"There is just more love in it": a qualitative study of youth voice and relatedness in U.S. youth circus programs

Barbora Adolfová & Jennifer P. Agans

Published online: 05 Sep 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ☑

View related articles ☑

View Crossmark data ☑

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

"There is just more love in it": a qualitative study of youth voice and relatedness in U.S. youth circus programs

Barbora Adolfová [a,b] and Jennifer P. Agans [b]

aDepartment of Alternative and Puppet Theatre, The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Prague, Czech Republic; bDepartment of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

Recreational youth circus programs are a unique context for positive youth development. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young people feel heard in these programs, and research in other recreation settings shows that participation in decision making helps youth connect with others. The present study therefore examined how youth voice is supported at five youth circus programs across the United States through program observations and qualitative interviews with participants ($N = 17$, ages 12–18) and staff ($N = 13$). Thematic analysis revealed that both youth and staff felt their circus programs listen to youth members, although actual options for engagement varied. Furthermore, the love and acceptance of the circus community was omnipresent in the interviews; a feeling of belonging/relatedness even for individuals who felt excluded elsewhere. This study shows that youth circus can foster belonging and inclusion, and raises questions about the differences between perceived and actual opportunities for youth voice in recreation contexts.

RÉSUMÉ

Les programmes de cirque récréatif pour les jeunes constituent un contexte unique pour le développement positif des jeunes. Des données anecdotiques suggèrent que les jeunes se sentent écoutés dans ces programmes, et des recherches menées dans d'autres contextes récréatifs montrent que la participation à la prise de décision aide les jeunes à se rapprocher des autres. La présente étude a donc examiné la manière dont la voix des jeunes est soutenue dans cinq programmes de cirque pour jeunes à travers les États-Unis, par le biais d'observations de programmes et d'entretiens qualitatifs avec les participants ($N = 17$, âgés de 12 à 18 ans) et le personnel ($N = 13$). L'analyse thématique a révélé que les jeunes et le personnel estiment que leurs programmes de cirque sont à l'écoute des jeunes membres, même si les

CONTACT Barbora Adolfová ✉ bja5560@psu.edu ◯ Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State UniversityUniversity Park, PA USA

options d'engagement réelles varient. De plus, l'amour et l'acceptation de la communauté du cirque étaient omniprésents dans les entretiens ; un sentiment d'appartenance même pour les personnes qui se sentaient exclues ailleurs. Cette étude montre que le cirque pour jeunes peut favoriser l'appartenance et l'inclusion, et soulève des questions sur les différences entre les possibilités perçues et réelles d'expression des jeunes dans les contextes récréatifs.

Feeling connected and included in society is important (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and having agency and opportunities for participation in decision making helps youth connect with others (Hart, 1992; Hopper et al., 2019). However, the adult-oriented structure of society often excludes youth from decision-making processes, even those that affect them directly. Young people have limited opportunities to express their opinions (James, 2007; Jeanes, 2010) and are often forced to use language spoken by adults (Mitra, 2003). Youth programs are one context in which adolescents can make meaningful contributions. For example, belonging in youth programs can be induced by enabling young people to participate in community activities and their planning (Hopper et al., 2019; Rahm et al., 2014). Unfortunately, not all programs capitalize on the opportunity to include the voices of youth in decision-making (Jones & Perkins, 2006). The present study therefore examines how youth voice is supported in a form of arts-based youth development program that is hypothesized to be an exemplar for youth voice: recreational youth circus. Youth circus programs have been observed promoting trust (Cadwell, 2018) and relatedness (Agans et al., 2019). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that young people feel heard and experience autonomy in these programs, but empirical evidence is lacking. The present study addresses this gap by examining how youth voice is supported in youth circus programs.

Youth voice

The process of youth and adults sharing decisions affecting the lives of the young people has been widely studied under the terminology of 'youth participation' (e.g. Hart, 1992). This process supports personal and social development as well as democratic skills and improves youth-adult communication and understanding (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2003). In the context of youth programs, youth participation in decision-making can also provide expertise to support the delivery of youth services (Checkoway, 2011; Conner et al., 2015; James, 2007). Other terms used for this concept in both literature and practice are youth voice, youth engagement, and youth

involvement, with terminology varying by geographic region. In this paper we use 'youth voice' because the data were collected in the United States (U.S.) where this term is more widely accepted.

Youth voice is also understood differently among educators. For example, in public school settings teachers see youth voice as students´ input in classrooms or institutional decision-making, as well as the opinions of students in general (Conner, 2022). Listening to youth voice in out-of-school programs can also mean that program staff actively listen to and respect young people´s perspectives, empower youth to enact agency, provide mentorship for youth organizing, implement suggestions from youth, or any combination of the above (Wu et al., 2016). The techniques needed for youth voice to thrive can be summarized in three inter-related areas – agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004), which align with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Young people who feel that they belong in their program will more likely step up and share their opinions and will be able to gain more competences for personal and social development; these competences consequently provide more agency and meaningful social interactions supporting belonging (Mitra, 2004). However, although relatedness has been observed as an important factor in U.S. circus programs (Agans et al., 2019), youth voice has not yet been examined in this context.

Youth circus

Recreational youth circus programs have been gaining popularity in the past 30 years (American Circus Educators Association, 2022). These programs introduce participants to circus arts such as juggling/object manipulation, acrobatics, equilibristics, aerial acrobatics, clowning, physical theatre, etc., with the variety of options allowing many different types of youth in terms of personalities, skill abilities, demographic factors, and ages to find at least one activity they enjoy. Youth circus programs reside at the intersection of physical activity, youth arts, and community life (Cadwell, 2018). As such, and similar to many other recreational arts programs, recreational youth circus programs are typically designed with the primary goal of supporting youth development rather than producing professional performance artists. For example, in prior research, youth arts programs including circus have been described as a functional tool for creating belonging (Agans et al., 2019; Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Stevens et al., 2019; Woodland, 2018) and trust (Cadwell, 2018).

In fact, youth circus programs are built around trust. Their activities intentionally lead to building trust between participants, between participants and coaches, and supporting participants' trust in themselves or empowering them to advocate for decolonizing practices

(Lavers et al., 2022). Youth circus also brings the experience of shared achievement through performing in front of an audience (most circus programs offer at least one performance opportunity per year) and relying on others, which have also been observed in other arts contexts (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Woodland, 2018). However, unlike in dance or theatre programs, youth in circus programs are given agency to choose a skill they want to train and perform alongside peers who might have chosen a different type of circus arts, supporting everyone´s individuality and sense of belonging at the same time (Jachovský & Klusáková, 2021). The collective experience of training and performing in a supportive environment provides development of autonomy, competence and relatedness leading to increased internal motivation to keep learning more with other in the community they feel they belong to (Agans et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similar to other youth programs, participation frequency and duration vary in youth circus. For example, Smith et al. (2017) observed a range of 30 to 489 contact hours from September to May among U.S. youth circus participants in their study.

However, the processes through which recreational circus programs may foster youth voice have not been sufficiently explored. Only one study (Silius, 2019) has assessed the state of youth voice in circus, with research conducted among international (mainly European) members of the Caravan Circus Network. The vast majority of participants found youth voice important but it was not always put in practice due to insufficient financing, understaffed teams, and/or unwillingness of adults to implement ideas from youth (Silius, 2019). However, because Silius' study focused on opinions of adults representing the participating organizations, there is little data from the actual experts on the topic of how youth voice is supported, the young people themselves. Furthermore, knowledge of youth voice in circus programs in the U.S. is also absent from the literature, despite their growing prevalence across the country.

The present study

This study examined youth voice in U.S. recreational youth circus programs. We chose to conduct the study in the U.S. to present data collected from participants living in the same country and speaking the same language, unlike prior international research on the topic (Silius, 2019). Specifically, we observed how five U.S. youth circus programs incorporate youth voice in their work from the adult and youth point of view, in order to better understand the phenomenon of the role of belonging in youth voice and how is it supported in this leisure context. These observations were

exploratory with research questions grounded in practice-based knowledge rather than seeking to test theory-based hypotheses.

Methods

Youth and staff from five U.S. youth circus programs participated in the study between December 2021 and May 2022. The programs were purposively sampled based on their industry reputation for listening to their youth and based on recommendations from the U.S. youth circus community connected to the American Youth Circus Organization/American Circus Educators Association (AYCO/ACE), a non-profit network supporting the U.S. circus education field. The chosen programs were all considered to be examples of best practices in approaching youth voice in their work and do not represent the whole U.S. youth circus community.

To ensure both youth participants and program staff were heard in the study, interviews were scheduled with two to three staff members (total staff $N = 13$) and three to six youth aged 12–18 years (total youth $N = 18$) from each program. The study used a combination of snowball and opportunity sampling of participants (Patton, 2002). Youth participants were purposively sampled based on their age (12–18 years) and number of years attending the program (minimum 3 years). Staff members were purposively sampled for their direct contact with youth. Participants in the study were pre-selected and contacted by the primary contact of the researcher – either a director or program coordinator, which could have influenced their answers. The participants are also likely to be content in the circus community; we did not have a chance to talk to people who have left these organizations and might have different experiences. All adult participants signed an online consent form and youth participants had consent forms signed by their guardians. Verbal assent was also acquired from the minors prior to the interviews. All interviewees were asked to share the pronouns they use and some youth participants shared their ages, but we do not provide further identification of the interviewees in the text. The U.S. youth circus community is small and interconnected, so additional details about the sampled programs or interviewees would threaten confidentiality. Staff interviews took 30 to 90 minutes, and interviews with young people lasted between 8 and 30 minutes. This study was approved under protocol number 00018953 by the Institutional Review Board of the Pennsylvania State University.

Observation

In addition to the interviews, the primary researcher visited the circus programs in person for 3–5 days to observe classes, meetings, and

events. She took handwritten and typed notes during the observed activities, which were turned into detailed field notes daily after the activities were finished (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). These notes were compiled into observation reports. Follow-up video calls and e-mail exchanges were also made to collect information missed during the site visits, enabling a more thorough understanding of each program and its activities and goals.

Interview data collection and analysis

Interviewees participated in semi-structured interviews including descriptive and structural questions (Spradley, 2016) in person (and in one case over Zoom) with the first author. The interview guides were piloted with young people and staff members from European circus programs and adapted according to their comments prior to this study. The interview guide for youth focused more on their personal experiences in the program, whereas the guide for staff members focused more on organizational and coaching approaches to youth voice and communication with youth. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded and analyzed in MaxQDA software together with observation reports. The coding process started by taking notes after each interview was recorded and writing memos about the themes that seemed to be recurring. Another set of notes was taken during transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the coding process we used structural and descriptive coding following the questions in the interview guides and added inductive codes, mostly in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2009) such as 'welcoming', which later became one of the presented themes in this paper. After the second round of coding we had 40 codes which were grouped into overarching themes, which were consolidated into three. Themes describing values such as community, inclusion, diversity, and safe space were merged into a theme named in this paper as 'Welcoming'. Themes describing the experience of the young people are presented as 'Being Heard', and experiences of staff members and the tools they use for supporting youth voice as 'Supporting Youth Voice'. These final themes were discussed among the authors, tested for their scope and clarity (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and slightly modified based on the reviewers' comments to provide further clarity. A document introducing the themes was sent to interview participants prior to the submission of the paper for member-checking (Saldaña, 2009). The adult participants were contacted by e-mail, youth through our contact in the program, and all were sent a reminder two weeks later. We received responses from five staff members and one young person, none of whom had any concerns

with the themes' depiction of their experiences. One of the adults additionally noted their appreciation that the document included both positive and challenging aspects of youth voice in circus programs.

Positionality statement

The first author is a circus practitioner from Europe with 13 years of experience in youth circus. She is White, cisgender, able-bodied, and grew up in a safe city in Central Europe in a middle-class family who supported her in studying at an arts university. English is her second language. The combination of these factors may have caused a research bias in favour of circus as well as minor misunderstandings caused by language barriers and cultural differences. The second author is a former youth circus participant and practitioner who volunteers in a leadership role in AYCO/ACE in addition to her primary occupation as an academic researcher. She is also White, cisgender, and currently able-bodied, with college-educated parents and an upper-middle class upbringing in a suburban/rural area of the northeastern U.S.

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis resulted in three major themes that described the ways in which youth circus participants and staff at the five participating programs viewed and enacted youth voice. These themes were labelled Welcoming, Being Heard, and Supporting Youth Voice. The Welcoming theme shows that youth circus programs provide a space fostering youth voice. The two other themes show the perception of youth voice in the observed programs by the young people and staff. In this section, we present the findings for each theme and discuss them in relation to prior literature.

Welcoming

Young people in this study had strong positive feelings towards their circus community, some even called it a family. 'There is just more love in it', as per a youth circus participant (he/him, 15 years) in response to the question 'What is your favorite thing about circus?' When asked to describe the community within their circus program, the young people used words such as 'loving', 'kind', 'empowering', 'fun', or 'charming', but there were two words that stood out and were said repetitively – 'welcoming' and 'accepting'. These terms indicate that the youth participants view their circus programs as a community in which sense of belonging is strong. Although circus has complicated history (not only) in the U.S., and was not always perceived as a place where everyone was treated as an equal (Uncle

Junior Project, n.d.), in the present understanding, the worldwide youth circus environment is generally known to be open to everyone (Bortoleto et al., 2022; Cadwell, 2018). Our data reflect this industry trend, as evidenced by a youth participant who said, 'I think that overall, circus communities tend to be very, very open and very accepting of people from all walks of life, which I think is a very important thing' (he/him, 17 years). Similarly, another youth participant (he/him, age not provided) described his circus community as:

> very welcoming . . . That probably ties back into why it's so diverse, because it's so welcoming in the first place. Because the community really doesn't care who you are or what you are, what color you are, what you identify as, because at the end of the day, we all like the same art.

This strong sense of community lays important groundwork for facilitating youth voice (e.g. Hopper et al., 2019; Rahm et al., 2014), and also supports participants in developing stronger relationships with each other, as evidenced by one participant (she/her, 17 years) who noted that 'When you meet another circus person, like, it's an instant bond'. However, to emphasize how different the circus community feels to these young people, we add an observation of a participant (she/her, 16 years) who was aware of her circus community being uniquely accepting to the point that it created a discrepancy in the rest of her life:

> Just because you're accepted here doesn't mean you might be like, accepted [in the] outside world . . . as a student sometimes you feel like everyone is gonna treat you the same that they do here. And then it's really heartbreaking when they don't.

From the provided quotes it is clear that the circus community provides a sense of belonging to the youth because it accepts them for who they are. This finding aligns with prior research in other settings where youth feel a sense of belonging (e.g. Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Hopper et al., 2019). This sense of belonging in the circus community was deliberately fostered by the program staff and leaders. For example, in this answer from a coach (she/her):

> We have things around the studio that sort of express those values as well like 'No one is illegal'. We used to have a big banner up here (. . .) that said, 'Cherish trans lives, cherish Black lives' . . . how do we make a space that is, like, welcoming to people of all different, like, (. . .) different races, different body types and all of that and, like, that's a process that we have to be in and there's no, like, one thing that we're going to do that's going to make this space, like, officially, chill for everybody; it's a process that we have to be in.

Many programs´ spaces were decorated in a way showing support to their student community, in a program with a strong queer membership, the space was covered with pride symbols; programs focusing on social justice

intentionally showed posters and statements supporting causes important to their youth. Although the need for programs to be intentionally designed and implemented to promote belonging is widely recognized (Walker et al., 2005), putting these ideals into practice can be more difficult. For example, the leaders of the observed circus programs were trying to support participant belonging by improving staff representation in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, life experience, etc. One of the programs was intentionally hiring and providing circus specific training to professionals representative of their students´ demographics coming from related fields such as sports and performing arts. In words of one of the program coordinators (she/her):

> We make a concerted effort to . . . work with students and hire young people as well as adults that are . . . people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities and socio-economic statuses. So I think because of that the students definitely easily identify with our staff, because they look like them . . . We obviously are always aspiring to, you know, work with more BIPOC employees . . . we've rapidly evolved on our . . . even our core staff administratively. It is by and large evolved from probably a 30% BIPOC representation to 50–60% since I've gotten here . . . to make sure that there is a balanced representation of students that we actually serve because, overall, our entire program and our entire roster across our programs were about at 60+% of students that are BIPOC.

However, other programs had difficulty hiring diverse staff. As stated by a coach (he/him) in a primarily White program:

> Demographics are difficult for us in [location]. And we certainly aspire to do more outreach, because most of our students probably can identify with us but that's just because we're all the same demographic, which isn't, isn't the best.

These hiring challenges reflected the difficulty of finding people with the skill set required to teach circus and also because careers in the arts in general are more accessible to individuals from higher socioeconomic background who are likely to be exposed to art in their families (Catterall, 2012). The lack of staff who share their backgrounds or identities may deter some students from joining the programs, consequently exacerbating the lack of circus professionals from marginalized groups, similar to other forms of performing arts (Hluscu & Kyrtsakas, 2021). Decolonizing practices can therefore be important for increasing belonging in circus programs (Lavers et al., 2022).

In sum, the circus community was described by the youth interviewees as welcoming and accepting, both in general and compared to other contexts. This is an important element of circus programs that are designed to empower their participants (Cadwell, 2018), and an important prerequisite to fostering youth voice (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018; Rahm et al., 2014). The interviewees also described the circus community as diverse

yet unified around their shared love of circus arts. This diversity posed a challenge to the circus program leaders, who were trying to recruit staff who would better reflect the diversity of their student body in terms of life experience, race, ethnicity, and gender identity. It is important for youth to have mentors and role models to whom they can relate (Hluscu & Kyrtsakas, 2021; Jones & Perkins, 2006; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018), and the observed programs were aware that despite the feelings of belonging described by current participants, the composition of their staff may be deterring other youth from joining the program.

Being Heard

Young people in the studied circus programs felt heard in their classes, during act and performance creation, and in some cases even in decision-making affecting the whole organization. For example, a student and assistant coach (he/him, 17 years) responded to a question about whether young people have a chance to talk about their ideas and questions in their program by saying:

> All the time, yeah. One of the, the structure that we have is more of a coaches propose ideas, and then the [youth] talk about it. So right now, we're in the middle of making a show. And so there's a lot of the, the elements of the coach saying, we have these lists of ideas, what do we think how could this work for our theme, and then we all talk about it and argue or come up with a solution and just kind of talk through it, which I think is really, really good.

Youth often compared circus to other areas of their life and, especially in comparison to school, described circus as giving them a chance to express their ideas and needs in a safe environment that accepted them for who they are. For some youth, the circus programs may be the only place where their voices are heard, as observed by one of the young people who also teaches younger children in her program (she/her, 18 years):

> I mean, we have a lot of student-led stuff . . . and I feel like one of the best things about that is, um, kids, especially younger kids, don't have that many places to express themselves, especially in you know, public school and stuff. It's just difficult for them to be able to have a lot of their own ideas and be able to fully express themselves. So I think we definitely try to incorporate that a lot.

However, not all participants were ready to have their voices heard. Whereas ten of the 18 youth interviewees said that topics important to them were being discussed enough in their program, the remaining eight did not want to talk about their personal life or societal issues in their program despite feeling like they could if they changed their mind. In addition, one youth (she/her, 16 years) reflected that she was not initially

prepared to speak up but that participating in circus had helped her 'find a voice':

> Um, it's changed the way I viewed myself as a person. Because before I used to come here, I was, uh, I have, like, social anxiety. So, I was very shy to talk to people out of fear of being judged or fear of not being liked, which I still deal with that now. And coming here has made me be like an outspoken person. It's made me be louder and find a voice in who I am . . . it's like I was in the. . . in the like, you know how big is a butterfly and they start like as a little worm and then they go into like a cocoon and then they cause a butterfly. I feel like I went through the stages of me coming to circus. That's how I went and then became a butterfly and that's really nice.

Although all the participants described feeling heard in their programs, the level of understanding of what being heard means was different for each of the interviewees and was linked to their age, time spent in the circus organization, the organizational policies, and procedures, and also their individual personality. Most of the answers from the young people related to being heard were connected to creation of acts or shows and to their wishes for training in class – such as with which apparatus they want to train, what game they want to play – or to having workshops and master-classes organized, or equipment purchased by the circus program to support their training. These examples of being heard align with youth valuing the possibility to choose if and how they want to participate opposed to their experience in other areas of their life (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Rahm et al., 2014) and the need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, the number and importance of opportunities for involvement varied in the observed programs. Some programs operated on the single class planning level, some allowed youth take part in decisions about the program´s curriculum development, some invited their youth members to the table for discussions on the mission statement, performance venues, merchandising design, or building renovations.

The young people who had a chance to participate in the bigger picture decision making could reflect on the importance of being invited to these discussions, as exemplified by a student (he/him, age not provided) who said:

> They've asked us in the past what they could do to be a better community or a better organization. So I feel like that's already a really good thing to be able to have, because that means that they're, that they listen to the people, to their youth.

However, those who did not have these opportunities could not see that they could be participating in more decisions and therefore did not comment on these possibilities. They were content with having impact on the lower-level decisions that affect their direct experience in class such as the assistant coach quoted above describing proposing show ideas as a high level of youth involvement in their program.

Across the observed youth circus programs, we saw a higher level of youth engagement in decision making in programs focusing on social justice compared to programs prioritizing skill development. The fact that youth felt heard in all of these programs, despite the considerable differences in the extent to which they were actually included in organizational decision-making, is interesting and is not commonly discussed in the literature. This discrepancy in some programs between youth feeling heard and the amount of real power they were allowed is especially poignant when we consider the young peoples' reasons for why their voices are important. For example, one participant (she/her, 15 years) said 'if there are young people involved in the circus programs and the young people are clearly affected by whatever's going on and whatever decisions are being made so they should have a say in those decisions'. Another youth participant (they/them, 15 years) further noted that

> Young people have a lot of thoughts and feelings and emotions that are often not taken seriously, but they bring a lot to the table. And they have new perspectives and new ideas that other people may not even like think of.

Youth programs that do not offer opportunities for youth to be heard in meaningful ways not only risk reinforcing the sense that youth should not be 'taken seriously' (in the words of the participant) but also miss the potentially valuable contributions these youth could bring because they have a lived experience that the adults in the organizations are missing (Conner et al., 2015; James, 2007; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). However, it is important to remember that young people should be informed about their options to participate, but the decision about how much they want to be involved should be entirely their own.

Supporting Youth Voice

In general, staff members were proud of their organization´s work in the area of youth voice, but some admitted they could be doing more. In most cases they realized that they had not been thinking about youth voice much prior to being interviewed about it, but that they were organically implementing some of the processes in their daily work. As stated by one of the program directors (he/him) when asked about feedback from their youth members on the youth voice activities, 'I haven't asked them specifically. I, I just know that if people, if people feel heard, and they feel their opinion matters, then they feel confident in sharing'.

The staff members most invested in youth voice were former youth circus participants – coaches and administrators who grew up in circus programs – because they could recall moments from their youth when they felt they were not being heard and wished to create better conditions for their current

students. However, they were also aware, now being in the position of the responsible adults, that sometimes the young people cannot see what fulfilling their wishes would mean for the organization from the financial, safety, or community perspective. For example, one staff member (she/her) who was also a prior youth participant in her circus program said:

> There were times when I was a student that I felt as though I had said the same thing a lot of times and had not necessarily been heard as much as I wished and now, seeing things from the other side, I do understand why sometimes we're not able to take all the students' suggestions, but I don't know that I necessarily agree with it all the time.

In addition, staff members were aware that young people have a need to be heard but that it might be difficult for some to express their thoughts and emotions because they are not used to doing that. One coach (they/them) described this dilemma by saying:

> Kids are constantly living in in a world with adults. We're telling them what to do all the time. So it's not always easy to get them to just share. They don't feel like they can, or they don't trust that it's going to be heard… And so like, my hope is that with a long term kids, they're learning that, no, we're gonna, we're really, we're for real. We're gonna take you seriously, you can tell us what you want.

Furthermore, some coaches were aware that participants' (dis)comfort with speaking up can also be connected to issues of identity in other social contexts such as in school, as demonstrated by a coach and former youth circus participant (she/her) who said:

> I was probably one of the people whose voice was more easily heard because of my position and as a White person (…) I, I wouldn't say that they listened to me more because I was White. I would say that because I am White, I have been traditionally listened to more and was therefore more comfortable speaking up in front of people. And I think that, that happens anywhere you go, certain people are treated by society as though they should have a voice and then they believe it and certain people are not always treated that way.

The challenge of helping youth to learn to trust the adults in their circus community was therefore made more difficult due to the fact that, as previously mentioned, the observed circus programs were working with young people from various backgrounds, people of different social status, skin color, and gender identity, and sometimes struggled to represent that diversity in their staff. As observed in literature and practice (see quote above), young people from underprivileged communities appreciate having mentors that look like them and share their lived experience (Hluscu & Kyrtsakas, 2021; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). The coaches and administrators who came from more privileged setting were still figuring out how to communicate with young people who do not share their life path, despite the youth sometimes feeling more comfortable with these topics, as noted by a program director (she/her):

> There are certain things like when [teenagers] talk about like, race and class and sexuality, all these things, a lot of my like, 30-something colleagues are like, trying to figure out how to talk about like, [teenagers] know how to talk about it. You know, like, they already know how to talk about it. So like, so many of the things that I noticed adults are like, struggling with, to figure out, it's like, if only they had the gift of spending time with teenagers, because teenagers know how to handle some of this stuff.

The same program director (she/her) also noted:

> Basically, youth voice is probably going to say something that you weren't prepared to hear, right? Like, that's what I love about them. It's like they're constantly ahead of you, right? And so, as an adult stakeholder, you have to one - not be intimidated by that. Two - be ready to be really receptive to some information that's new to you. Three – like, set a boundary for yourself about what do you need to actually respond to that in a respectful way. Sometimes it's time, sometimes it's research, sometimes it's conversation. Sometimes it's just no. But that sense of confidence to pause, take it in, acknowledge that probably it's a few steps ahead of you, and then realize you're the one to help with the next step is kind of the process.

Although youth voice is related to the interdependence of agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004; Rahm et al., 2014), the extent to which it can be challenging to organizations and their adult leaders (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018) provides one possible reason for why some organizations provided only limited opportunities for youth input.

At all of the observed organizations, the youth voice activities started organically because working with young people and adapting to their needs was a part of their missions focusing on youth development and/or social justice. However, only two of the five organizations had formal structures for feedback, and staff universally agreed that these systems were not always effective with youth because they do not provide honest answers that way if they do not feel they can trust the adults. In fact, one of the program directors (she/her) said:

> Asking for feedback or asking for opinions like... it doesn't really mean anything if they don't feel comfortable telling you how they really feel. Because they are very accustomed, in my experience, to providing really artful bullshit answers to adults when they don't want to or don't engage.

In addition to structured feedback, when asked about the tools their organizations use to listen to youth voice, staff members listed specific techniques and program activities, and also general approaches to working with youth. Table 1 shows the specific tools mentioned across the 13 staff interviews, although some staff members might not have recalled all techniques common in their program or they do not use them as individuals. The tools for supporting youth voice varied across the observed programs and were used with understanding of the needs of the group, its size, and the characteristics of

Table 1. Tools described by staff interviewees for fostering youth voice in their circus programs.

Times mentioned	Tool
TECHNIQUES used specifically to solicit youth voice	
13	Asking questions
11	Group discussions
9	Listening
7	Giving students an option not to participate
6	Guided reflection
5	Social circle
5	Individual conversations/mentoring
5	Consulting experts (from social work etc.)
4	Constant re-assessment
4	Brainstorming sessions
4	Using big papers/boards
PROGRAM ACTIVITIES that are core parts of the programing and also support youth voice	
12	Act & show creation
11	Students oversee their own training
7	Youth leadership and teaching
4	Students participate in decision-making affecting the program
APPROACHES TOWARDS YOUTH identified by individual staff members	
10	Trust-building
7	Adapting to students´ needs
7	Being authentic
6	Teaching students about body autonomy and consent
5	Promoting empowerment and self-esteem
5	Following through

Times mentioned refers to the number of interviews in which this tool was mentioned, not the prevalence of the techniques in the programs.

participants. Staff members highlighted group management and the need for an individualized approach in selecting the tools they used. Some tools were straightforward (e.g. all 13 staff members listed asking questions as a tool for supporting youth voice and 9 also mentioned listening, reflecting their awareness of the need to ask for, and be receptive to, youth voice). Others, however, may be more specific to the youth circus context. For example, the creative performative aspect of circus was widely seen as a tool for introducing youth voice in organizational practice; act and show creation were mentioned by 12/13 staff members and were often the first or only example nominated by the young people as a situation in which they felt heard. This finding aligns with previous research on youth arts and its impact on wellbeing of young people (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Woodland, 2018).

In sum, staff at the observed organizations were aware that while serving young people they need to listen to their ideas and needs. They recognized that youth voice could help them do their work better (Conner et al., 2015; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018), but they also highlighted challenges that echoed those observed in other youth-serving settings, such as disillusionment and frustration of students when their ideas are not realized (Jones & Perkins, 2006; Mager & Nowak, 2012).

General discussion

The present study examined how youth voice is incorporated and supported in the work of U.S. youth circus programs. Youth programs, including circus programs, should be designed to fulfill the need for belonging/relatedness (Walker et al., 2005), which is essential to humans (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Feeling heard and being included, both in the community and in decision making, help youth create positive bonds with others (Hopper et al., 2019) and effective youth-adult cooperation also fosters belonging (Mager & Nowak, 2012), especially when youth can relate to the adults (Hluscu & Kyrtsakas, 2021; Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). The strong relatedness observed in youth circus programs (Agans et al., 2019) may contribute to the development of autonomy and competence through youth voice and consequently to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition to these benefits to the young people, youth voice can also improve the quality of youth programs through insights shared by the experts on youth, the young people themselves (Checkoway, 2011).

Qualitative data, including interviews with youth and staff and observational reports, were collected from five U.S. youth circus programs. Three key themes were described in the data: Welcoming, which illustrated how youth feel included in their circus programs, Being Heard, which provided insight into how youth view the role of youth voice in their programs, and Supporting Youth Voice, which offered staff perspectives and catalogued the various strategies the programs used for soliciting youth voice. Together, these themes provide a window into how the interdependence of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000) supports youth voice in youth circus programs, which operate within a unique sociocultural space where pedagogical practices are specifically adaptive and supportive of connections between youth and staff (Cadwell, 2018; Jachovský & Klusáková, 2021). As evidenced across our results, both youth and staff view youth voice as an important aspect of youth circus programs, although staff expressed some concerns about the extent to which they could incorporate the views of youth into their programs. Implementation strategies to foster youth voice also varied across the programs, and young people with fewer opportunities to participate were not aware of the possibilities that youth might have in other programs. It is perhaps a reflection of the lack of voice in other aspects of their lives that the youth participating in circus programs operating at lower levels of youth participation still felt heard. These findings align with prior research on the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in personal development (Ryan & Deci, 2000) described in circus (Cadwell, 2018; Stevens et al., 2019) and other youth arts context (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Woodland, 2018).

In sum, the themes described in this study illustrate the extent to which youth voice is heard in youth circus programs and highlight strategies to

support youth voice that can be used in other types of programs. Interestingly, despite the sampled programs having reputations as exemplars within circus arts, a type of activity known for inclusivity, the participants and staff at these programs described both successes and difficulties supporting youth voice. The obstacles for youth voice were mainly from the organizational setting, including lack of funding and time and the challenges inherent in incorporating ideas from youth, such as difficulties with long-term commitment of youth or unsupportive attitudes of adults (Silius, 2019). This shows a structural issue in recreational youth programming that needs to be addressed in advocacy efforts for supporting youth voice. However, our results also suggest that although youth voice is important for young people to feel included (Hopper et al., 2019; Rahm et al., 2014), this sense of inclusion may rely more on their perceptions of youth voice rather than on objective measures of youth participation. This finding points to the importance of experiencing autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with special focus on the sense of relatedness as a factor for youth well-being in youth programs (Agans et al., 2019; Hopper et al., 2019). Programs seeking to support youth voice should therefore acknowledge the importance of creating a welcoming environment and invite their youth into discussion of how it could be supported even further. We observed that youth want to feel safe and accepted in their program, illustrating the importance of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To achieve this, our participants described the importance of having staff representative of the program´s youth in terms of race and gender identity, as well as accepting and celebrating participants' diverse identities. We also observed that youth need to feel that their voices matter in areas that matter to them (Hart, 1992), such as creating shows or being in charge of their own learning, so programs should be attentive to the preferences of their own participants in creating opportunities for increased youth leadership. In conclusion, if you have any questions about supporting youth voice in your program, ask the youth.

Limitations and future directions

Participating in this study may have influenced program staff to think more about youth voice than they otherwise would. Although this is a limitation to the ability of the study to examine their practices without outside influence, it may also be a benefit to their ongoing practice after the study if they became more aware of ways they could promote youth voice in their programs. Future research, ideally involving young people as co-researchers, should observe in more detail how trust is built in recreational youth circus programs and how participation in recreational circus activities may contribute to youth development through supporting agency, belonging/relatedness, and competence (Mitra, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000) using prospective longitudinal methods.

Conclusion

We found that youth and staff at the five observed U.S. recreational circus programs strongly felt that their programs provide space for youth voice to be heard. Participants cited the welcoming and accepting approach of the circus community as factors that help to create feelings of belonging in the youth participants and described strategies that helped youth feel heard in their programs. However, although all interviewees felt youth were heard in their program, the level of actual youth engagement in decision-making varied across the observed programs. It would be beneficial for the youth circus community to share best practices in this area both within the industry and with other youth-serving organizations.

Notes on contributors

Barbora Adolfová (MA) is a doctoral candidate in Alternative and Puppet Theatre at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and this research was conducted while she was a Fulbright-Masaryk visiting scholar in the Department of Park, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on youth circus and youth voice.

Jennifer P. Agans (PhD) is an Assistant Professor of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on positive youth development in recreation and physical activity contexts.

ORCID

Barbora Adolfová 🅳 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8373-2589
Jennifer P. Agans 🅳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0108-8898

References

Agans, J., Davis, J., Vazou, S., & Jarus, T. (2019). Self-determination through circus arts: Exploring youth development in a novel activity context. *Journal of Youth Development*, *14*(3), 110–129. https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2019.662

American Circus Educators Association. (2022) *Circus census 2022*. Retrieved April 10, 2023, from https://www.americancircuseducators.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ACE-AYCO-Survey-Final-Report.pdf

Bortoleto, M. A., Ross, J. J., Houser, N., & Kriellaars, D. (2022). Everyone is welcome under the big top: A multiple case study on circus arts instruction in physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2022.2153820

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cadwell, S. J. (2018). Falling together: An examination of trust-building in youth and social circus training. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, *9*(1), 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2017.1384755

Catterall, J. S. (2012). The arts and achievement in at-risk youth: Findings from four longitudinal studies. Research Report #55. *National Endowment for the Arts*.

Checkoway, B. (2011). What is youth participation? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*(2), 340–345. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.09.017

Conner, J. O. (2022). Educators' experiences with student voice: How teachers understand, solicit, and use student voice in their classrooms. *Teachers & Teaching*, *28*(1), 12–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.2016689

Conner, J. O., Ebby-Rosin, R., & Brown, A. S. (2015). Introduction to student voice in American education policy. *Teachers College Record*, *117*(13), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811511701308

Ennis, G. M., & Tonkin, J. (2018). 'It's like exercise for your soul': How participation in youth arts activities contributes to young people's wellbeing. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *21*(3), 340–359. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1380302

Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. (No. inness92/6).

Hluscu, A., & Kyrtsakas, T. (2021). "I'm so Happy I'm here Tonight" youth artistry at SummerWorks. *Canadian Theatre Review*, *187*, 61–65. https://doi.org/10.3138/ctr.187.020

Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, Y., Walker, G. J., & McHugh, T. L. F. (2019). 'I feel like we finally matter': The role of youth-led approaches in enhancing leisure-induced meaning-making among youth at risk. *Leisure/loisir*, *43*(4), 419–444. https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2019.1697351

Jachovský, A., & Klusáková, K. (2021). *Základy cirkusové pedagogiky*. CIRQUEON.

James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist*, *109*(2), 261–272. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.261

Jeanes, R. (2010). Seen but not heard? Examining children's voices in leisure and family research. *Leisure/loisir*, *34*(3), 243–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2010.520490

Jones, K. R., & Perkins, D. F. (2006). Youth and adult perceptions of their relationships within community-based youth programs. *Youth & Society*, *38*(1), 90–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x06287860

Lac, V. T., & Cumings Mansfield, K. (2018). What do students have to do with educational leadership? Making a case for centering student voice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *13*(1), 38–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117743748

Lavers, K., Burtt, J., & Bochud, E. (2022). Cirqiniq: The decolonising of social circus in Nunavik. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, *13*(2), 180–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2052174

Mager, U., & Nowak, P. (2012). Effects of student participation in decision making at school. A systematic review and synthesis of empirical research. *Educational Research Review*, *7*(1), 38–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2011.11.001

Mitra, D. (2003). Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships. *McGill Journal of Education/Revue des Sciences de l'Education de McGill*, *38*(2). https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/8686

Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record*, *106*(4), 651–688. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810410600402

Musante, K., & DeWalt, B. R. (2010). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. Rowman Altamira.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Sage.

Rahm, J., Lachaîne, A., & Mathura, A. (2014). Youth voice and positive identity-building practices: The case of ScienceGirls. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *37*(1), 209–232. https://www.jstor.org/stable/canajeducrevucan.37.1.209

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.68

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Silius, S. (2019). (Rep.). *youth participation mapping Report*. Caravan circus network. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from https://www.caravancircusnetwork.eu/resources/.

Smith, C., Roy, L., Peck, S., & Macleod, C. (2017). *Evaluation of program quality and social and emotional learning in American youth circus organization social circus programs*. The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. https://americancircuseducators.org/sel

Spradley, J. P. (2016). *The ethnographic interview*. Waveland Press.

Stevens, K., McGrath, R., & Ward, E. (2019). Identifying the influence of leisure-based social circus on the health and well-being of young people in Australia. *Annals of Leisure Research*, *22*(3), 305–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2018.1537854

Uncle Junior Project. (n.d.). *Uncle Junior Project*. Retrieved January 22, 2023, from https://www.unclejrproject.com/

Walker, J., Marczak, M., Blyth, D., & Borden, L. (2005). Designing youth development programs: Toward a theory of developmental intentionality. In L. Joseph, W. Reed, & S. Jacquelynne (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development* (pp. 411–430). Psychology Press.

Woodland, S. (2018). I love you I love you: Aesthetics of love in a culturally diverse youth theatre ensemble. *Youth Theatre Journal*, *32*(2), 164–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2018.1520768

Wu, H. C. J., Kornbluh, M., Weiss, J., & Roddy, L. (2016). Measuring and understanding authentic youth engagement: The youth-adult partnership rubric. *Afterschool Matters*, *23*, 8–17.