard, "the circus becomes an educational tool for the empowering of people and communities in a situation of social inequality" (Alcántara, 2017: 957). Social Circus is a concept that adapts and builds itself according to the needs of the area in which it takes place, the agents that perform it and its participants. "The concept of Social Circus is mobile, porous, absorbent, self-constructed. It has been enriched by personal and collective experiences, which makes it unique and complex" (Alcántara & Ballester, 2020: 20).

Social Circus looks for a change in community relationships and "above all, searches for the participants' personal and social development to boost their self-esteem, their trust in others, the acquisition of social skills, the development of the citizenship spirit and the expression of their creativity and their potential" (Lafortune & Bouchard, 2013: 28). Through circus, many people have found a stage beyond known barriers, they have been able to empower themselves personally and collectively, bringing to life the three action levels of the Social Circus: individual, group and community (Alcántara & Ballester, 2020).

Citizenship Competencies for a Democratic Culture

The concept of competency is a crucial aspect of the current educational ecosystem. It has quickly spread and it has its voices in favour as well as its critical ones. It is a complex and polysemic concept that has found a growing interest in being defined during the last few years. The term *competency* appeared in the business world during the seventies to designate what characterizes someone capable of conducting a specific task efficiently. Some years later it started being used in the school system. The competency-based approach induces progress in education since it searches for the acquisition of knowledge in a comprehensive and functional way. Competencies must allow acting efficiently in a specific and particular situation (Zabala & Arnau, 2007).

The *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2008) suggests that the competencies to effectively participate in a democratic culture need to be learned and practised. These competencies appear under different names such as *social competencies*, *citizenship competencies*, *civic competencies* and/or *democratic competencies*. Carvalho *et al.* (2019) refer to democratic competency and define it as "the ability to mobilize and deploy relevant psychological resources (such as values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or comprehension) in order to correctly and effectively respond to demands, challenges and opportunities arisen by intercultural situations".

In this regard, the Council of Europe (2018) has developed a conceptual model of the citizenship competencies needed to effectively participate in a democratic culture. It uses the concept of competencies for a democratic culture in a rigorous study carried out through different years to develop a list of competencies so that educators can have innovative tools to teach students how to coexist in diverse and interconnected societies.

The Council of Europe working group that carried out this study identified and listed a total of 101 competency schemes that met the definition quoted above. Within those schemes, competencies were grouped into related sets, and 55 of them were identified as potentially relevant to a democratic culture. After various reviews, 20 competencies were included in the model. They are shown below:
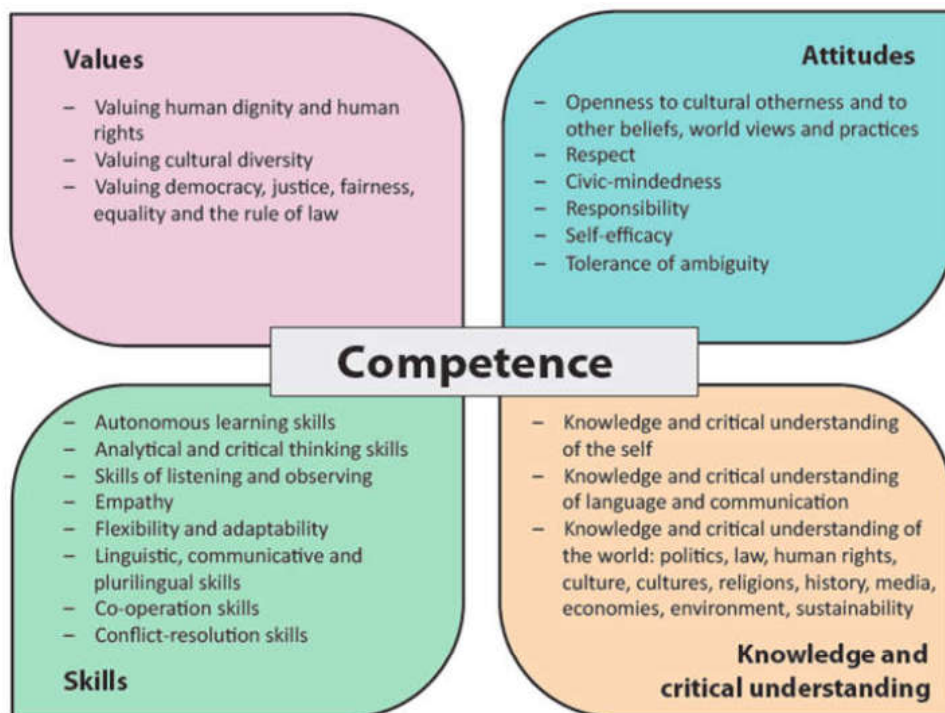
Values
- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

Attitudes
- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices
- Respect
- Civic-mindedness
- Responsibility
- Self-efficacy
- Tolerance of ambiguity

Competence

- Autonomous learning skills
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Skills of listening and observing
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
- Co-operation skills
- Conflict-resolution skills

Skills

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
- Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

Knowledge and critical understanding

Figure 1. Competencies Scheme for a Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018)

This model of democratic culture competencies developed by the Council of Europe (2018) has become an adequate and rigorous framework to verify whether educational projects allow learning and practising citizenship competencies for the construction of democratic societies.

On citizenship and participation

As interpreted by the Council of Europe (2018), the concept of citizen does not only apply to those holding legal citizenship or the passport of a particular state, it also applies to every person affected by democratic decision-making processes and who can commit to democratic processes and institutions.

On the one hand, this definition creates a setting that includes all those people who can take part in deep democratic processes related to participation in specific

communities and/or social movements. On the other hand, it excludes all those who cannot legally commit themselves to democratic institutions: minors and migrants in a regulated situation and who cannot exercise their right to vote, for instance.

Participation is a right, a capacity for action. It allows the identification of problems and needs. When we generate participative spaces, we achieve social inclusion. Participation has great strength in democratic culture when it allows the voices of people who have normally been left out of decision-making processes to be included, both on the closest plane - such as their own community - and on a further one - where they could have an influence on a social and governmental level.

Methodology

Identification and justification of the method

This research has a qualitative approach that systematically seeks a deep understanding of a social and educational situation, as well as the development of an organized body of knowledge. According to Hernández Sampieri *et al.* (2010), qualitative research "focuses on understanding and deepening phenomena, exploring them from the participants' perspective in a natural environment and in relation to the context". This type of research focuses on specific contexts and claims everyday life.

It stands close to the case study, where *cases* are "those unique situations or social bodies worthy of interest. Thus, a certain methodology to develop educational actions can be considered a case" (Sabariego, Massot & Dorio, 2004). Furthermore, the case study allows a collective perspective: by understanding these particular cases, other situations and projects can be better understood (Stake, 1994). Therefore, this type of study becomes a methodological strategy of great interest to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of organizational cultures and to understand everything related to their development in more depth.

Identification of the setting and the sample of the study

To identify the research setting and sample, we focus on understanding two projects with specific characteristics. They are shown below:
  – Projects associated with the Spanish Socio-Educational Circus School Federation (FEECSE);
  – Which use the concept of Social Circus;
  – Which develop projects from a community perspective;
  – Which have received training from Social Circus trainers;

– Which are accessible by previous relationship and work with the researcher;
– Which have shown interest and willingness to participate in the research.

Based on these criteria, it was decided to work with two projects: the Son Donyet Ardit Association in Alicante and Ateneu Popular 9Barris in Barcelona.

Participants selection

In order to understand reality, we set out the need for the research participants to have theoretical and practical professional knowledge about the Social Circus and, therefore, to have a certain profile and certain characteristics:
– Students with a certain experience within the projects;
– Circus artists who perform as social circus trainers;
– Professionals in the social and educational field who perform as project coordinators or social circus trainers;
– Members of the social and community network of the territory where these projects are being developed.

For said profiles, we have searched for a minimum of two people, following the equality criteria, in order to include a diversity of points of view and keep the gender perspective in mind in the research results.

Techniques for obtaining and analysing information

This research has been developed by combining multiple strategies selected for their relevance to the study. Flor Cabrera (2011) suggests a classification given by the different processes of information collection. They are grouped into: a) based on personal relationships, b) based on group relationships, and c) based on product analysis. Following this classification, this research has carried out interviews, discussion groups and document and data analysis.

The process of interpretation and analysis of information is developed throughout the research process. Tables made in the Microsoft Word processor have been used to classify target-connected responses and to connect said responses to the 20 competencies for a Democratic Culture. Collecting and grouping this information in cells has allowed its subsequent analysis.

Ethical considerations

This research has been carried out under four basic ethical principles: respect for people, the search for good, no harm and distributive justice. The study has also followed the basic principles from the Code of Ethics set out in the *Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* by the University of Barcelona (2020).

In this regard, we have maintained the participants' privacy and confidentiality by encoding their names. This was done by using the first letter of the project - (A)teneu and (D)onyet Ardit - and a second letter randomly assigned.

In addition to that, we have created a document of informed consent including the research protocol, protection of anonymity and confidentiality and act of consent. It has been signed by the participants. Two different models have been developed: one for children and teenagers under 18 years of age and another for those over 18 years of age.

Field Work

Documents and available data

An interview was carried out using the references from each project to set the objectives and needs of the research. They were asked to send the researcher any written or audiovisual material that could be framed in the objectives set. For its analysis, a first reading and viewing was carried out; then, a second reading looked for those elements that respond to the objectives of the research. A section of observations was left for those elements that generated doubts or helped to create the questions for the interviews.

Interviews

We used a table where the objectives and questions to be asked were detailed. Most lasted around 60 minutes. We were forced to modulate the vocabulary when interviewing participants between 17 and 18 years of age. The language was technical and far from the one used in everyday life; it was necessary to adapt it. For instance, when we referred to social challenges, we introduced examples such as sexism or racism. The interviews with the educational teams did not require any modifications. However, both groups needed a somewhat extensive explanation of the concept of competencies for a democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2018). Lastly, the two people and equality criteria were respected in all of the participants' profiles, except for the case of students since, due to health reasons, we were unable to interview one of them. In total, there have been 8 interviews. At Ateneu Popular 9Barris, three students, a circus artist and a social and educational professional were interviewed. They were all face-to-face. In Donyet Ardit, there were a student, a circus artist and a social and educational professional. The latter were carried out through video conferences.

Discussion groups

The dynamisation of the discussion group was performed at the Ateneu Popular 9Barris and was done in a hybrid mode, with people who came in person and others who attended through the Zoom platform. The discussion group lasted 1 hour 30 minutes and was supported by a PowerPoint presentation that allowed us to contrast the first results and respond to the research objectives.

The suggested participants were consulted and agreed with the referents of the Social Circus projects analysed. They were a technician from the Roquetes Community Plan in Nou Barris, a person in charge of the Social Circus projects of Cirque du Soleil in Montreal (Canada), a trainer from the Zaragoza Social Circus School, a person in charge of the Social Circus projects in Donyet Ardit. There were three more participants from the Ateneu Popular 9Barris: a Social Circus research technician, a Social Circus trainer and a sociocultural technician. Additionally, the project involved a researcher who is doing her doctoral thesis on Social Circus at the UNED University.

Discussion

The interpretation of the concept of Social Circus

The information collected through the interviews and the discussion group demonstrates that students understand Social Circus from a personal experience and that the professionals, in different depths, add a layer of socio-educational intentionality. When we look at it as a whole, we find some elements that allow us to discuss a common ground. Below, we show a summary table with the main ideas shown by students and educational teams.

Table 1. Force-idée on Social Circus

STUDENTS	EDUCATIONAL TEAM
Different from the everyday Fun Filled with tools and motivation to transfer into other areas of their lives Socializing Safe It allows one to express themselves, to create and, at the same time, to show their achievements and improvements Community connection	Artistic, personal, social and community skills Values or skills such as self-esteem, effort, overcoming or companionship Risk Intensity of experiences and learning From a positive perspective and hope Reflection on their own reality Community dimension relating to other projects Criticism of "population in a situation of exclusion risk"

As an element of criticism or improvement, they suggest that the concept of Social Circus may have a bias connected to the profile of the participant when said participant is described as "a person in a situation of exclusion risk". This practice wants to avoid labels, and it may be by putting them on. One of the program coordinators refers to the fact that she often uses the term socio-educational and avoids the term social.

For the people interviewed, the circus is somewhat of a lifestyle. They came across it from different paths, but each one of them with a will to discover a space different from the ones they had known so far, a space that would make them fall in love. "I met the circus through the meetings that take place in different locations. I first went with a friend, and then I got lost in this world", or "I came across it while running away from competition. I used to swim. In one of the competitions, my parents realized the aggressiveness to win and be the best. I left when I was seven or eight. We met the circus at a campsite, I tried the unicycle and they said 'Go for them!'".

Participation and citizenship in front of social challenges

The circus is strongly perceived as a citizenship-building mechanism because it allows reflection on the oppression that the participants are going through. One of the interviewed participants said "We have to come to an agreement when things happen in the group that have nothing to do with the circus. It is a safe space for the people who participate, where you can be accompanied, where you can find support; it is a place to escape, to build us as people and also as citizens".

We have identified four social challenges: sexism and women's oppression, racism, lasting housing and continuity of studies and access to work. The first three (sexism, racism and lasting housing) appear strongly in the collective and community socio-educational processes of the projects, while the third (education and work) appears connected to individual socio-educational processes.

In short, the people who have participated in the research define the Social Circus as a political action directly linked to participation. A member of the discussion group said that "participating does not mean accepting established laws. It consists of having the right to speak within an established structure that can be modified. It is the basis of popular education". This is how the concept of community participation is strengthened.

The spaces where students take the lead and work on social challenges are the class space, the creation process, the show or the final exhibition and the creation of the project itself. This project connects to the neighbourhood or other projects even further away. These are the places where citizenship competencies can be learned and put into practice. They are shown in the table below:

Table 2. Participation spaces within the project

Participation spaces		
Within the socio-educational project itself	The class	
	The creation process	
	The show or final exhibition	
	The creation of the project	
About other spaces	The neighbourhood projects	
	Projects beyond the neighbourhood	

First, we show those connected to the artistic process and the socio-educational project itself.

– The class: one of the students explains "We organize ourselves with the circus teachers to decide. We make a list of what we want to do and from there we see how to organize it; they suggest things, depending on how they see us, and they make a recommendation. We can see new things and have more options".

– The creation process: it is the moment in which research occurs in everyday life, where it is meditated and done collectively to express a shared idea. One of the coordinators states that "the techniques are applied to a drama that has to do with a topic that interests them, motivates them, impacts them. To make this combination, there is research work to decide the elements, the way to come to an agreement, the way we want to illustrate it, and who plays each part. We must recognize the part each one plays, and what they can offer".

– The show or final exhibition: it is the place where the research on the social challenge and collective work culminates in the form of artistic language. It is part of the process and at the same time, it is a product that is shown. For one of the coordinators, "it is the simile with society". It sets out that you can have a lot of technical skills, but you still need the others.

– The project creation: it is about giving the people who set foot in the Social Circus the possibility of deciding on the global perspective of the project. Project creation is learning circus techniques and also collectively building creation processes and shows. It is relating it to the decision-making spaces connected to the project. For one of the coordinators, "they must be binding spaces where this participation serves to something. If it does not serve to any purpose, they stop participating". "It's about intentionally thinking about how these people can take on more power levels.".

There are other spaces with which the socio-educational project is related, where participation and circus are also at stake. These spaces are the streets, squares and other locations in the nearest environment; sometimes they are beyond

the neighbourhood. A bond is established between the project itself and the neighbourhood's core and the environment that surrounds it.

On the other hand, going beyond the neighbourhood is valued as a powerful element for socio-educational growth and for putting citizen skills into practice. For one of the coordinators, "trying to move the kids from their place, going to the theatre downtown, going to a meeting in Barcelona, Tarifa, to a Circo del Social show allows us to diversify points of view, find other models and feel part of the large circus family".

The Citizenship Competencies developed within the framework of a democratic culture

We have identified that the Social Circus projects analysed work on the 20 competencies defined by the *Competencies Scheme for a Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2018). Social Circus projects do not use this scheme, but they work and relate to one another through the research that we have seen.

There is one element that stands out above the others because it generates a certain debate or contradiction. It is "valuing democracy, justice, equity, equality and the Rule of Law". There is a sense of discomfort with the concept of the Rule of Law since they place it in a logic of rule imposition and, it feels that it leaves out all those people who, for different reasons or oppression situations, cannot access the decision spaces.

Limits and future lines of research

As the main limits of this research, we have found the pandemic context, which has caused a modification in the dates and even the impossibility to interview some participants. On the other hand, interviews with students needed some adaptation due to the use of technical vocabulary.

This case study approach, with more time, could allow greater depth in the analysis of the documents provided by the projects, conducting participant observation and expanding the number of interviews and discussion groups.

As future lines of research, we find the idea of dedicating more time and depth to the construction of citizenship through the social circus. It can be brought about through analysing projects in other contexts, and with different age ranges and purposes. Another line of research is the role that the educational team should play in the construction of the socio-educational and community proposal.

Conclusion

Social Circus is a pedagogical framework that allows learning and putting citizenship competencies into practice through socio-educational action. It promotes the connection with community spaces both inside and outside of the circus project and creates an environment that boosts its practice with democratic depth, respect for coexistence, peaceful conflict resolution, human rights and dignity.

The interpretation of the concept of Social Circus aims towards a definition of such practice, not focused on the characteristics of each person or the idea of "population in a situation of exclusion risk", but rather focused on elements such as collaborative work, the intention of the project and the purpose to which it is intended to respond. Therefore, it is focused on improving the quality of people's lives, and their communities, by analysing the world they have to live in and reflecting to create artistic proposals that will allow us to improve it.

This conclusion leads us to suggest a definition of Social Circus that allows progress and evolution in this concept. It is as follows: "The Social Circus is an educational tool that works on the personal, group and community level by giving tools, skills and citizenship competencies that will allow the person's improvement and their involvement in the nearest environment to change their relationships and living conditions".

They understand the concept of citizenship through the construction of collective decision-making processes, the inclusion of different voices, the relationship with social movements, the peaceful conflict resolution and the cooperation with the city council as the closest administration. Citizenship is conceived from the exercise of being part of a community and collective organization. The concept of citizenship does not lie within an identity document that connects a person to a State.

Four social challenges have emerged: sexism and women's oppression, racism, lasting housing, continuity of studies and access to work. The spaces where the students take centre stage are the class, the creation process, the show or the final exhibition and the creation of the project itself. And it also connects to the neighbourhood or other projects even further away. These are the places where citizenship competencies can be learned and put into practice

We have found that the Social Circus projects analysed work on the 20 competencies defined by the *Competencies Scheme for a Democratic Culture* (Council of Europe, 2018).

To conclude, we must highlight that throughout the research the idea that the educational team is a crucial aspect for the Social Circus to allow the construction of citizenship is pointed out. To do so, it is necessary that the educational team and the organization of which it is part take a stance in front of the social challenges it faces, that they have a work methodology that plays a leading role in the students and that they connect the project to its community. In short, the ability to create a democratic environment or culture.

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